After dispossession

Ethnographic approaches to neoliberalization

Oscar Salemink and Mattias Borg Rasmussen

Abstract: Since the 1980s globalization has taken on increasingly neoliberalizing forms in the form of commoditization of objects, resources, or even human bodies, their reduction to financial values, and their enclosure or other forms of dispossession. “After dispossession” provides ethnographic accounts of the diverse ways to deal with disposessions by attempts at repossessing values in connection to what has been lost in neoliberal assemblages of people and resources and thus how material loss might be compensated for in terms of subjective experiences of restoring value beyond the financial. The analytical challenge we pursue is one of bridging between a political economy concerned with the uneven distribution of wealth and resources, and the profound changes in identity politics and subject formation that are connected to these. We therefore argue that any dispossession may trigger acts of repossession of values beyond the financial realm, and consequently that suffering, too, entails forms of agency predicated on altered subjectivities. This move beyond the suffering subject reconnects the study of subjectivities with the analysis of alienation, disempowerment, and impoverishment through dispossession and attempts at recapturing value in altered circumstances.

Keywords: dispossession, identity politics, neoliberalization, political economy, subjectivity

This collection of articles addresses the question of how unequal social relations materialize and become part of the everyday in very different settings, in the form of dispossession and disenfranchisement on the global margins. More specifically, the articles seek to offer ethnographic insight into what happens after disposessions of resources, bodies, and human agency in neoliberalized contexts. In The new imperialism, David Harvey (2005: 145–152) argued that dispossession itself is nothing new (and hence not necessarily neoliberal), as it had already been described by Marx in terms of “enclosures of commons” and “primitive accumulation,” which in his view preceded capitalist accumulation by the exploitation of “free” labor. However, with the imposition of commoditized forms and financial values in all spheres
of life, accumulation is no longer exclusively associated with capitalist production as accumulation by dispossession takes place beyond capitalist production itself.

Since the 1980s globalization has taken on increasingly neoliberalizing forms in the form of commoditization of objects, resources, or even human bodies, their reduction to financial values, and their enclosure or other forms of dispossession. Neoliberalism entails processes of commoditization exploding into virtually all spheres of life, resulting in a financialization of all sorts of different values and in their consequent dispossession. While these processes follow a global logic, the encounters that are the subject of the analyses in the following articles always take place locally. In this theme section a number of processes and connections, scales, and categories intersect: subjects and objects, local and global scales, and historical processes and subjective experiences are all connected to a redefinition, repackaging, and transformation of a variety of dispossessions that people around the world experience. “After dispossession” provides ethnographic accounts of the diverse ways to deal with dispossessions by attempts at repossessing values in connection to what has been lost in neoliberal assemblages of people and resources and thus how material loss might be compensated for in terms of subjective experiences of restoring value beyond the financial.

The materials, resources, and bodies that are commoditized and financialized are not simply “things” but often have ontological dimensions in the sense that they identify and define and categorize persons, connect them with others, map them onto locations, and inscribe them into localized histories—thus producing localities (Appadurai 1995). Joel Robbins (2013) argues that an obsession with identities and identity politics over the last couple of decades coincided with an anthropological infatuation with the “suffering subject” as substitution for the “savage slot” as the main object that constitutes the anthropological discipline. Differentiated along ethnicity, gender, sexuality, caste, or race lines, “suffering subjects” have largely been understood in postcolonial (Said 1979, 1993; Chakrabarty 2000), postsocialist (Burawoy and Verdery 1999; Hann 2003a, 2003b), postfeminist (McRobbie 2004, 2011), or postsecular terms (Habermas 2008). While offering valuable insights into the formation and contestation of subjectivities, the emphasis on identity politics has in academic practice led to some measure of decontextualization in which political-economic and class considerations, for example, are largely left out. The analytical challenge is therefore one of bridging between a political economy concerned with the uneven distribution of wealth and resources, and the profound changes in identity politics and subject formation that are connected to these. We therefore contend that any dispossession triggers acts of repossessing of values, and consequently, that suffering, too, entails forms of agency predicated on altered subjectivities.
In a parallel analysis of postmodernism as the “cultural logic of late capitalism,” Fredric Jameson (1991: 48) writes:

the dissolution of an autonomous sphere of culture is rather to be imagined in terms of an explosion: a prodigious expansion of culture throughout the social realm, to the point at which everything in our social life—from economic value and state power to practices and to the very structure of the psyche itself—can be said to have become “cultural” in some original and yet un theorized sense.

