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Geoforum xxx (2005) xxx–xxx

GEOFORUM

www.elsevier.com/locate/geoforum

Editorial

The epistemology of particulars: Human geography, case studies and ‘context’

5 Since the mid-1980s, so-called ‘case study’ research
6 has become ever more prominent in the journal articles
7 and monographs produced by human geographers. A
8 case study usually involves investigating one or more
9 phenomena in some depth in one place, region or coun-
10 try. What makes it an actual or potential ‘case’ is that
11 the phenomena under investigation (e.g. workfare poli-
12 cies, flexible manufacturing technologies, postmodern
13 architecture) can be found in other places, regions or
14 countries: the case may thus be unique but is not singu-
15 lar.¹ In certain fields of human geography, particular
16 cases have been the focus of so much research they’ve
17 become iconic (think of Manchester, my own city, as
18 well as Los Angeles and Vancouver). Focussing on these
19 and other cases has become a means of negotiating two
20 opposing views of the world that have a pedigree in the
21 discipline. On the one side, a nomothetic perspective
22 presumes an ontological regularity in both pattern and
23 process between otherwise different contexts. On the
24 other side, an idiographic worldview accents the contin-
25 gent and enduring differences that make ‘context’ no
26 mere ‘modifier’ of ostensibly general processes. Starting
27 over twenty years ago, critical realism convinced many
28 human geographers that this either/or choice could be
29 avoided; the ‘both/and’ slash of Marxian dialectics had
30 a similar effect on some in the discipline. As a result, it
31 has these days become disciplinary common sense that
32 geographical difference ‘matters’ but not in a stereotyp-
33 ically Hartshornian way. That is, geographical difference
34 is seen to matter not just for its own sake but also be-
35 cause it has *constitutive* effects on processes, rules and
36 regulations that are ‘stretched’ over wide spans of space
37 and time. Case study research in human geography thus

serves an important function. It shows the world to be
persistently *diverse* (notwithstanding the ‘flat earth’ hu-
bris of some analysts of globalisation). Yet it shows that
this diversity arises out of multiscaled *relations* such that
it does not emerge *sui generis*.

For some time I have had a sneaking suspicion that,
notwithstanding its other virtues, an awful lot of case
study research by human geographers is ill-conceived.
Many geographical researchers seem to favour case
study research while, paradoxically, not really under-
standing its nature and rationale. I want to illustrate this
seeming paradox with reference to recent published
work on neoliberalism and the non-human world (some
of it published in this journal). I ‘pick’ on this work (if
that’s the word) simply because I have spent a lot of
my time, in recent months, reading it with a view to
understanding what wider lessons we can learn about
nature’s neoliberalisation. In other words, this work is
not especially guilty of the problems I will identify be-
low. In highlighting these problems I want to raise a ser-
ies of questions, the answers to which may produce
some future clarity about the why and wherefore of
the case approach in human geography as a whole.

In the last couple of years, a growing body of theoret-
ically informed empirical research has appeared on the
subject of nature’s neoliberalisation. Critical geogra-
phers like Karen Bakker, Jessica Budds, Jeffrey Bury,
Nik Heynen, Roger Keil, Becky Mansfield, James
McCarthy, Tom Perreault, Scott Prudham, Paul Rob-
bins, Morgan Robertson and Kevin St. Martin (hereaf-
ter Bakker et al.) have greatly advanced our
understanding of what neoliberal policies do to the bio-
physical world (and vice versa).² Their highly grounded
research focuses on specific aspects of the natural envi-
ronment (e.g. water resources, wetlands, trees, fish and

¹ In this sense, those who see themselves doing case study research differ in sensibility from an older generation of area specialists. The latter, to hazard a generalisation, tended to write about a specific place, region or country for its own sake: as of interest in its own right rather (unless comparative research was being undertaken).

² I use the term ‘critical geography’ in a broad sense to designate research that in some way takes issue with the prevailing social and/or environmental order.

74 minerals) and their governance in particular parts of the
75 world (e.g. Milwaukie in Heynen's case (2005); England
76 and Wales in Bakker's (2003) case; Bolivia in Perreault's
77 (2005) case; the North Pacific ocean in Mansfield's
78 (2004a) case). This research reveals the path-dependency,
79 contingency and varied outcomes of specific
80 kinds of neoliberal policies in specific situations.

