Book Review

Masculinities under Neoliberalism

Cornwall, Andrea, Karioris, Frank G. and Lindisfarne, Nancy (Eds.) 2016. *Masculinities under Neoliberalism*. London: Zed Books.

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The advent of neoliberalism has had immense consequences across the globe—not only in relation to deregulation of national economies. Rather, neoliberalism is being recognized as a form of population management that operates through the incorporation of various norms related to the optimization of the human subject. This happens in particular through a strong emphasis on values of entrepreneurship: in neoliberal capitalism, humans are seen as free agents, although, as critics often point out, only free to choose within the terms set by the market. Neoliberalism thereby appears to have two faces; it postulates an emancipatory potential, but this potential is pursued within powerful and confining moralized discourses of consumption. This constitutes a fundamental conflict not only in the lived realities of people across the globe but also, one could argue, in the academic effort to produce novel insights into such lived realities. For one might ask: how can we write openly about a political phenomenon as criticized as neoliberalism without succumbing to the intellectually constraining negative preconceptions, justified or not, that are reproduced throughout the academic world? This becomes a tension in much scholarly work—and this is also the case in *Masculinities under Neoliberalism*. The question is if such a tension is productive in expanding the readers' ability to comprehend how the global forms of governance are impacting people's lives? This collected volume, I will argue, is largely successful in this endeavour.

Polyvalence of Neoliberalism

Contributing authors have backgrounds in social anthropology, and detailed ethnographic accounts form the base for discussion throughout the chapters. The authors focus in particular on the lived realities, meanings and practices that are being

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formed within the shifting structures of the global economy. This proves to be a powerful approach to an area of research where much has been published in recent years. While neoliberalism is almost always framed by a singular, adverse vocabulary that envisions neoliberalism as an all-consuming, global force, *Masculinities under Neoliberalism* avoids the pitfall of being dazed by such pervasive narratives. Rather, the book reminds us, following James Ferguson, 'not to cast neoliberalism in the singular and [to] pay closer attention to its polyvalence' (p. 24).

Given its ethnographic approach *Masculinities under Neoliberalism* is not just an important, comprehensible and extremely timely endeavour to grasp the immeasurable impacts of neoliberal reforms. But, by taking the reader to a variety of settings - from post-conflict Sierra-Lione, Asian migrant communities in the United Arab Emirates, to industrial workers in Russia - it also reflects the sense of up-rootedness, distress and trepidation - and, perhaps, of new political openings - which saturates the imagination of people across cultures and societies. For this reason, far from being merely a piece of detached scholarly work, *Masculinity under Neoliberalism* is itself a historical document, a product of its own time, written in the incongruous prose of urgency and futility that captures the spirit of today.

Due to its evolving nature, neoliberalism is inherently slippery and uneven, and it is difficult to come to grips with its effects on men's lives. However, it is clear that it offers a normative framework for entrepreneurial behaviour, self-making and self-management, which individualizes success and failure and, consequently, naturalizes inequality. The chapters demonstrate successfully the manifold ways men in different cultural contexts respond to the exigencies of neoliberal economic governance as well as how the ideals of manhood are reconfigured and negotiated in the process. Thus, I find several of the contributions in this volume invaluable to comprehend how masculinity can be perceived as multi-dimensional aspects of people's lives, which, for instance, deeply affect their attachment to their workplace and extend into their home lives. To me, the most important accomplishment of this book is its insistence on allowing questions of masculinity to emerge while simultaneously allowing gender to remain unfixed. By showing how conceptions of masculinity emerge from the entanglement of traditional values and emergent economic structures, the book repeatedly reveals the limitations of relying on simple categorizations as a way to convey an understanding of gender issues across cultures. The authors insist that rather than having a fixed nature, masculinity is historically and spatially produced.

Crisis of Masculinity

The book sets out to show that although the neoliberal ethos may at first glance appear gender-neutral, it is not always the case. In fact, to grasp the local impacts of neoliberal governance, gendered effects must be taken into account. While the book sets out to offer an account of masculinities under neoliberalism, what seems to be the focus - with only a few exceptions - is the way that neoliberalism brings about a *crisis* of masculinity. While not expressed so explicitly, the sense of loss associated with masculinity leaves the impression that a proper, 'traditional' masculinity has given way to the flux of late capitalism. Masculinity is framed in terms of dislocatedness, precarity and disappointment. The latter is a theme that runs through many of the chapters; for

instance, patterns of consumption and increased living costs render men unable to live up to the rather ubiquitous ideal of the man as a provider. Thus, men see themselves eclipsed by women in their households, which severely undermines men's claims to authority in cultural contexts where respect for men is deeply bound up with their capacity for material provision. It would be interesting to read more about masculinities among the well-off social classes that have capitalized on the economic policies of recent decades.

Masculinities under Neoliberalism turns out to be an extensive collection of papers that offer a remarkable ethnographic richness. It succeeds in both being true to the abstract, sociological level and in weaving together engrossing tales of people living under the aegis of global neoliberalism. The book can thereby be read by all those seeking to gain new and stimulating perspectives on a diversity of ethnographic settings. But the relevance of this book extends beyond geographic contexts. The 17 chapters included in this work will resonate with broader ideas in the field of masculinity studies - and most of the chapters are replete with at once narrow and expansive meditations on a range of themes relating to continuities and changes in the way masculinity is understood and constructed across ethnographic fields.

Throughout the book, much ground is covered, and the picture that emerges is necessarily complex and incomplete. The book moves quickly from one topic to another and while this could, in other anthologies, cause a general sense that one did not get quite enough time to digest each chapter, due to the thorough editorial work, this book, in fact, manages to maintain a steady pace that allows the reader to dive into each chapter. What I missed is a conversation between the texts. As is often the problem with this type of anthologies, the ethnographic cases appear to have been picked haphazardly from a great number of potential cases. This constitutes an underlying weakness of the book when reading it cover to cover. Arguably, the book would have been strengthened by a more systematic comparative effort. This, however, does not lessen the value of the individual chapters.

By all appearances, this is yet another scholarly work that seeks to frame the intricacies of late capitalism with the conceptual boundaries of neoliberalism. But in reality, through its ethnographic attention to masculinity, it becomes a profound dissection into different life-worlds today. *Masculinities under Neoliberalism* is poised to inspire future research by showing how the (ethnographic) study of masculinity can help to address and even recast critical concerns in relation to precarious lives today.