

Book Review: After the Crisis: Anthropological Thought, Neoliberalism and the Aftermath edited by James G. Carrier

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9/1/2016

In *After the Crisis: Anthropological Thought, Neoliberalism and the Aftermath*, editor James G. Carrier and contributors reflect on the impact that neoliberalism has had on the state of anthropology today. While Christopher May finds a clear account of the sense of crisis currently gripping the discipline, he argues that greater engagement with the field of critical political economy might have helped the book to also suggest a more concrete route out of the malaise.

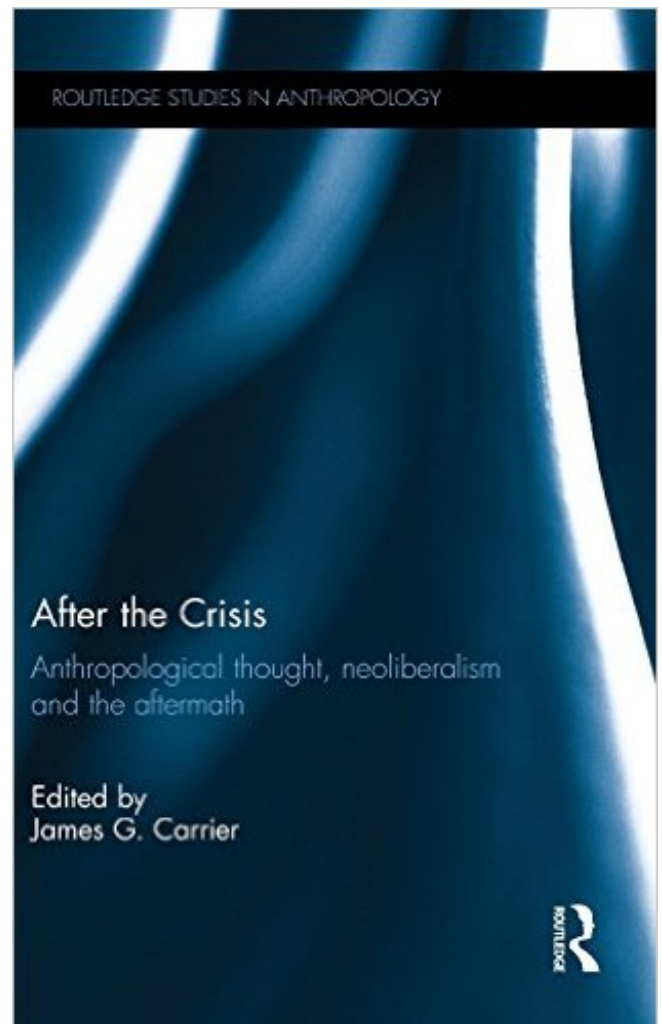
After the Crisis: Anthropological Thought, Neoliberalism and the Aftermath. James G. Carrier (ed.). Routledge. 2016.

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In the last couple of decades, partly driven by a (re-)engagement with the work of Karl Polanyi and partly by a desire to construct a political economy of the everyday that emphasises the practices of social agents, many political economists have been reading and deploying ideas and analyses drawn from anthropology. In this new edited collection, *After the Crisis: Anthropological Thought, Neoliberalism and the Aftermath*, James Carrier and contributors reflect on the impact that neoliberalism has had on their discipline, as well as its attendant crisis, in a way that will be of some interest to those political economists who have sought an 'authentic' voice for agents through anthropological approaches.

Carrier's account of the crisis in anthropology wrought by neoliberalism takes up the first third of this volume, starting with a depiction of the neoliberalised academy, bringing together a critique of bibliometrics and the more generalised marketisation of higher education. Such a position is not uncommon in European critical political economy, and indeed many colleagues will immediately feel common cause with our disciplinary neighbours. The post-1980s shift to neoliberalism to some extent robbed anthropology of its key subject, society; as such, Carrier argues, it pushed anthropologists away from order and system and towards individual decision-making. This went beyond the cultural turn to emphasise the 'native's point of view' (that is, letting the 'subjects' of anthropology speak from themselves without the distortions of theory or analytical perspectives).

