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## **The social projects of late liberalism**

Elizabeth A. Povinelli

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## Notes

1. Recall Chancellor Angela Merkel's declaration to youth members of the German Christian Democratic Union in 2010 that multiculturalism had 'utterly failed' and immigrants need to do more to integrate. The crowd responded with a standing ovation.
2. Braun and McCarthy (2005) make a similar point in relation to Hurricane Katrina.

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## The social projects of late liberalism

**Reviewed by:** Elizabeth A. Povinelli, *Columbia University, USA*

I must admit to feeling that the cart is leading the horse in this generous exchange. Not only are these responses pulling *Economies of Abandonment* down intriguing new avenues, but also the book that I would have imagined to be of interest to readers of *Dialogues in Human Geography* has yet to be written. If my last two books, *Empire of Love* and *Economies of Abandonment* explored how late

liberal forms of power are animated and expressed in the affects of love, narratives of time, and the experience of eventfulness, the third volume, *Geontologies: A Requiem to Late Liberalism* examines late liberal power at the borders of what I am calling the carbon imaginary—the governance of life through commonsense understandings of the difference between geological and biological existence. As a result, not only have I been given new ways of thinking about *Economies*, I have also been handed fantastic problems as I begin writing its sequel.

Rich in detail and diverse in focus, these responses nevertheless contain some important

common themes: the productivity and limits of 'late liberalism' as a descriptive analytic; the usefulness of the term 'sociographic' as a writing style and a mode of analysis; and the relationship between abandonment/endurance and justice. Let me touch on each, if not sufficiently tackle any.

In *Economies of Abandonment*, I use the phrase 'late liberalism' to refer to the governance of difference that emerged in the 1960s as a response to a severe crisis of legitimacy. As anticolonial and new social movements tore the face off paternalistic colonialism, gender, racialization, and heterosexuality, the politics of recognition emerged as a way of taming the radical nature of this critique. I reserve the phrase 'neoliberalism' to refer to the governance of markets emerging around the same time as stagflation put Keynesian economics into crisis. I now find it more helpful to use the phrase 'late liberalism' to refer to the period between the 1960s and mid-2000s in which the governance of difference *and* markets responded to these two legitimacy crises. Thus, rather than merely referring to the governance of difference, late liberalism refers to the entwined but not determinate relations between a mode of governing difference and modes of governing markets. I try to spell out what I see as shared discursive elements to this governmental order in *Empire of Love* (where I focus on autological and genealogical discourses) and *Economies of Abandonment* (where I focus on tense and event).

While *The Empire of Love* and *The Cunning of Recognition* were written inside the (full blown) imaginary of late liberalism, *Economies of Abandonment* begins to feel its way around what may well be the end of the formation of liberal governance in—and as Olund notes—a very specific social formation, Anglo-American settler colonialism. What is late liberalism in the wake of: the loud proclamations of Merkel, Sarkozy, Cameron, and Howard that the multicultural experiment has failed; the reemergence of a robust civilizational rhetoric in the wake of the 9/11 attacks; the collapse of financial markets in 2008; the stark disarticulation of capitalist expansion and political form as witnessed in China; and the appearance of the precariat?<sup>1</sup>

But while I now use the phrase 'late liberalism' in a slightly different way, late liberalism does remain

a periodizing phrase. And my interlocutors express some disagreement about the potential of the phrase 'late liberalism' as a way of characterizing a form of liberalism. Olund pushes me to think late liberalism outside the framework of Anglo-American settler colonialism and provides a powerful reading of US race relations as evidence of its potential analytical productivity—as does Valdivia. But McCormack worries that like many phrases that have emerged over the last 10+ years (late capitalism, neoliberalism, etc.), 'late liberalism' might find itself so overused that it loses its intimate relationship to the thick socialities out of which it sprung.

Perhaps, every thinker wants her particular thought to become everyone's background assumption. But McCormack is right that if achieved, the generalization of the thought usually comes at the price of destroying its specific analytic source, purpose, and power. If, however, 'late liberalism' is a periodizing phrase, I mean it to be a very strange way of periodizing—and the strangeness was meant to address the opposite directions to which McCormack and Olund point. I was hoping this strange way of periodizing would be visible in the opening diagram, 'A Symphony to Late Liberalism'. I had to argue to get the diagram printed, but I saw it as a vital part of my argument about what late liberalism 'is' and means to 'do'. Take the upper and lower stanzas. One can imagine readers taking the upper stanza as the global order and lower stanza as the local one—so Australia in the lower is a local variant of the global events provided in the upper. But the upper stanza is a retrospectively formed echo of the lower stanza—the specificities of the Australian formation and deformations of liberalism projects a 'global' citational ground. 'From here that looks like this'. I was hoping others would add not merely additional series of lower stanzas (a stanza from Honduras, Brazil, France, Chechnya, etc.) but also additional corresponding projective upper stanzas. Across these multiple upper and lower stanzas, what elements overlap? Why? What are the temporal lags and spatial formations? In answering these questions, as McCormack so nicely puts it, concepts become 'as generative participants in storying . . . rather than frames of analysis that stand outside or above these scenes'. But they also call forth as Olund and Valdivia suggest

new insights on the elasticity, citational logics, institutional mirrorings, and social variations of whatever is the aggregation I am calling late liberalism.