This points to an interesting paradox: whereas many anthropologists analyze contemporary culture in terms of its neoliberalization (Strathern 2000; Ventura 2012), Jameson points to a simultaneous, seeming culturalization of human experience, which is often expressed through identity politics (see Robbins 2013). To the extent that the various “post” approaches privilege the study and hence the foregrounding of identity politics, anthropology’s “suffering subject” has been naturalized.

This anthropological focus on identity politics has had profound effects on the ways in which we understand existing political-economic inequalities, which are oftentimes conceptualized in terms of the relation between persons and objects. The analysis of the accelerated accumulation by dispossession taking place under conditions of neoliberal capitalism became by and large divorced from the analysis of the constitution of subjects. This divorce is made conceptually possible by taking a Cartesian subject-object dichotomy in Western thought for granted. The articles in this collection follow Joel Robbins’s call for anthropologists to move beyond the suffering subject as the raison d’être of the discipline—without following him in his call for an “anthropology of the good”—by reconnecting the study of subjectivities with the analysis of alienation, disempowerment, and impoverishment through dispossession and attempts at recapturing value in altered circumstances beyond the “post” implied the various post-approaches.

We do not claim to be unique in this venture. The articles in this collection share an interest with a growing body of literature concerned with the question of how to combine the study of intimate space with that of global powers (Smith 2014: 12; Wilson 2012). This is a program that has been developed over a number of publications (Kalb 1997; Kalb and Tak 2005; Narotzky and Smith 2006), which have all explored how class is being reconfigured and new surplus populations produced in the wake of neoliberal expansion. Don Kalb (1997, 2005)
suggests the notion of critical junctions to understand different scales of interaction and how it articulates with another (Smith 2014: 13). We share with Kalb (2015) an ambition to combine intimate ethnographies with an understanding of larger historical processes. These studies raise the question of how to combine “the currents of force and tendency” with a “fine grained attention to everyday experience” (Narotzky and Smith 2006: 3). We do, however, take a different stance from these studies as we focus on the diverse fields of value that are simultaneously becoming subject to contestation in the context of neoliberalization within and beyond the economy.

The articles in this collection are about populations deemed to be redundant within the capitalist system—so-called surplus populations (Li 2010). Some, but not all, have been dispossessed economically. We are interested in the kind of dispossession being associated with being “surplus” rather than the restructuring of, say, class (Carrier and Kalb 2015; Narotzky and Smith 2006; Barber, Leach, and Lem 2012). By highlighting the complexities of histories, struggles, and social relations, these studies have shown how the current moment of capitalist restructuring is producing a range of new social relations. Focusing on neonationalism in Europe, Kalb and Halmai, for example, argue that “working-class neo-nationalism is the somewhat traumatic expression of material and cultural experiences of dispossession and disenfranchisement in the neoliberal epoch” (2011: 1). The point here is that social relations are being restructured in processes of dispossession referring to “the varied acts of disorganization, defeat and enclosure that are at once economic, martial, social and cultural” (Kasmir and Carbonella 2014: 7). While sharing the overall concern of these authors with the varied impacts of neoliberal restructuring of the economic order, here we are not so much interested in material economic forms of dispossession as with the “intangible” outcomes of such processes in terms of altered subjectivities and, consequently, changed forms of agency.

Changing subjectivities

The call to connect the study of changing subjectivities with changing political-economic circumstance is not unique in anthropology. Peter Worsley’s (1957) analysis of cargo cults as attempts on the part of Melanesians to appropriate the goods of capitalist modernity (see also Otto 2010) is an early example of such an approach. In The devil and commodity fetishism in South America, Michael Taussig (1980) scrutinized the incursion of global capitalism into rural Colombia and Bolivia, bringing “inexplicable” poverty, misery, and death. He argues that peoples living on the margins of the world economy interpret money and wealth—after all,
equally inexplicable as their own poverty—as magical and the work of the devil. Other, similar examples of such metaphysical interpretations of capitalism transcending the subject-object dichotomy and generating new—often magically or religiously inflected—forms of subjectivity include the work by Peter Geschiere on the modernity of African witchcraft (1997) and the seminal work by Jean and John Comaroff on “occult economies” and “millennial capitalism” (2001). In contemporary Western society, Richard Sennett (1998) analyzed the personal and psychological effects of contemporary capitalism, while Simon Coleman (2000), Matthew Engelke (2010), and Daromir Rudnyckyj (2010) discuss the material aspects of contemporary “prosperity religions” and the ways that they form new subjectivities.

