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**Ambivalent flexibilities: anthropological exploration and perspectives**

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The world seems more flexible today. Flexibility has become a household word that refers not only to the workaday world but also to the ways in which we consume commodities and organize our lives in late modernity. Whether we talk about work places and corporations, care, cultural products and artefacts, or citizenship, identities, boundaries etc., flexibility is on the agenda as a self evident scale of value that resonates with the workings of global capitalism. As a result of that much social theory has focused on the notion of flexibility building upon long established debates about the relationship between agency and structure, difference and empowerment etc. Yet, while such issues can be found at the heart of anthropological theory, anthropologists have not tended to take much of a part in discussions about flexibility. This paper is an exploration of what anthropology can contribute to understanding the significance of ideas of flexibility in the contemporary world. We focus in particular on feminist sociological critiques which concentrate on what is seen as the hegemonic status of flexibility in the modern world, in particular the work of Lisa Adkins.

Some time ago, through conversations with each other about the ethnographic contexts in which we have each conducted fieldwork, we became aware of certain similarities between the two sites, which were in other ways very different. Sissie had conducted a study of music and gypsy musicians'

musical performance in NW Greece, Rosie had examined changing ideals and discourses of nursing care within the context of the privatisation of Czech health services. It became apparent that in different ways, discourses of flexibility were assuming a resonance and importance in each context. Participants in each of our research projects were increasingly required to demonstrate flexibility, in relation to the performance of care and music respectively. This was not all however. On closer examination, we noted that what we call the *imperative to be flexible*, (borrowing here from Green et. al. 2005: 807) actually seemed to be producing certain kinds of essentialisms and inequalities (2005: 807). In brief, within the Czech case, the requirement that nurses become ever more flexible in relation to the performance of individualised care for patients was closely linked to the discursive constitution of care as a naturalised 'feminine' ability to respond to the needs of others, a process which contributed to the continued economic exploitation of nurses. In the Greek ethnography, the need to produce music as a flexible product required the simultaneous essentialisation of musicians as 'authentic' gypsy identities, from which they were then unable to escape.

In considering how to account for these processes we became attracted to the work of feminist sociologist Lisa Adkins, who has published a considerable body of work in recent years on the themes of flexibility, reflexivity and mobility (Adkins 1999, 2001, 2002, 2005, Adkins and Lury 1999). In a recent book Adkins examines how these themes are discussed within current social theory. She engages with work which points to the significance of mobility and flow in the re-making of culture, time and place (exemplified for e.g. in the work of Urry and Clifford), as well as reflexive modernization theory (in work of Beck and Giddens, amongst others). Despite their different methodological and epistemological underpinnings, these theories, Adkins argues, share a fundamental thesis of social change in arguing for the "declining significance of social structure" (Adkins 2002: 3). In other words, social categories associated with modernity are fractured as movement, flow, flexibility, reflexivity, detraditionaliation and increased individualisation, provide the ground for the reconfiguration of social life. The result is the construction of the self as an

empowered liberated agent, polyvalent, fluid, hybridised, mobile, detraditionalised, freed from structures, marked by a heightened, transforming level of reflexivity - the move from identity to identification can be easily accounted for in this context. The resonances of such a way of understanding the social can be detected in Appadurai's (1996) anthropology of "ethno-scapes": according to this everyone can take advantage of mobility and flexibility and transnationality is seen liberatory in both spatial and political terms for all peoples.

Adkins's concern is that none of these theories pay sufficient attention to the re-making of relations of "authority, privilege and exclusion" (2002: 9) as a direct result of the new significance accorded to flexibility, mobility and reflexivity. Adkins is not the only person to argue this point; there is indeed an amounting critical literature that reflects on the limitations of the modernist (and post-modernist) celebrations of flexibility (see for example Argyrou 2003). But what we found particularly useful about Adkins's approach was her focus (through her own sociological studies and those of others) on the exclusionary nature of discourses of flexibility. She considers a wide range of arenas in which the ability to be 'flexible' or 'reflexive', is highly valued, including workers' gendered performances of self within UK financial and tourist sectors, discourses of 'responsible' sex and sexual identities in relation to HIV/AIDS testing in Australia, Western Europe and the USA, and notions of the reflexive researcher within social science. Adkins argues that what links the forms of flexibility practiced within these varied contexts is an underlying assumption that actors can develop or achieve a 'mobile relation' to their own identities. However, alongside such developments are processes which create categories of people who are left unable to achieve that same mobile relation to identity. Thus, Adkins concludes that, if the social is being reformulated around notions of flexibility and reflexivity, then these are also the same axes along which new forms of exclusion emerge. Flexibility does not necessarily subvert essentialist frameworks, but instead reproduces them, thereby reformulating the logics it appears to disrupt. This argument seemed to resonate in important ways with our own observations from our respective studies.