This argument is taken up in Eduardo Dullo's chapter, which seeks to move away from an 'us and them' perspective on the native's point of view, to instead construct an approach that allows all perspectives to be considered as



aspects of difference arrayed horizontally rather than hierarchically. However, in doing this, Dullo works to a large extent within a notion of choice that Carrier identifies as part of a neoliberal ontology, which the latter argues is part of the very crisis he seeks to address. Carrier accepts that neoliberalism was not the only driver of change in anthropology, but that it meshed with postmodernism and the critique of imperialist theories to prompt unwelcome shifts in the way that anthropologists approached and perceived their field of study/analysis. Thus anthropologists, in Carrier's and Dullo's telling, have become focused on diversity and the celebration of difference, increasingly seeing interaction and choice as the key analytical issues. Anthropology (or, at least, key elements of its disciplinary clusters) seem to have adopted, or been co-opted into, the methodological individualism of neo-classical economics and/or neoliberalism.



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This point is reiterated in Josiah Heyman's final reflections, which conclude that the discipline's neoliberal-induced crisis means that this is a time for remaking anthropology. In a sense, this remaking is exactly what Carrier invites his contributors to do, having set out his own account of anthropology's neoliberal crisis. The chapter by Sabina Stan develops Carrier's critique by examining the manner in which anthropologists have addressed post-socialism, suggesting that the adoption of a number of ontological aspects of neoliberalism has not in the end precluded an engagement with the political aspects of post-socialist society's adoption of such strictures. Here, this adoption is regarded as parallel to the adoption of these analytical pre-commitments by anthropologists themselves.

If the link with political economy has been asserted rather than demonstrated up to this point, two chapters make this much more specific. Michael Blim sets out the political power of the US 'ruling class' and how it has reproduced this political power in an account that would not be out of place in any political economy journal. Certainly there is much of interest here, but I, at least, had difficulty seeing how an anthropological perspective had informed or added to such an analysis. Likewise, Jeffrey H. Cohen and Ibrahim Sirkeci's interesting chapter on migration would find a home in a critical political economy collection on the subject, but again offers little that would seem to be specifically anthropological other than a focus on actors and decision-making (which is hardly unusual in migration studies). This is not to suggest that either of these chapters is without merit, only that they seem unable to establish (for this reader at least) something definitively anthropological in their approach.

This question comes into focus in Jeff Maskovsky and Ida Susser's identification of a political-economic critical

anthropology, which uses the political-economic depiction of the context of study as a foil for the work of critical anthropology. Focusing on two exemplary studies – Sherry Ortner’s [New Jersey Dreaming](#) and John Jackson’s [Harlemworld](#) – they suggest a way forward for critical anthropology to act as a bridge between the particular (of inequality, for instance) and the more systemic level of analysis offered by political economy (such as in Thomas Piketty’s recent bestseller). Thus, it would seem that what anthropology offers that distinguishes it from political economy is a sensitivity to, and place for, the voice, action and perspectives of agents on the ground. Indeed, this is exactly what political economists coming to this bridge from the other end would expect and value from colleagues developing anthropological analyses of political-economic contexts.

Overall, then, there is a clear account here across many of the contributions on a crisis in anthropology, but less clear is what the route out of this malaise is. Looking at this from an expansive perspective on political economy that is permissive of interdisciplinary inclusion, one might conclude that anthropological approaches to political economy are already in play, but are perhaps not so well recognised from the perspective of the anthropologists themselves. Thus, the most perplexing thing about this volume for a critical political economist is that nowhere is Polanyi invoked, despite his ubiquity as a touchstone for critical political economy and/or economic anthropology. The volume seems to indicate that a useful bridge might be built between anthropology and political economy as a way of critically engaging the neoliberal ontology that clearly Carrier and others are uncomfortable with, but on this evidence their knowledge of the discipline they hope will save them seems patchy at best.

Christopher May is Professor of Political Economy at Lancaster University, UK. His most recent book is *Global Corporations in Global Governance* (Routledge 2015) and he is currently editing *The Edward Elgar Research Handbook on The Rule of Law* (2017). He has published widely on the interaction between law and political economy, and wrote the first independently authored study of the World Intellectual Property Organisation. [Read more by Christopher May](#).

Note: This review gives the views of the author, and not the position of the LSE Review of Books blog, or of the London School of Economics.

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