

BOOK REVIEW

The Neoliberal Subject: Resilience, Adaptation and Vulnerability
by David Chandler and Julian Reid, London: Rowman & Littlefield
International, 2016, 210 pages.

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Neoliberalism has occupied the central focus of research in anthropology and sociology in the past decade and has animated many debates regarding the ways in which the latest stage of global capitalism has to be understood in relation to previous forms of capitalism. There have been many attempts to define this concept and give it a more socio-empirical grounding that can enable capturing the transformations within capitalism and the specific social and economic processes associated with these changes. The field of social sciences have been so much flooded with studies of neoliberalism that some have advocated giving up the term altogether because of the confusions and obscurities it creates (Dunn, 2017). Many of the studies on neoliberalism have dealt with the political processes embedded in the economic structures of global capitalism, but have focused little on what these transformations have meant at the level of subject-formation. How is the self constituted by neoliberalism and what are the inner features the self has to develop in order to be attuned to the new political-economic regime? Neoliberalism cannot function without cultural legitimations that actively sustain the capitalist mode of production in its specific constellations and most of all it cannot function in the absence of social ontologies that regulate the self and corresponding societal relations. Chandler and Reid's book *The neoliberal subject: Resilience, adaptation and vulnerability* constitutes one of the most articulate contemporary attempts to define these processes in terms of how they impacted on the subject and the specific modes of socialization that were enabled by these new political-economic structures which contributed to the institutionalization of a new generalized self-understanding.

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The book focuses on three important aspects of how neoliberal regimes embed particular forms of ontologies within the structures of the subject: resilience, adaptation and vulnerability. The discussion between the two scholars explores the genealogy of these transformations that have shaped the current understanding of the subject as it is instituted within a great spectrum of forms of governmentality: from security studies and international relations to UN resolutions and social policies implemented by global governing structures. The book brings a great deal of clarity in terms of how the bio-political subject is aggregated and constructed in contemporary security studies and global neoliberal politics and it enfoldes an incisive criticism of the ways in which these modes of understanding the self de-politicizes structural power relations and global inequalities.

One of the most important aspects of the book is its attempt to delineate neoliberalism from liberalism and outline the specific ways in which at the level of the subject we can differentiate between different regimes of socialization and operationalize these differences in terms of capabilities with which the self is endowed:

The knowledge capacities and capabilities necessary for the neoliberal subject are very different from those of the traditional or classical liberal subject. The capabilities and capacities required are those that enable the subject to actively embrace and adapt to change rather than resist it. [...] Whereas liberal frameworks of governmentality focused upon how governments might regulate and control specific levers of the economy—inflation levels, unemployment rates, interest rates, and such—under neoliberal approaches, the governance of economic processes is displaced by the enabling of societal processes, particularly of knowledge and communication, facilitating the adaptive capacities of individuals, enabling them to make better or more efficient lifestyle choices (Dunn, 2017: 76-77).

This break between neoliberalism and liberalism and its impact of subjectivity formation can be followed in the three inter-related dimensions which the book analyses, which are an integral component of what neoliberal governmentality regards as a 'complete' and 'well-developed' subject: resilience, adaptation and overcoming of vulnerability.

Resilience represents one of the most important features of the neoliberal subject. By this, Chandler and Reid refer to the capacity of the subject to re-adjust and calibrate itself in a period of fluctuation and changes. The resilient self is flexible, pro-active and capable of transforming critical situations in opportunities for self-development. The main idea is not to stabilize uncertain conditions of existence, but to intervene at the level subject and instil in it the capacity of self-reflexivity and readiness to change in order to be able to face the fluidity and instabilities generated by global capitalism.

The book takes a comprehensive look at the field of international relations and security studies and analyzes the growing attention given to sustainable development and the way this is linked with a new emphasis on developing the capacity of being resilient. This can be seen in wide spectrum of expertise and knowledge production implemented by governing structures such as UN, UNDP and other international bodies, or in nation-state agencies that enable evaluations and benchmarks for assessing capacities for sustainable development. Although sustainable development emerged as a criticism of classical Western theories of development that had little regards for preserving ecosystems and focused mainly on economic aspects of development, the authors show how this was captured eventually by neoliberal governance policies (Chandler and Reid, 2016: 56). Sustainable development emphasis the need of engaging community and personal human resources in dealing with risks and encouraging them to display a pro-active commitment for creating one's own general well-being. The area where these two different paradigms of governance overlap (sustainable development and neoliberalism) is in the way they perceive the need for agency enhancement and capacity of individual and collective organisms to adapt and cope with structural fuzzy changes.