Building then on Adkins's (among others) critiques it seems that there is a dualism between potentially positive flexibility which is dynamic, progressive, and subversive, and a potentially negative one which is a product of capitalist economy, a trope through which new kinds of essentialisms and inequalities are produced. Yet, this account of flexibility seemed to leave certain questions out of the frame, questions which we begin to pose and explore in this paper, and which, we feel, anthropology is well placed to address. If in the "global hierarchy of values" (Herzfeld, 2004) flexibility appears to become a standardised and hegemonic measure to judge "change" – this having highly desirable sides and negative ones - it does not appear, however, to be based on something that can be located. Although regarded as basically 'Western' and 'neo-liberal' flexibility is simultaneously everywhere and nowhere, lacking an obvious 'location' in substantive terms. This seemed problematic to us, particularly in relation to the findings from each of our studies. Whilst, in both cases, we could identify an "imperative to be flexible" (c.f. Green, 2005: 807), the ways in which 'flexibility' in each case was understood, who or what was introducing and supporting it and whose interests it was being made to serve, were key parts of the picture. These elements were very much to do with the particularities of the histories, politics and economics of the locations in question. The issue of location (which can be seen as simultaneously imaginary, social and political) seemed to be significant, since it appeared to open up areas of ambivalence in relation to hegemonic accounts of flexibility. *That* there was a need, even an imperative, to be flexible was rarely disputed, but *how* to be so, how to do flexibility in the *right* way and *who* got to decide on this matter; these issues were rarely if ever settled in our own ethnographies. If Adkins's approach (among others) offered an analysis of the effects of hegemonic flexibility, it also appeared to overlook the question of how, within particular locations, flexibility comes to be hegemonic in the first place.

On further consideration, it became apparent to us that the problem of how to account for the salience of location is linked to Adkins's theoretical alignment with a key presumption of the social

theories she otherwise sets out to critique. Perhaps most fundamentally, Adkins accepts the proposition that the increased significance and importance of flexibility (with regard to identities, commodities, ideas or capital flows, etc.) disembeds the individual from certain key structures which hitherto defined modernity, and thus has heralded a major shift in the constitution of social life. However, the precise nature of this shift is not elaborated. For instance, it is unclear whether the social relations and forms of power associated with modernity prior to this rupture have been completely, or only partially, reformulated. The question of how the imperative to be flexible is refracted through different social, historical and cultural guises, leading to potentially uneven and variable effects for social relations in different locations is not a focus of consideration. Proponents of the reflexive modernisation thesis postulate a key shift, but do not specify its relationship with what existed before it, in temporal, spatial or cultural terms. Other commentators have identified that a significant weakness in the reflexive modernisation thesis inheres in its inability to account for historical continuities across the temporal ruptures it identifies. Lee, for example, frames the issue in terms of reflexive modernists' "ability to handle the question of tradition in the West and elsewhere" (2006: 360). It appears difficult to know quite how to locate the continued relevance of 'tradition' within a reflexive modernisation perspective, because of the insistence on a major break with previous ways of organising social relations. 'Tradition' and its meanings can be re-evaluated and even reinvented, but only from the other side of a historical rupture, which is then (as Shields (n.d.) and Argyrou (2003) have suggested) universalised and taken to be relevant to all parts of the world. Whilst it should be recognised that Adkins is concerned not so much with the tradition-modernity divide as with a rupture within modernity associated with flexibility, she appears to treat this break in a similar manner to other reflexive modernists.

We want to suggest that Adkins's important theoretical insights and her critical perspective to concepts and practices of flexibility might be used in ways which do not necessarily rely upon the existence of a fundamental rupture between tradition and modernity, or even within modernity.

