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## **A well-formed, 'participatory subject': Asking neo-liberal governmentality questions of PGIS**

Elvin Wyly (2006), in his commentary in the 'Researching the City' panel session at the annual meeting of the Association of American Geographers, remarked that the "neat alignments between positivist, qualitative/quantitative, reactionary/radical have become unhinged". The very frameworks with which we have researched the city are in flux, continually in co-production with our projects; no particular framework or epistemology captures the complete narrative. Indeed, this unhinging is no more apparent than at the crossroads of participatory geographic information systems (PGIS) and Wyly's additional point, that many of those in GIS research do not realize the extent to which their projects are political, is well taken. PGIS comprises a series of wide-ranging projects situated across disciplines, which seeks an alternative to desktop-based geographic information systems: a confluence of participation methods, activism/organizing, decision-making sciences, community-public involvement, critical GIS, participatory research and public participation planning (among others). However, little research has asked 'why now' and 'for whom'. Similar issues about participation, power, politics, and representation face these PGIS projects and this paper shall explore and propose a particular continuity, or common thread, throughout these various participation-focused endeavors.

The project of participatory GIS depends, I argue, upon the formation of a 'participatory subject'. This subject is a figure of potential empowerment and emancipation, of autonomous rationality and self-actualization – a targeted body for state devolvement and responsabilization resulting in a shift from government to governance.

I shall interrogate further what this subject might be, and discuss how it results from neo-liberal, governmentalized processes. My interest in this notion of a ‘participatory subject’, crucial to PGIS, serves as a response to two recent articles by Sarah Elwood (2004) and Stephen Graham (2005) which demonstrate a certain intrigue or curiosity about contemporary, neo-liberal moments. I draw upon these two articles to demonstrate different approaches of how we might interrogate PGIS using a neo-liberal governmentality analytic. The ‘participatory subject’ is a site of introspection, a place of re-consideration and reflection – and a re-situating of the political.

This paper proceeds in four sections. Firstly, I discuss briefly what I mean by neo-liberal governmentality, using three perspectives articulated by Wendy Larner. Secondly, I introduce both the Elwood and Graham articles as examples of neo-liberal analysis of contemporary technologies and forms of participation. Thirdly, I propose the notion of a ‘participatory subject’, as a formative process which characterizes this contemporary, neo-liberal moment. Finally, I place these two discussions in conversation with the emerging subfield of participatory GIS, and describe my preliminary thoughts on the implications this analytic has for PGIS in terms of participation, power, and ‘the political’.

### **Neo-liberal governmentality**

The ‘neo’ in neo-liberalism functions as a device or heuristic, thereby opening a space within which to critically examine particular departures from a liberal, Keynesian welfarist state. Matthew Sothorn (forthcoming), extending Wendy Larner, points to the performative work of the ‘neo’, which disjoins or precludes a liberal foundation; Sothorn’s research on disability sex manuals intends to demonstrate a certain “identity

crisis” for particular hegemonic neo-liberal critiques (7). The ‘neo’, therefore, draws attention to these situated departures and is always-already involved in their reproduction. In this section, I look to Larner’s (2000) depiction of three strands of neo-liberal phenomena: as policy, ideology, and governmentality/discourse.

Neo-liberalism as analytic describes particular changes in policies: state restructuring, public/private partnerships, devolution of power, increased bureaucracy, and the importance placed on market rationality. Larner terms these shifts as “neo-liberalism policy” and articulates distinctions from/among neo-liberalism as ideology and governmentality analytics. It is useful then to revisit her conceptualizations about various neo-liberal forms of governance.

Neo-liberalism as ideology, Larner (2000: 9) writes, is a broader approach incorporating “institutions and organizations and processes”. This analytic employs Gramscian notions of ideology and hegemony to interrogate how particular individual and group identities were constituted through neo-liberal ideology. This focus on ideology, Larner (2000: 12) continues, counters a top-down approach (neo-liberalism as policy) by focusing on “new welfare state arrangements [which] emerge out of political struggle” and a disciplinary and hegemonic power which changes ideology, resulting in state restructuring.