Reid traces the genealogy of the concept of resilience and its embedding in contemporary institutions in the discursive practices of ecology. Here, *living systems* have the capacity to adapt to their environmental changes and create a surviving niche within the wider biosphere through articulating a resilient behaviour (Chandler and Reid, 2016: 62). This applies as well to human beings who have to learn to model themselves accordingly. Generating a resilient subjectivity becomes this way an instrumental aspect for advancing sustainable development. This means most of all the entrepreneurialization of inner resources, insistence on self-responsibility and self-sustainability. The authors show how, by emphasizing this, the current neo-liberal governing strategies depart from the previous liberal ones. Whereas the classic liberal regimes aimed at securing individuals and creating governmental structures that could mediate and enable this goal, neo-liberalism aims at enhancing the capacity of individuals to adjust and accommodate themselves to the insecure conditions of this world.

This shift from liberalism to neoliberalism can be much clearly observed in the way current governing structures engage with another important feature of the neoliberal subject, that of *adaptability*. By adaptability the authors understand the capacity through which resilience is actualized and it refers to the ability subjects have to adjust and get acclimatized to their swirling insecure environments:

In this conception, political freedom and market economic competition are to be valued because they help facilitate individual choice-making capacities and enable their expression, thereby enabling efficient adaption to changing

circumstances. The assumption is that without development individuals will not be free, in the sense of no longer lacking the capabilities necessary for efficient adaptation. Here none of us are free from the need for development. Development is the process of altering the institutions that shape our capacities and capabilities for adaptive choices. In this understanding of freedom, there can be no assumption of originatory or universal autonomy and rationality, such as that underpinning social contract theorising: the mainstay of the political and legal subject of liberal modernity (Chandler and Reid, 2016: 90-91).

In comparison with the liberal forms of governing which focused on a state driven development and economic growth through specific macro-interventions led by the nations-states, neoliberalism emphasizes competence development of the subject and its adaptive capabilities through giving stakeholders access to the empowering informational fluxes and knowledge. The dissolution of the liberal promise of economic and social development through institutional interventions makes now way to an emphasis on self-reflexivity and emotional adjustment to the conditions of the world. Rather resisting them and mobilizing political projects in order to alter these conditions, neoliberalism stresses the need for self-adjustment and creative flexibility which subjects need to acquire in order adapt better. This is why neoliberalism releases the proliferation of a multitude of knowledge devices that interrogate and model the interiority of the self. Adaptive decision-making therefore relies very much on the extent to which the subject is able to develop capabilities of plasticity and self-governance as a result of self-interrogation (Chandler and Reid, 2016: 77-78).

The aim of neoliberal governmentality is to enable not just abilities that the subject has to develop, but an empowering way of living as well. Sustainable development starts with facilitating those endogenous processes that allow for the cultivation of a sustainable subject. The constitutive power of this multi-scalar forms of governmentality relies on the way it interrogates the subject and shifts to it the responsibility for its own well-being. Learning how to become resilient and adapt to fluidity of the contemporary world is one of the most of important element that the neoliberal ethics of authenticity instil in individuals and communities.

Another important feature of the way neoliberalism socializes the subject is structured around how it accounts of *vulnerability*. Vulnerability is understood in this book as the conditions that prevent subjects and communities to become resilient. In comparison with the liberal moral ontology that all human beings are rational, entitled to emancipatory human rights and the services of a democratic state power that guarantees individual freedoms, the neoliberal political assumption is that the subject (individual or communal) is responsible of producing and creating its own welfare. All dysfunctions and vulnerabilities are understood as a lack of informational resources on which

decision making is based (Chandler and Reid, 2016: 141). This means that the existing social and economic differences are explained not in terms of structural features relating to access to resources, inequalities, spatial arrangements and political ecologies, but in terms of subjective inner strength, willingness to successfully overcome problems and crisis and access to relevant informational flows. The lack of this strength, vulnerability, is understood as the main feature of governed subjects which needs to be addressed by neo-liberal policies. Empowering these vulnerable subjects and transforming them into resilient, self-relying units which are capable of overcoming their limits constitutes one of the main features of our neoliberal age. Social difference and the ontological oscillation between vulnerability and resilience is understood by neoliberal governing structures as being due to informational engagement capabilities (or lack of them) and access to relevant data for decision-making.

One of the shortcomings of the book is its lack of embedded ethnography and in-depth sociological analysis on how this neo-liberal subject is actually constituted in everyday life. Although the book draws on a vast amount of data and on a careful analysis of the variations of neoliberal shifts within contemporary governing policies, it lacks specific case studies that show how this type of subjectivity constitutes an integral part of actual-existing neoliberal regimes. The authors present compelling evidence that these transformations are real in terms of how contemporary governmentality technologies function and the way different political-economic regimes institute different subject-formation process. But to what extent are these self-configurations actually internalized and appropriated by human beings and communities in everyday life? How stable are these self-formations and how do they function in specific spaces of interaction? The book surveys masterfully the variety of changes at the level of development strategies, governmentality procedures and discourse formations, but gives only limited insight into how these transformations are actually embodied in real-life. An anthropology of neoliberal subjectivity has the future task of making more visible how neoliberalism is appropriated in specific social and cultural contexts. In spite of this, the book is an outstanding addition to the debates on neoliberalism and brings an important contribution to clarifying how the self is re-imagined within this political-economic regime.

REFERENCES

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