Anthropologists have long held that property involves a relationship between persons rather than only between persons and things. In their thoughtful introduction to an edited volume on Ownership and appropriation, Busse and Strang theorize the complex and multiple connections between ownership, property, and persons against the backdrop of “the rise of neoliberal ideology and its emphasis on free markets and private property, and the collapse of socialism in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union” (2011: 2) and “the recent extension of property rights into the public domain … [as] a process of enclosure” (2011: 10). The latter insight stems from James Boyle’s critique of the “second enclosure movement” (Boyle 2002: 23) predicated on “our contemporary expansion of intellectual property” (2002: 17) and hence on “fencing off ideas,” which presupposes the commodification of knowledge through the enclosure of intellectual and cultural commons (see also Brown 1998).

Busse and Strang seek to denaturalize the seemingly natural categories of personhood (in liberal ideology usually thought of in individual terms) and property, by complicating our understanding of the connection between persons and objects through processes of mutual appropriation: “Like beauty queens, sports stars and spokespersons, such people work hard to be appropriated and to become icons. The result is a relationship of ‘mutual possession’ with the social and political entities that they represent … this relationality is at the core of appropriation” (Busse and Strang 2011: 8).

The point to take home here is that—like property—personhood is relational, and that relations between persons are oftentimes mediated via objects through processes of appropriation—“the act of making something one’s own” (Busse and Strang 2011: 4). Paradoxically, property relations are also conceived of as relations between persons but disguised as relations between people and things, as many scholars—following Marx—have observed. Busse and Strang therefore follow Humphrey and Verdery’s (2004) call to “rethink property in more complex and dynamic terms that do not reify persons, things or relations”
Property relations

Dis- and repossessions are reconfigurations of the relationship between persons and collectivities, redefining the material and nonmaterial rights between members of society. As highlighted by Lund (2011), there is a tight connection between what you can have and who you can be; new property regimes entail new subjectivities. Changing relations of property in relation to labor (Nugent 1993); common property and images of community (Li 1996); territorial property in the context of a colonial history of dispossession and alienation (Van Meijl 2012); genes and the ways that new biotechnologies expand the ways in which bodies are valued (Everett 2003); DNA and “whiteness” as property embedded in racial hierarchies (Reardon and TallBear 2012); and intellectual property and indigeneity (Greene 2004) are different ways of trying to understand what happens when different notions of property meet as different kinds of claims over tangible and intangible resources. In these diverse instances, property relations refer to different appropriating subjects, different appropriated objects, and different types of connections between these two categories. As bodies, genes, territories, and even culture become commoditized, objectification occurs (cf. Sharp 2000: 293), and networks are cut in new ways (Strathern 1996).

Taking their point of departure from these seminal theories that marry the study of subjects and subjectivities with in-depth political-economic analysis, the articles in this collection take this analysis one step further. The specter of neoliberalization lingers in the background of the articles through enclosures, disposessions, financialization, idioms of accountability, and a pervasive market logic that overturn existing relations of power and authority at all levels. The articles in this theme section, however, focus on the dynamics of attempts to recapture values—understood here not as financial but as cultural value, and hence different from what was lost through dispossession—by seeking to highlight convergences between structural conditions, collective imaginaries, and individual aspirations. In using the terms “property” and “possession,” we make the usual distinction between property as a legal category that refers to specific rights to something, and possession as the actual use or inhabitation of something. This could mean, for instance, that dispossession can take place in situations where property rights are claimed over things that might have been in possession without legal property rights; in such situations, appropriation inevitably means dispossession.

Dispossessions of land and resources, of bodies, of political agency and sociality, even
of humanity (cf. Agamben 1998), entail a reconfiguration of the relationship between objects and subjects. Consequently, new subjectivities emerge as the dispossessed, commoditized, and individualized subjects craft new relations with the objects that were alienated from them, which are transformed and repackaged in the process, as well as with the agents of dispossession: corporations, state agencies, clinics. This view questions a scholarly narrative that links neoliberalization, commoditization, and loss by suggesting that neoliberalism in its various guises may open up new spaces for other forms of appropriation, or appropriations of other values or properties, for those deemed redundant in the capitalist market logic. But how may we understand these spaces? To answer this question, we seek to understand how a number of connections converge: the connections between subjects and objects; the connections between “local” and “global”; and consequently, the redefinition, transformation, and repackaging of the objects and values that are dis- and repossessed.

What comes next?