Neo-liberalism as governmentality looks to the ways in which power is enabling through discourse, in the formation of political identities and subjects (Larner 2000). Foucault’s project on (bio)power, captured in *History of Sexuality*, allows him to show how discourses around sex and sexuality enabled particular political subjects, through normalizations. Normalizations are tactical expressions of the enabling and disabling

notions of power. Power, for Foucault, “is not an institution, and not a structure; neither is it a certain strength we are endowed with; [rather] it is the name that one attributes to a complex strategical situation in a particular society.” (1990 [1978]: 93) Power, instead is co-productive with discourse. Derek Hook explains an aspect of this connection:

Discursive rules are hence strongly linked to the exercise of power: discourse itself is both constituted by, and ensures the reproduction of, the social system, through forms of selection, exclusion and domination. ... These concerns with not underestimating the functioning of discourse lead also to his [Foucault’s] emphasis of the fact that discourse is both that which constrains *or enables*, writing, speaking, thinking. (2001: 42-43, original emphasis)

Discourse enables the mobilization of power – the power to exclude and select, as Hook notes. Individuals and institutions become objects of power; through tactics of governmentality – the specializations of knowledge and the use of normalizations. Governmentality as an “art of government” targets population, by the regulation of individuals and activities in place – a “conduct of conduct” (Foucault 1991).

Therefore, neo-liberal governmentality is power working on individuals and institutions to conduct themselves through market rationality, forming political subjects who are self-actualized, entrepreneurial, and responsabilized. It is the formation of these political identities through both discourse and ideology and the restructuring through state policies which complicates neo-liberalism as a “multi-vocal and contradictory phenomenon” (Larner 2000: 21) Peck further describes this conflict and struggle as altering or blurring the notion of the state, “as the clean lines that were once imagined to exist between, say, the national state and the offshore world, bureaucracy and civil society, and the local and the global have become increasingly blurred and porous.” (2004: 397) The notion of the state itself, through neo-liberal governmentality, has been

shown to be dysfunctional and contradictory, and yet has also become so pervasive and strengthened.

According to Brown (2003) and eluded to by Larner, neo-liberal governmentality critiques must be careful that they do not reproduce the conditions of neo-liberalism by giving neo-liberalism some ontological status, incapable of resistance (minding the productive work of the 'neo'). Rather, a focus on discourse demonstrates the very constitutive nature of this process and therefore positions resistance and response at the level of discourse, not necessarily policy or ideology. Brown's point, that neo-liberalism should be thought of as a set of normalizations and not necessarily having some ontological status, illustrates a difference in approaches for some neo-liberal governmentality critics (c.f. Hindess 2002; Stoler 1995). A neo-liberal analytic explores these idealized norms (of rational choice, market rationality) as they construct (racialized) citizens and states. As Brown writes, neo-liberalism "does not presume the ontological givenness of a thoroughgoing economic rationality for all domains of society", making suspect notions of citizenship located, as Hindess writes, within a "system of states" (130), where the "citizen" has some pre-given condition. Again, careful attention must be paid to the ways a neo-liberal critique constructs the original departure from the liberal, Keynesian state.

### **Neo-liberal participation and technologies**

Even still, these three perspectives on neo-liberalism (as policy, ideology, and governmentality) resonate in the various ways geographers write about this phenomenon. With regards to participation projects, Elwood (2004) describes the "new localism" in collaborative planning and revitalization programs in the UK and the US. Here, she

analyzes the discourses of each state context in motivating particular participation initiatives and local scales. Additionally, Graham (2005) examines the resulting inequalities which come with a shift from Keynesian to neo-liberal governance, whereby “software-sorting” techniques present in technologies like online GIS create new inequalities. While little research places participatory GIS in confrontation with a neo-liberal governmentality analysis, an extrapolation of the arguments of Elwood and Graham can begin to imagine how this critique might take shape.

Elwood (2004) describes the shifting of responsibility for urban revitalization from the state to citizens and voluntary organizations. For her, neo-liberalism is revealed upon inspection of the discourse used to motivate a focus on participation for these institutions and organizations. By pointing to the rescaling toward community and neighborhood, Elwood examines how a new localism exists to motivate participation through “effective planning” and an “empowering” of local residents (760). However, she writes, many of these participation-based processes do not transfer any real influence or autonomy to local residents. Elwood concludes by recognizing the need to look toward these new localisms and the discourses employed to motivate collaborative partnerships. A certain ‘fine line’ exists for those engaging in participatory projects, especially those caught in the intersection of government and citizen interests.

Graham (2005) advances a somewhat different critique relevant to those interested in participatory GIS. His context is urban and inequality studies; therefore, he examines how online GIS works to constitute identities and supports an unequal consumption of urban space. Technologies such as online GIS represent a particular sorting of people and places, by software – resonating with neo-liberal governmentality

critiques of the targeting of particular populations and the development of knowledges, facilitated by discourse. Additionally, Graham advises against notions that these technologies are “limitless, completely integrated, and all-powerful” while recognizing the difficulty in pursuing critical policy and activist agendas otherwise (Graham 2005: 577).