My gut is that, if we add all our stanzas and re-stanzas, late liberalism will appear as the geographical assemblage of a social project—and we would begin to see the glimmers of a multitude of immanent alternative social projects across the variants of late liberalism.

But again this depends on understanding late liberalism—or liberalism as such—not as a thing but as a social project. As Valdivia notes, *Economies of Abandonment* is a sociography of alternative social projects not an ethnography of a social group. Social projects are not things—although they may appear to us as if they were. Social projects are instead activities of fixing and co-substantiating phenomena, aggregating and assembling disparate elements into a common form and purpose. The word ‘project’ means to convey the constant nature of such building as well as the constant tinkering with plan, draft, and scheme as the building is being made, maintained, and remade out of disparate materials. Late liberalism is a set of dominant patterns, constantly tinkered with and revised according to local materials and conditions, according to which life is fabricated. Valdivia is spot-on that critical focus on social projects rather than social worlds foregrounds the distributed nature of biospacing and enfleshment. It is a way of decisively breaking with the always-lurking presupposition of the homogeneity of the social group, of culture, of society, of the ethnos.

But the term sociography is not merely meant to signal a relationship to social projects rather than social groups. It is also meant, as Derickson insightfully notes, to create a link between a form of writing, a theory of critical distance, and a method of research.

Given how long I have known, lived, and worked with many people discussed in *Economies of Abandonment*, and previous works, I could write quite a thick account packed with longitudinal data! But if I am to answer honestly Derickson’s question, what is relationship between the mode of engagement or the praxis of research that appears to shape my approach to knowledge production and inform my

theory building and the ethical and political substance of that theory and knowledge, I have to preface it by saying that my relationship began as friendship, family, colleague. I was not an anthropologist first then setting out with a project into which they fit. Their alternative social project—the way they fit within the land rights regime that demanded they be represented by an anthropologist—outlined both what I would become by professional degree and how I would continue to define my mode of engagement. I did not begin with the question, ‘Who are you?’ but ‘What is this that surrounds us, differentially making us, with such vast implications on our life trajectories?’ ‘What can you see standing next to me but within a different framework of capture; I by you as close as can be but treated so differently?’ Derickson rightly intuits that this way of proceeding seems askance to typical ‘academic’ inquiry. But it is, as Valdivia writes, ‘the incomplete truth[s] of the social projects ‘we inhabit’ that demonstrate the noncorrespondence between what is claimed as truth and what is within the social projects we live’.

The writerly trick is to give enough content and context to this ‘we live’ so as to demonstrate the noncorrespondence between what is claimed as truth and what is, while keeping the focus on liberal formations of power rather than on the amusements of the other—to shift the critical attention away from ‘them’ and onto liberal formations of power by demonstrating how it manifests itself ‘here’.

What is quite difficult is that the grammar of these liberal amusements can quickly colonize any writing project. Thus, Valdivia’s question about why I do not refer to another scene in ‘*Killer of Sheep*’ in which Stan differentiates himself from the truly poor. It is an amazing scene and marks, as Valdivia notes, how fine the spatiotemporal biospacing of late liberalism can be and how vital such spacings are even for those within its more rotten corners. As Valdivia writes, the scene screams, ‘this is not bare life, this is performative and embodied and willing to endure’. And yet, the scene also powerfully demonstrates how delicately drawn are the differential logics of late liberal abandonment. Saying ‘at least I am not that’ demonstrates how endless the calculus of differential endurance can be and how this differential calculus can be put to the use

of dominant social projects. Just barely in front of falling behind—what are all the possible affective and discursive responses to this scene? Some might include: Amazement at their sacrifice? Hope for the future? Justification—look they endured so why didn't those others? And yet knit together, the vignettes that compose the film portray a protagonist that is heroic but hardly a hero; exhausted to lethargy, but not a 'dead battery', to use a phrase from where I work; refusing to succumb to the racist structures of US capitalism but not leading a revolutionary vanguard.

I may not succeed, but the idea is to frustrate readings looking for hope, sacrifice, and adjudication so as to focus on the differential manifestations of late liberal power and the (f)actual but not necessarily hopeful conditions of endurance necessary to survive the zones in which immanent critique has placed so much weight for the source of a social and political otherwise. (And, yes, I may give short shift to immanent critique's thick experience. As I try to emphasize in *Economies*, I locate myself within this tradition, urging it to complete the step and then

look back to what retrospectively happens to the path that led us there.) I don't want, 'Wow, they're amazing', but, 'What the hell am I making them endure as the price of my good life?' I am not wanting to provoke the feeling of injustice—which, as Derrida noted long ago, though not swamped in late liberal forms of the future anterior is nevertheless always yet to come (*à venir*); nor of vulnerability and precarity. I want instead to contribute to the cultivation of a new politics of obligation (*obligare*) in which we find ourselves within but not determined by.

### Note

1. As the Italian Autonomists have noted, the emergence of the precariat marks a potentially new moment in left and right theorization. Located outside even the possibilities of a reserve labor force, the precariat punctures the dialectic of labor and capital in the heart of Europe. Neither the politics of recognition nor neoliberalism seems to be providing robust ideological answers to the crisis of the moment.