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# Post/neo/liberalism in relational perspective

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ABSTRACT

Within a decade of the new millennium new left governments in many countries across Latin America developed new constitutions that bespeak a new, postneoliberal era, supplanting neoliberal hegemony. Debates about postneoliberalism-as-governance or as a discourse lack resolution. Drawing from Foucault's lecture series *The Birth of Biopolitics*, which engages the relation between neoliberalism and liberalism, as well as from his general analytic approach, we cast postneoliberalism, neoliberalism, and liberalism in relational terms relative to principles not time periods, and offer precision on how different discourses co-exist and become mutually entangled and politicized in the context of neoliberal practices. We reference points in our argument with empirical research in various Latin American contexts, and in the penultimate section we thread the argument through current dynamics in one context, Nicaragua. Although overall we concur with the critical literature about the neoliberal character of pink-tide governments in practice, in the final section we depart from the prevailing approach that focuses on formal government as the bellwether of change and conclude by drawing attention to prospects for postneoliberal practices in the microspaces of daily life. Drawing from Foucault's late scholarship on ethics and mindful of the longstanding role of informality in Latin American political economy, we clarify how postneoliberal values can materialize in everyday life while formal governmental actions and policies persist as neoliberal amid liberal, postneoliberal, as well as socialist discourses.



## 'Postneoliberalism': a synopsis of scholarship on contested realities

Proclamations of postneoliberalism in Latin America are at the least provocative. To varying degrees, within a decade of the new millennium new leaders of countries including Venezuela, Chile, Brazil, Argentina, Uruguay, Bolivia, Ecuador, Nicaragua, Peru, and El Salvador declared new priorities and changed constitutions to challenge the underpinnings of neoliberal hegemony and postcolonial life. The apparent new beginning purportedly was prompted not only 'from above' by elected leaders on the left – the so-called pink tide or 'the new left' – but also 'from below' by the rippling of indigenous movements, notably in Ecuador, Peru, Venezuela, Bolivia, Colombia, Brazil, Guatemala, and Mexico from the 1970s onward. The texts of the new constitutions privilege postneoliberal values: social over economic goals; pluriculturalism, including an appreciation of indigeneity; equality; and a non-exploitative approach to nature. Many scholars have suggested that, notwithstanding considerable variation in strategies and despite significant challenges, the unilateral failure of neoliberal reforms across Latin America to sustain economic growth and redistribution deepened already pronounced inequality, sowed the seeds of dissent, and inadvertently created spaces for new, politicized opportunities (Barrett, Chavez, & Rodr, 2008; Brand, 2009; Burdick, , Oxhorn, , and Roberts, & eds., 2009; Cameron and Hershberg 2010; French, 2009; Lievesley and Ludlam 2009a; Luna Filgueira 2009; Postero, 2007; Postero and Zamosc 2004; Silva, 2009; Stahler-Sholk, Vanden, and Kuecker, & guest eds., 2007a, Stahler-Sholk, Vanden, & Kuecker, 2008; Van Cott, 2003; Vanden, 2003; Yashar, 2005). Others have argued that the decentralization that accompanied neoliberal governance entailed increased activity amongst NGOS, which encouraged and facilitated the participation of indigenous groups in the political process (Brysk, 2000; Kuecker, 2007; Van Cott, 2005). For various reasons, then, Latin America in the 21st century has been proclaimed the hearth of a *post*neoliberal era (Fortes, 2009; Sader, 2009, 2011; Wylde, 2012).

However, a burgeoning literature critiques declarations of the new era. Research has shown that postneoliberal discourses fail to match on-the-ground, remarkably neoliberal realities (Benwell, Hasselip, & Borello, 2012; Escobar, 2010; Kohl & Farthing, 2012;

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Leiva, 2008; Radcliffe, 2012; Sieder, 2002a). The apparent victories of indigenous movements likewise are limited (Escobar, 2010; Hale, 2011; Puig, 2010a). Even recognizing path dependence (Molyneux, 2008) and distinct modes of governance (de la Torre, 2013), similar problems occur across wide-ranging contexts, including the persistence of clientelism and undemocratic processes of decision making (Bebbington & Bebbington, 2011; Bédécarrats, Bastiaensen, & Doligez, 2012; Escobar, 2010; Radcliffe, 2012; Sieder, 2002a), uneven land distribution (Bebbington & Bebbington, 2011; Enríquez, 2013), and patriarchy (Friedman, 2009; Sieder, 2002a) and post-colonial racial hierarchies (Sieder, 2002a; Yashar, 2005). The social sectors that were meant to be protected often have been the first to be hurt (Panizza, 2009). Colombia in particular has been described as a *deepening* neoliberal regime characterized by dispossession and securitization (Rojas, 2009). Throughout pink-tide countries, direct cash transfers to the poor remain a prominent avenue to alleviate poverty, without, however, broader redistributive mechanisms such as change in the structure of taxation (Cortés, 2009; Reygadas & Filgueira, 2010). Although cash transfers have been implemented in many Latin American countries, state funds are limited and the sustainability of such policies is questionable (Castañeda & Morales, 2008); further, dependence on the state and the relative absence of mechanisms to deal with underlying causes of poverty render apparent redistributive policies tentative in the long run. The state often remains the central actor via majority ownership of companies (Grugel & Riggirozzi, 2012), and material realities in many countries entail dependence on ecologically insensitive extractive industries for revenue generation via exports to meet the demands of new redistributive policies, which combine with a persistent discourse of economic growth (Bebbington & Bebbington, 2011; Escobar, 2010; Grugel & Riggirozzi, 2012; Kohl & Farthing, 2012; Kuecker, 2007; Radcliffe, 2012). Transnationalization, financialization, and precarization systematically undermine the goal of economic growth combined with social equity and democracy (Leiva, 2008), and institutions often lack the capacity to balance conflict and accommodation (Panizza, 2009). The postneoliberal discourse itself seems dubious as a plan for action insofar as strategies for pluriculturalism are vague and issues of difference are elided (Escobar, 2010; Radcliffe, 2012; Sieder, 2002a; Yates & Bakker, 2014). From this vantage point, postneoliberalism might be cast as a discursive-only element of a variant of 'variegated neoliberalism' (Brenner, Peck, & Theodore, 2010).