Central to these articles is therefore not the act of dispossession itself, often vividly described in the literature, but what comes next. How do people under different circumstances deal with new property relationships? How are new forms and relations of possession and appropriation connected up with lived experience and identity formation? What kinds of inequalities are enacted in the process? Which new alienations, objectifications, appropriations, and fetishizations come into being as bodies, objects, territories, and (social) life itself are being commoditized? Through the idioms of dispossession and repossession of values, we wish to highlight how people not only resist but engage in a new politics of belonging as their place within their own world and their place in the worlds of others are being reconfigured.

Not dwelling on the act of dispossession itself but rather on what comes next, we seek to illuminate relationships between subjects and objects that have been commoditized and lost, involving a temporality without assuming a fixed, linear, or causal teleology. In this move beyond the experience of dispossession toward acts of repossessing we therefore attempt to understand how people under different circumstances deal with the new relationships that emerge between subjects and objects, subjects and subjects, objects and objects, and the new ontologies and subjectivities that emerge in that process. The approach of the articles emphasizes experiences of and beyond loss—after dispossession—which postulates a temporal connection between past, present, and future in which it may be “post” but certainly not past neoliberalization. This observation is based on the realization that there is no turning back the
clock, and that relations and appropriations—that in the age of the “second enclosure movement” largely work through accumulation by dispossession—define and eventually become the persons involved, as in Busse and Strang’s (2011) example of beauty queens above, but might trigger attempts at repossession, if only in narrative terms, as claims to human dignity or to the moral high ground.

The articles in this collection, therefore, seek to grasp peoples’ attempts at repossessing objects, identities, bodies, and even their bare lives—and thus reconstituting themselves—in varying commoditized, subaltern, sometimes even muted ways. In widely diverging contexts, the articles in this collection tell thick ethnographic stories of attempts at repossession of such commoditized relations after the experience of loss and dispossession. Moving beyond the “suffering subject,” the articles thus explore the myriad subjective implications that such loss may have for subjects’ livelihoods and identities. These reconfigured relations of subjects with other subjects and with significantly signifying, commoditized objects—sometimes their own bodies—are constitutive of new subjectivities and forms of economic and political agency in changing national and global contexts.

The articles

The collection consists of four articles, which in different ways show how seemingly global processes become entangled in local affairs in sub-Saharan Africa, in a former Soviet republic, and in Latin America. The articles focus on how people mobilize and engage themselves with new opportunities and constraints that follow these emergent discursive, political, economic, and cultural formations. Two articles—both set in Peru—deal with “classic” forms of dispossession, namely of water as resource. In a study set in the northern Peruvian Andes, Mattias Rasmussen analyzes how a group of marginal peasants mobilized successfully against a proposed mine that would appropriate and probably pollute a high mountain lake that served as a water source for downstream peasants. Highlighting emerging tensions between property regimes in land and water and how these spill into notions of citizenship as connected with both identity and rights, the article sheds light on the shifting relationship between state, capital, and rural dwellers of the highlands. In the environmental conflict analyzed here, Rasmussen argues that violations of environmental rights become connected to questions of citizenship, thus linking the governance of resources intimately to the governance of people as the deep grievances held by the local populations toward the central government and its obvious articulations to business interests became a vehicle for protesting against the appropriation of
the lake.

In urban Arequipa, a very different group of people, namely peri-urban farmers, also seek to find their place in a changing world. Through an analysis of two infrastructural projects, Astrid Andersen traces the shifting position of the farmers in the social and political landscape over the course of seventy years. Economic, demographic, and political tendencies created a situation in which they have been removed from the center of cultural and productive life in Arequipa to the margins. Finding themselves at the losing end of history, these peri-urban farmers make nostalgic claims to ancestry and moral high ground—if they don’t literally sell out and leave. In this conundrum, Andersen claims that material infrastructures simultaneously distribute ideas of progress and layers of dispossession, shaping a neoliberal urban ecology. Farmers struggle to reclaim a position of status through moral and affective reactions and by attempts to strengthen collective efforts.

Also concerned with attempts to regain the moral high ground on the part of dispossessed subjects during difficult and unsettling times, Katrine Gotfredsen brings the readers in touch with postsocialist life experiences in the Republic of Georgia. In contrast with the two previous articles, the dispossessed in the formerly industrial town of Gori are those who were deprived of their social status and material benefits in the wake of the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991 and of the so-called Rose Revolution in 2003. They find themselves lost in a space between a Soviet past and a present marked by market-oriented forms of accumulation that made some “inexplicably” rich and powerful at times of deindustrialization. The inexplicable, however, is explained by rumor and conspiracy theories, which restores the honor of those made redundant in contemporary Georgia. Through a mirroring of the very political discourse that has dispossessed people of social and political standing, such vernacular conspiracy theories have the effect of repackaging generational and economic marginality into a broader framework that is of concern to the wider community, and of reinscribing the dispossessed into social domains—both local and national.