The previous sections have meant to present a brief introduction of what is potentially meant by neo-liberal governmentality studies in relation to policy and ideology, and ground this critique in two examples of scholarship which could be extrapolated to the critique of participatory GIS. The following section examines further the notion of subject formation and discourse as critical projects of neo-liberal governmentality, and proposes the figure of the ‘participatory subject’.

### **‘Participatory subject’ formation**

Graham, in his critique of software-sorting techniques like online GIS and closed circuit television, describes contemporary phenomena of post-Keynesian societies where “code-based technologized environments continuously and invisibly classify, standardize, and demarcate rights, privileges, inclusions, exclusions, and mobilities and normative social judgements across vast, distanced, domains.” (2005: 563) These technologies work to sort specific people, constituting populations and political subjectivities. The ‘participatory subject’ emerges as a subject bound to government through responsabilization and so-called empowerment. In actuality, as Elwood writes, these collaborative partnerships “grant participating actors relatively little autonomy or influence in processes of urban spatial change.” (2004: 767) ‘Participatory subjects’ are these actors or individuals imagined in neo-liberal discourse. They are subjects, in the

sense that they are expressions of neo-liberalism, and yet, they are specifically ‘participatory’ because it is their involvement and partnering which motivates and completes the project of Participation. In other words, it is these subject’s perceptions that they are in fact empowered or participating which allows these projects to further extend governance into the lives of individuals – to more completely target populations and practices.

Projects of empowerment or participation constitute well-formed neo-liberal subjects through responsabilizing discourse, as Elwood has explored. These subjects are invested with choice, and the ability to rationalize (via market rationality) decisions placed before them. This investment of choice and ability is laced with the intent to empower – that these individuals should transform their private interests into that of a common. These ‘participatory subjects’ are co-productive with a governmentalized state; invested with supposedly devolved state power and responsabilized to that of their neighbors, themselves, and the common. Of course, this devolvement of power to the individual is not fully actualized; the participating individual at the receiving end may not actually have any additional power or autonomy, as Elwood (2004) has noted. Still, it is this imaginary ‘participatory subject’ which discursively frames for projects of participation both the objective and the process of reaching this objective. This discursive, participatory subject obtains emancipation through the practice of participation – their empowerment contingent upon their self-actualized, autonomous (market) rationality, entrepreneurialism, and responsabilization.

By examining the ‘participatory subjects’ which emerge from governmentalized and neo-liberal discourses, a new set of questions can be articulated for the projects of

participatory GIS. This discursive subject formation unites participation-based projects, and inspection of this subject assists in the re-examining of the motivations for such future participatory projects. The concluding, final section explores what questions would be furthered by a neo-liberal governmentality analysis of participatory GIS.

### **Conclusions: implications for PGIS**

Mitchell Dean, in his depiction of projects of empowerment, castigates such efforts as “clear examples of those contemporary liberal rationalities of government that endeavor to operationalize the self-governing capacities of the governed in the pursuit of governmental objectives.” (1999: 67) While not all participatory GIS projects are necessarily empowerment-based, recognizing empowerment as a particular technology of government, like Dean, is one approach of exploring further what a neo-liberal governmentality analytic might provide. In this concluding section, I offer future research questions which address PGIS as a project of empowerment that constitutes a polity and the political in particular, neo-liberal governmental ways:

- How (through what discursive production) is PGIS motivated by the empowerment of participants to meet particular government-institutional objectives?
- What participatory practices are expected of the participant? How are these practices structured and regulated?
- What ‘training’ becomes necessary for the participant? What ‘background knowledges’ or ‘contextualization’ must be facilitated in order to support effective participation?

- Where (at what points in the process) are participants allowed to express a political identity, if ever? How is PGIS able to monitor/calculate/eradicate such politics? Why do so at all?
- Is PGIS fundamentally a political project? In what ways is PGIS eliding any such political status? For what ends, must PGIS remain a neutral intervention?

These questions are motivated by a neo-liberal governmentality analytic, which seeks to expose power relations and discursive formulations whereby a ‘participatory subject’ is imagined and operationalized. Elvin Wyly’s (2006) remarks at the AAGs suggested a “critical genealogy of data systems” which positions these sorts of endeavors as “narratives with a history”. This sort of contextualization situates PGIS as productive of discursive subjects who participate and are ‘empowered’, who are responsible and are ‘given voice’, who are self-actualizing and calculating and are given the ability to choose.

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