How, then, can we reconcile conflicting portraits of new realities? Neoliberalism and postneoliberalism might be viewed as being co-produced (Hernández, 2007; Yates & Bakker, 2014) because hybrid systems seem more reasonable than an absolute break from previous systems of governance. Pronounced inequality throughout Latin America, for example, suggests the need for an interventionist state that prioritizes social issues (Sheahan, 2002). Some scholars have suggested that global constraints mandate coming to terms with market realities and that export-oriented economies are unlikely to diminish in neostructuralist regimes of 'open regionalism' (Gwynne & Kay, 2000); from this perspective the left need not reject markets, just the neoliberal ideology that has underscored it, towards a hybrid politics (Arditi, 2010; Cameron, 2009; Macdonald and Ruckert 2009). However, if the state persists as the main actor and a market orientation has become a matter of pragmatism (Tussie, 2009) – to name just a couple of enduring, on-the-ground realities – then what precisely is *post*neoliberal?

Pinpointing postneoliberalism is all the more challenging because the same has been asked about neoliberalism (e.g. Barnett, 2005; Castree, 2006; Larner, 2003). Defining and positioning postneoliberalism therefore requires the same of neoliberalism; accordingly, we engage postneoliberalism and neoliberalism, relationally. We also suggest that although the focus in Latin America mostly has been on *post*neoliberalism and associated critiques that liken it to neoliberalism, liberalism is far from irrelevant (Cameron and Hershberg 2010), notably regarding principles of equality, which, as we explain, interface with socialist values that root the new left. As elaborated below, our critique draws from Foucault's (2008) lecture series *The Birth of Biopolitics*, which examines ideas fundamental to neoliberalism and classical liberalism[1]; to date, this resource has remained outside the purview of discussions of postneoliberalism. As indicated in the title, we focus on the *relations* amongst liberalism, neoliberalism, and postneoliberalism; we reference socialism and its relation to liberalism and neoliberalism, but a genealogy of socialism in Latin America warrants at the least a separate paper.

## A Foucauldian approach

Our project is to develop an argument about the meanings, and crucially, the relations amongst postneoliberalism, neoliberalism, and liberalism, and in that light to clarify our position on postneoliberalism in Latin America. We draw specifically from *The Birth of Biopolitics* (Foucault, 2008) regarding its critical discussion of neoliberalism and its examination of the relation between neoliberalism and liberalism. Foucault's discussion focused on the logics of these mentalities, which is germane to our analysis because we examine the relations amongst liberalism, neoliberalism, and postneoliberalism relative to principles. This approach departs from the usual periodization, which frames liberalism and neoliberalism temporally and presumes that neoliberalism necessarily follows liberalism; as we will elaborate, Foucault argued that liberalism is a utopian discourse rather than a mode of governance. This distinction between liberalism as discourse, and neoliberalism as a mentality and also in practice a mode of governance, relates more generally to Foucauldian epistemology that asks, rather than presumes, whether discourses are grounded (Ettlinger, 2011; Foucault, 1980, 2000a).[2] A Foucauldian understanding of liberalism is helpful in explaining how on-the-ground practices of liberalism as well as postneoliberalism differ from the mentalities they purportedly represent. Neoliberalism as well, per Foucault, can be decomposed into principles, but, as explained in the next section, whereas liberalism offers a normative frame notably regarding equality and the absence of government intervention, neoliberal principles of *in*equality frame actual institutional policymaking whereby the state acts to maintain such principles; policies from this vantage point are not a matter of ideology, but rather

[1] Despite the title of Foucault's lecture series, the series is not about biopolitics, but rather about the ideas – the "governmental reason" – underlying neoliberalism and liberalism. As Foucault (2008, 21–22) indicated at the end of the first lecture: "I thought I could do a course on biopolitics this year … But … analysis of biopolitics can only get under way when we have understood the general regime of this governmental reason. … it is only when we understand what is at stake in this regime of liberalism opposed to *raison d'État* … will we be able to grasp what biopolitics is." He begins his course summary at the end of the lecture series saying that: "This year's course ended up being devoted entirely to what should have been an introduction. The theme was to have been 'biopolitics,' by which I mean the attempt, starting from the eighteenth century, to rationalize the problem posed to governmental practice by phenomena characteristic of a set of living beings forming a population: health, hygiene, birth rate, life expectancy, race … these problems were inseparable from the framework of political rationality within which they appeared and took on their intensity" (Foucault, 2008, 317).

[2] Some Foucauldian governmentality analyses are constructed in such a way as to present a seamless iteration of a mentality throughout societal organizations and institutions through to regimes of practices. However, governmentalities are imperfect and therefore discourses and practices can diverge, warranting problematization.