81 For Bakker et al. this research emphasis on geo-
82 graphical difference is clearly seen as a good thing.
83 Becky Mansfield (2004a, p. 566), for instance, sees the
84 key contribution of her work as "avoid[ing] treating
85 neoliberalism as an unchanging force that is applied in
86 different contexts". She argues that it is "geographically
87 constituted" (Mansfield, 2004a) and illustrates this
88 empirically with reference to Alaska pollock (see also
89 Mansfield, 2004b). Likewise, Bakker (forthcoming, p.
90 4) sees post-1989 water privatisation in England and
91 Wales as a "specific variant" of neoliberalism and bases
92 this claim on the fact that water has not been truly com-
93 modified (whereas commodification applies in other
94 cases of nature's neoliberalisation). Finally, to offer a
95 third example, Prudham's (2004, p. 357) study of dereg-
96 ulated water testing in Ontario concludes that "each
97 specific neoliberalisation is just that, specific, contingent
98 and geographically constituted".

99 What are we to make of these claims? The new empiri-
100 cal literature on nature's neoliberalisation appears to be
101 meeting a need that Wendy Larner and others identified
102 a few short years ago. Larner (2003, p. 21), concerned
103 that critical geographers avoid treating neoliberalism
104 as a hegemonic monolith, asked them to identify "*differ-*
105 *ent variants* of neoliberalism ... [and] the *hybrid nature*
106 of contemporary policies and programmes ...". Like-
107 wise, introducing a set of essays on neoliberalism and
108 the city, Brenner and Theodore (2002) argued that 'actu-
109 ally existing neoliberalism' is a plurality not a thing: that
110 is, a set of spatio-temporally specific *neoliberalisations*.
111 Taking these arguments to heart, the research of Bakker
112 et al. achieves three useful things. First, general theoret-
113 ical claims about 'neoliberalism' in the singular are sub-
114 ject to the complications and rigours of empirical
115 analysis. Second, in geographical terms, neoliberal ideas
116 and policies are shown to be variegated rather than seri-
117 ally produced across space. Finally, in normative terms
118 the substantive and empirical diversity revealed creates
119 space for tailored criticism and finessed evaluations. In
120 sum, new case research on nature's neoliberalisation ap-
121 pears to be avoiding the errors of previous attempts in
122 human geography to apply 'transition models': that is,
123 supposedly widespread and relatively uniform systemic
124 changes that are (wrongly) seen to mark-off a new 'era'
125 from its predecessor.

126 However, these virtues will ultimately count for little
127 unless some deeper problems in the research literature
128 are addressed. These problems can be identified by
129 way of a brief analysis of comments made by Mansfield

and Prudham in their above mentioned works—com- 130
ments that are hardly exclusive to these two authors. 131
Mansfield (2004a, p. 580) concludes one her recent es- 132
says thus: "The particular forms that neoliberalism 133
takes should not be taken as aberrant from an ideal, 134
or as not really neoliberal". Likewise, Prudham (2004, 135
p. 357) ends his Ontario study with the observation that 136
"we need to appreciate *both* diversity *and* consistency 137
across particular neoliberalisations". In one sense, the 138
comments of both authors are as sensible as they are 139
uncontentious. Mansfield and Prudham are arguing that 140
in order to know what is different about particular neo- 141
liberalisations of nature we need to know what they 142
have in common. As Jamie Peck (2004, p. 396) notes 143
in another context, "splitting differences between varie- 144
ties of neoliberalism cannot be an end in itself, not least 145
because it begs questions about the common roots and 146
shared features of the unevenly neoliberalised landscape 147
that confronts us all". However, unless we have a clear 148
understanding of how 'common roots and shared fea- 149
tures' can be identified, we run two risks. The first is 150
the risk of identifying purely *formal* (rather than sub- 151
stantive) similarities between different neoliberalisations. 152
The second and related risk is of classifying otherwise 153
different cases as neoliberal when, in fact, the differences 154
outweigh meaningful commonalities. Let me explain. 155

Case studies scrutinise one or more phenomena 'in 156
context'. In other words, while these phenomena may 157
be very large in their scale of operation or exist indepen- 158
dently in numerous places, they are examined *conjunc-* 159
turally: their 'local' articulation with other things may 160
alter their operation across space and time. Context is 161
one of those polysemic terms that means multiple things 162
in geographical discourse. For some it is a synonym for 163
all things empirical or 'concrete' (Marx's famous 'unity 164
of the diverse'). For others context is a synonym for 165
the scale of everyday life: that is, place or the local scale. 166
However, as Cox and Mair (1989) insightfully argued 167
many years ago, both conceptions of context are only 168
partially valid. In the first place, one can *theorise* about 169
context insofar as there may be processes *specific* to a 170
context that can be isolated conceptually.³ Secondly, 171
Cox and Mair also pointed out that context is necessar- 172
ily multi-scalar. The local is not the only scale at which 173
multiple enduring and contingent phenomena come to- 174
gether empirically. For instance, the global is as much 175
a 'context' as the many 'locals' that comprise it; it is 176
not some homogenous scale overlaying all that exists 177
'below' it. 178

The relevance of all this to the research of Bakker 179
et al. is as follows: it is currently unclear which of the 180
meanings of context are in play in individual studies 181

³ And this is what is normally meant when the term 'meso-level theory' is used in academic literature.