Instead, we advocate further exploration of how ideologies of flexibility emerge within the convergences of historical, political and economic conditions of contemporary life in particular locations. We seek to develop an approach which understands the significance of flexibility and reflexivity within social life as social processes which are always *entangled within*, rather than *separate from*, an array of other cultural, economic and political contingencies. We understand locations as places which always incorporate forms of power as well as agency. Thus locations cannot be conceived as localised sites of cultural variability or resistance to a singular global or hegemonic process – diversity will not only be generated within the local and its interactions with a coherent homogenous and abstract “global hierarchy of value”. If flexibility is indeed hegemonic then it must be recognised that hegemonic knowledge is always bound up with people and places, and that its deployments will vary, along with the kinds of exclusions and essentialisms it generates. Thus there will be a diversity of hegemonic notions of flexibility.

Such an approach is pursued by Aihwa Ong (1999), in her in depth ethnography of the contemporary transnational Chinese. The strategies associated with flexible citizenship, she contends, always emerge in and through the disciplining regimes of global markets, nation-states and kinship arrangements. Working always in articulation with each other, these arenas produce opportunities for a range of flexible transnational practices around business, residence, education and work, and which are usually aimed at accumulating wealth and consolidating prestige and influence. Yet just as the relations of capital, the state and kinship construct the desirability of flexibility, they also continually define its limits. These limits operate differently for different subjects, and Ong also points out that the extensive mobility of the few, must be seen as linked to the relative fixity of the many.

Notwithstanding Ong's ground breaking work, we want to suggest, following Adkins, that there are a wide range of areas in which the significance of flexibility, mobility and reflexivity in the contemporary world might be gauged, transnational practices being only one of them (albeit a highly important one). For example, Emily Martin's (1994) work traces the emergence of the ideal of flexibility and delineates the way it has quickly moved across three different areas of U.S. life-immunology, employment, mental health – and has become a prevalent image of a new kind of self. She states: "The intense desirability –even the seductiveness- of the ability to be flexible and adaptive while in constant change is registered by the simultaneous appearance of this cluster of attributes in an exceedingly wide variety of domains" (1994:149-150).

In this light we might well ask how the "imperative to be flexible" creates other kinds of subjects than transnational ones. Adkins's critique of reflexivity and flexibility as processes which normalize the notion of the subject's mobile relationship to their own identity is of particular interest and relevance here. Such a conception of the self cannot be simply disregarded as symptomatic of "neo-liberal" and "neo-modernist" discourses of selfhood, or as a way of embedding people in particular cultural frameworks, as some argue. Being flexible might be empowering for the post-modern, post-plural middle class subject; yet, it could also be seen as an imposition for all those who are not generally considered as flexible. Being flexible might be a strategy of maneuvering and positioning, a way to negotiate a sense of powerlessness, a means of engaging, an ability to negotiate diverse moral claims. At the same time, as Adkins's work clearly demonstrates, the imperative to be flexible can also reformulate inequality and marginalisation for those who are rendered 'inflexible'. It may also seek exclude those who are practicing the "wrong" kind of flexibility (e.g. gypsies, illegal migrants etc. ), those who have a reputation of being always already flexible, of fitting in, occupying gaps. In the new economy that foregrounds openness and flexibility and where people do not have relations – Adkins notes that there is instead an emphasis on doing relations and on relationship

management (2005)—the “imperative to be flexible” is supposed to dissolve pre-existing boundaries or render them irrelevant.

Yet, flexibility is not a view from nowhere or everywhere. There cannot be flexible relations free of previous entanglements. The continually shifting entanglements of definition, imagination, and practice that constitute location make “the imperative to be flexible” ambivalent. It is important therefore to pay particular attention to questions about discourses of identity that reach well beyond their allegedly flexible or “traditional” character. In understanding the significance of ideas of flexibility in the contemporary world anthropology is well equipped to consider its power and explore its ambivalence through an inquiry into the discursive and political conditions of the reproduction or transformation of particular formulations of identity. More importantly, this includes bringing into question the historicity and cultural specificity of boundaries that are supposed to be flexible, in other words the *where* of identities, in order perhaps to catch a glimpse of their *how*.

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