In the final article about rumors in urban Zambia, Birgitte Bruun provides an intriguing analysis of transnational medical research that extracts blood and other human substances from research subjects who (are supposed to) take certain experimental medication. By tracing the paths of research subjects and medical project volunteers, Bruun shows how research subjects and project volunteers learn to capitalize on the use of their own bodies for medical research while simultaneously confronting concerns about Satanism and other occult forces that circulate among their neighbors and acquaintances in peri-urban Lusaka about the “real” and clandestine purpose of the extraction of human substances. While navigating rumours of
Satanism in their neighborhoods, the subjects of medical research as well as project volunteers simultaneously maneuver among emergent scenarios of economic, social, and moral possibility. This study shows how these subjects of medical research who put their own bodies at stake, as well as other members of the marginalized communities where they live, seek to turn ambiguous transnational medical research projects into projects of new possibility.

The articles show different aspects of a global political economy that shapes individual lives. In the Peruvian cases we see how the interest of specific political-economic elites supersede the interests of certain groups of people. Thus, for the farmers of Arequipa, their shifting economic and social position can be traced both to internal demographic dynamics that over the course of the twentieth century changed Peruvian society from predominantly rural to majority urban. But their shifting position is also related directly to the new ways that Peru has been inserted into the global economy, producing agricultural crops grown on a large scale in the desert areas, thus requiring large amounts of irrigation water. The peasants of the highlands experience another aspect of Peru’s thorough insertion into international markets, as much of the economic growth that has been a priority of the national government can be traced back to extractive enterprises. In the case of Zambia, transnational medical companies and local researchers merge in their need to create cures, careers, and profits. In Georgia, recent political developments have changed the nation’s geopolitical engagement with the global political economy. While the economic logic of dispossession seems more obscure in this case, the ways in which the people of Gori narrate and make sense of the forces behind the policies that dispossess them reveal that there is an acute awareness of the unequal global distribution of wealth and resources.

Neoliberalism has been deliberately vague in its definition, allowing for different expressions of similar phenomena. As recent debates in Focaal (Clarke 2008; Wilson 2012) and Social Anthropology (Collier 2012; Peck and Theodore 2012; Wacquant 2012), among others, have shown, there is a need to move away from statist approaches to “neoliberalism” as a package of “promiscuity, omnipresence, and omnipotence” (Clarke 2008) and instead need to try to understand how neoliberalism as a principle for governance works on the ground. Wacquant (2012: 71) proposes a middle way that conceives neoliberalism—understood as an articulation of state, market, and citizenship—as both an open-ended, plural, and adaptable project (neo-Foucauldianism) and yet something that has an institutional core that makes it recognizable and distinct. However, neoliberalism does not exist in and of itself:
The fact that neoliberalism can only exist in socially embedded form means that transformative dynamics can never be *exclusively* assigned to neoliberalism … As an incomplete historical process, unevenly realized in space, neoliberalism must always dwell with its others; it may even be necessarily parasitic on other social and state formations (Peck and Theodore 2012: 183; see also Collier 2012: 191).

In these articles there is a shared understanding of neoliberalism as an economic rationale that permeates governance, “colonizing the field of value” as Povinelli (2011) would have it.

Highlighting processes of subject formation within an uneven global political economy, the articles all in their different ways show how people deal with new forms of value being attached to their surroundings and detached from their lives. From extractivist and booming Peru to postsocialist Georgia and HIV-AIDS-plagued Zambia we see that people seek to find new ways of having their perceptions of the good life and social justice heard, against the backdrop of dispossession and loss. All the articles therefore show how global inequalities are an integral part of “the local,” debunking the meaningfulness of a dichotomy between local and global scales as the global is already present in the local. The pairing of a (global) political economy with (local) subjectivities highlights that these do not exist independently to one another. Processes of dispossession of livelihoods, environment, social status, and human bodies as these become commoditized in new ways prompt people to find new ways of making their place in the world. Looking beyond dispossession as loss means that it is not the end but rather leads to the creation of a new context with emergent subjectivities “after dispossession.”

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