182 and is thus unclear in what specific sense the published
 183 case studies are ‘cases’. It is one thing to recognise that
 184 ‘neoliberalism’ as such does not exist (except in the
 185 books and papers of Milton Friedman, Friedrich Hayek
 186 and Richard Epstein). But it is quite another to show
 187 how different cases are, in Barnett’s (2005, p. 8) words,
 188 “varieties of a single *genus*”. To do this one needs to ad-
 189 dress a raft of vexing questions. Firstly, one cannot
 190 know the genus in isolation from its particular forms
 191 of expression. In other words, one must undertake
 192 extensive empirical research in the *first* instance to be
 193 able to identify whether the commonalities between
 194 cases are sufficiently strong to warrant seeing them as
 195 variations on a theme. One does not *start* with a text-
 196 book definition of neoliberalism and *then* look for exam-
 197 ples of it ‘on the ground’. So-called ‘neoliberalism’ is, as
 198 Mansfield (2004a) rightly argues, a diverse set of *prac-*
 199 *tices*. Thus far, the research of Bakker et al. has not been
 200 comparative in significant measure. It thus falls to read-
 201 ers of their work to make good on Prudham’s injunc-
 202 tion. This is challenging work because it obliges us to
 203 determine the criteria whereby apparently (and *really*)
 204 different cases of nature’s neoliberalisation can, in a
 205 meaningful sense, be deemed similar. These criteria are
 206 far from being self-evident.

207 I mentioned above the risk of identifying merely for-
 208 mal similarities among cases. It is a prevalent risk be-
 209 cause it’s far easier to draw formal comparisons than
 210 substantive ones. For instance, by abstracting from the
 211 complexity of any number of case studies, one could eas-
 212 ily generate the following list of ‘commonalities-among-
 213 differences’:

- 214 • *Privatisation* (i.e. the assignment of clear private
 215 property rights to social or environmental phenom-
 216 ena that were previously state owned, unowned or
 217 communally owned).
- 218 • *Marketisation* (i.e. the assignment of prices to phe-
 219 nomena that were previously shielded from market
 220 exchange or for various reasons unpriced).⁴
- 221 • *Deregulation* (i.e. the ‘roll back’ of state ‘interference’
 222 in numerous areas of social and environmental life).
- 223 • *Reregulation* (i.e. the deployment of state policies to
 224 facilitate privatisation and marketisation of ever-
 225 wider spheres of social and environmental life).
- 226 • *Market proxies in the residual public sector* (i.e. the
 227 state-led attempt to run remaining public services
 228 along private sector lines).
- 229 • *The construction of flanking mechanisms in civil soci-*
 230 *ety* (i.e. the state-led encouragement of civil society
 231 groups [charities, NGOs etc.] to provide services that
 232 interventionist states did or could provide for citi-

zens; these civil society groups are also seen as being 233
 able to offer compensatory mechanisms that can 234
 tackle any problems citizens suffer as a result of the 235
 previous five things listed). 236

237
 238 This six-point list is clearly so abstract that it fails to
 239 tell us how and with what effects otherwise different neo-
 240 liberalisations work. It constitutes nothing more than an
 241 ideal-type in Jessop’s (2002, p. 460) sense of the term.
 242 Substantive comparisons between cases must be *proces-*
 243 *sual* not categorical. Even Peck and Tickell’s (2002)
 244 helpful dichotomies of ‘hard’/‘soft’, ‘shallow’/‘deep’ and
 245 ‘roll back/roll out’ neoliberalism are too descriptive to
 246 get us far in understanding geographically differentiated
 247 causality. Yet the difficulty is that analysts must abstract
 248 processes from their contexts in order to identify com-
 249 monalities between cases—and in so doing they may mi-
 250 mic the ‘unrealistic’ act of formal comparison in the
 251 guise of substantive comparison.

252 This leads to a second set of issues in comparing cases
 253 of nature’s neoliberalisation. How does one know one is
 254 dealing with a distinct *type* of neoliberal practice as op-
 255 posed to the contingently variable operation of neoliber-
 256 al practices that are far more widespread than the
 257 case in question? For instance, I mentioned above that
 258 Bakker takes commodification as a key criteria for dis-
 259 tinguishing water’s neoliberalisation from other bio-
 260 physical phenomena. Mansfield, meanwhile, makes
 261 much of the open-access nature of ocean fisheries in
 262 her analyses of market-led pollock harvesting. Are these
 263 differences ones of degree or kind when compared with
 264 each other? And by what criteria do we answer this
 265 question? Going back many years the critical realist lan-
 266 guage of necessity and contingency emboldened many
 267 critical geographers to think these sorts of questions
 268 can be answered clearly. But I am not sure so sure. If
 269 one looks at the research by Bakker et al. it seems to
 270 me that ‘different’ neoliberalisations of nature are being
 271 identified in multiple ways both theoretically and empir-
 272 ically. It is very hard to parse this literature in a way that
 273 avoids the banality and formalism of the six-point list
 274 above (believe me I’ve *tried*).

275 One ‘solution’ to these difficulties is to focus on geo-
 276 graphical scale. Neoliberal policies operative at the
 277 international and national scales may seem to resolve
 278 the problem of identifying commonalities among erst-
 279 while different cases. For instance, McCarthy’s (2004)
 280 study of how certain firms in the US uphold their ‘right’
 281 to pollute the environment is situated within the interna-
 282 tional context of the NAFTA. Since NAFTA applies to
 283 the US, Canada and Mexico, other researchers could
 284 undertake studies similar to McCarthy’s elsewhere in
 285 North America. They could draw *direct* comparisons be-
 286 cause they would be looking at the same ‘framework
 287 conditions’ for the local or regional actions of corpora-
 288 tions re. the natural environment. However, reasonable

⁴ This is what critics usually call ‘commodification’ which, in one definition of the term, means the assignment of an exchange value to an object or idea.

as this scenario may seem it is actually implausible. The reason is that even international policies (neoliberal or otherwise) do not operate uniformly across the territories to which they apply. Even if only for contingent reasons, these policies can be amended, ignored, unenforced or only partially adhered to at the national or sub-national scales.

Let me summarise. The new geographical literature on nature's neoliberalisation provides us with a wealth of insights that take us beyond the fiction of a homogeneous 'neoliberalism' acting upon an undifferentiated biophysical world. However, these insights, I have argued, are *specific* to the cases and context researched by Bakker et al. Because key questions about how 'difference' is defined are not answered consistently or (in some cases) explicitly in the research literature, it is unclear what comparisons between cases are about, or how they might be achieved in practice. Just because 'neoliberalism' features as a keyword in the diverse studies of Bakker et al. does not mean these studies are about the same thing in degree or kind. If 'case studies' of nature's neoliberalisation are to avoid the 'trap' or 'dead-end' of idiography then much more work needs to be done. Greater clarity in defining objects of analysis is required both theoretically and empirically; questions about levels and scales of abstraction need to be addressed in a sophisticated way; and, finally, the 'translation-rules' for comparing apparently similar (or different) cases need to be established. Only then, it seems me, will we know what 'wider' lessons to draw from the growing body of concrete research into nature's neoliberalisation.

Though I have no clever solutions to the problems identified in this commentary, I do have one general recommendation. I think we need more rather than less attention to philosophical-cum-theoretical questions as a way of improving the quality and comparability of empirical case research. In many parts of human geography, I suspect that *doing* case research ('getting one's hands dirty') is valued more highly than the hard work of figuring out *how best to do* case research. This latter work has a vital philosophical and theoretical dimension because it involves issues of ontology, epistemology, concept-formation, classification and so on. It is the kind of work apparent in recent debates about geographical scale (involving Neil Brenner, Erik Swyngedouw, Sallie Marston and Neil Smith, among others), which have been highly abstract *yet* conducted with reference to a plethora of existing case studies. I think more of this concretised abstract discussion (not an oxymo-

ron) is what's required if the problems I've identified here are to be effectively addressed.

Acknowledgement

I wish to thank Andrew Leyshon, Nik Heynen and Alan Rudy for constructive criticisms of this commentary.

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N. Castree

University of Manchester

School of Geography

Oxford Road

Manchester M13 9PL

United Kingdom

E-mail address: noel.castree@manchester.ac.uk