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## **Anthropology of Neoliberal Globalization: Imagining Alternative cognitive discourses?**

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received: 03/04/2023

Accepted: 22/05/2023

*Published:* 16/06/2023

### **Abstract:**

The article sheds light on how to understand neoliberal globalization in social science discussions, considering anthropology as one among many disciplines that can contribute significantly to this ongoing debate. As a starting point, my paper incorporates an approach to neoliberal globalization, and uses key concepts and perspectives, to describe more clearly and focus on the phenomenon and its current trends. Anthropologists agree on how globalization is best achieved: through extensive, long-term fieldwork, either in a single area or in several locations analytically linked together.

Due to its magnitude, globalization is a concept that must be imagined rather than directly experienced. Analyzes on neoliberalism enable us to develop new insights reshaping debates, awareness and perspectives of neoliberalism, Georges Balandier, Marc Abélès political anthropology, David Harvey capitalistic-imperialism, hegemony and hegemonic transitions. ‘New Deals’, new visions allow us to think about the overall functioning of the world today.

**Keywords :** anthropology; globalization; neoliberalism; criticism; alternatives.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

In his book “The Anthropology of Globalization” (2008)<sup>1</sup>, the French anthropologist Marc Abeles confronts the questions of globalization with counter-theses, with the intention of dismantling its concepts and bridging the gap between the local and the globalized, calling for an open and critical anthropology that is ready to confront clearly the new imbalances of the world. In fact, this insight meets directly with this article in an effort to examine the various debates' aspects, divergence, and tendencies about the anthropology which lies right in the center of the story of neoliberalism together with its close cousin, economics<sup>2</sup>, political economy, humans, and societies are interacting and moving in a complex of global networks, known to many as “neoliberalism”.

Neoliberal globalization is widely referring to the predominate theory of free market capitalism, to be the primary engine of globalization. The term neoliberalism itself underscores an important element of the political economic argument-that globalization is a human-made and ideologically driven set of processes. The focus on neoliberalism is also one manner in which scholars have come to conceptualize how the contemporary moment is fundamentally different from the past.

In the debates broadly shaped by economics and the political sciences, the importance and particularity of the anthropological approach is to highlight dimensions that these other disciplines leave in shadow. The impact of neoliberalism is not confined to aspects directly linked to the market, institutional reforms, or political practices.

One of the main questions the anthropologists seek to explore what can be termed neoliberal practices and representations are produced and disseminated on the global scale<sup>3</sup>. How do anthropologists understand neoliberalism? How do neoliberal policies impact humans in modern current societies ?<sup>4</sup> how scholars have come to conceptualize the contemporary moment as fundamentally different from the past ? how “neoliberalism” is understood in social science discussions ?

## 2. Globalisation speculations:

### 2.1 Definition, meaning, and conter analysis

Most anthropologists agree that, experientially, globalization refers to a reorganization of time and space in which many movements of peoples, things, and

ideas throughout much of the world have become increasingly faster and effortless. Spatially and temporally, cities and towns, individuals and groups, institutions and governments have become linked in ways that are fundamentally new in many regards, especially in terms of the potential speed of interactions among them<sup>5</sup>.

In her article, Corina Sorana Matei<sup>6</sup>, identified three images of globalisation:(the neutral, descriptive one ; the prescriptive, positive one ; and the prescriptive, negative one). In the last decades, globalization raised an increasing interest in many of our contemporary areas, from economics and politics to ethics and anthropology, and the opinions regarding this major phenomenon tend not to a unified vision.

The Neutral, descriptive is a dictionary definition of globalization:"the rising and accelerated operation of economic and cultural nets, at a global level and on a global basis".<sup>7</sup> Prescriptive, positive: George Soros described it more specific, showing us a predictable path, from his point of view: "the free capital movement followed by dominance of global financial markets, and of multinational companies over the national economies"<sup>8</sup>; also, the American Professor Michael Mandelbaum sees globalization's "upward path" as already belonging to today's integrated world economy. He compares this economy with a powerful modern vehicle carrying, in one way or another, seven billion passengers<sup>9</sup>; (The current world population is around 8.05 billion persons),<sup>10</sup> another example of a positive evaluation is the book of German authors Oskar Lafontaine and Christa Müller, who were optimistically arguing before the "current" crisis(es) that globalization is not a disaster, that it offers to all countries more chances than risks, and they ended up with the exclamation: "don't be afraid of globalization!"<sup>11</sup>

I have contributed to the research regarding current debate of globalization like to show the changing patterns, the flexibility; such glophile and glophobia, Thomas Fridmane 2005 globalization 4.0, to perceive globalization as a new-colonial-imperial movement.<sup>12</sup>

The anthropological commitment to fieldwork has led many researchers to avoid nonempirical assumptions as to what globalization might be or what effects it might engender. The scale of globalization namely, that it is singular and worldwide, that it is something that encompasses the earth. Cooper argues that empirical truths about the world do not reflect the notion of global interconnection. Indeed, vast stretches of the planet, most notably in sub-Saharan Africa, remain largely disconnected from the wider world. Equally problematic, according to

Cooper, is the fact that a process that is global is everywhere and immeasurable, and therefore of little analytic value<sup>13</sup>.

The picture of globalization as a homogenizing, one-way flow of culture from the West to the rest does not adequately capture the complex realities of the contemporary world. Hannerz's chapter, for example, points out that while the circuits that connect the West to the rest of the world are no doubt the chief conduits of the global traffic in culture, they are certainly not the only important circuits around. One also has to contend with those that bring the culture of the periphery to the center as well as with the ones that interconnect the countries of the Third World with one another. Appadurai's piece suggests that the global cultural economy is a complex, overlapping, and disjunctive order, one best understood in terms of the relationship among five dimensions of global cultural flows: ethnoscapas (the moving landscape of people), mediascapes (the distribution of the electronic capabilities to disseminate information), technoscapes (the global configuration of technology), finanscapes (the disposition of global capital), and ideoscapes (a chain of ideas composed of elements of the Enlightenment worldview). The aim is thus to present a nuanced view of the globe, one that highlights the multiple routes of culture and the fact that globalization is not in any simple way producing a world of sameness.<sup>14</sup>

### **2.2 Questioning globalization**

The first concerns of anthropologists disagree the "what" : does globalization name a more-or-less singular and radical transformation that encompasses the globe, in which technoeconomic advancements have fundamentally reorganized time-space, bringing people, places, things, and ideas from all comers of the world into closer contact with one another ? Or, is globalization a misnomer, even a fad, a term too general to describe a vast array of situated processes and projects that are inconsistent and never entirely "global" ?<sup>15</sup> A second discussion concerns the "when" : Is globalization new---do we currently live in the "global era"? Or, has the world long been shaped by human interaction spanning great distances ?

These debates are not limited to two opposing sides. Some scholars feel that these very questions blunt meaningful analysis of the contemporary world and all of its nuances. By focusing largely on absolutes-that is, what is entirely singular versus wholly chaotic, what is radically new versus something predicated largely on the past important questions are passed over. For example, what are the specific

mechanisms of human interconnection and the particular histories in which they are embedded ?<sup>16</sup>

Anthropologists do agree, however, on how to best go about investigating globalization: through long-term, intensive fieldwork, either in a single locality or in several linked analytically together. This fieldwork is ethnographic ; that is, it seeks an intimate understanding of the social and cultural dynamics of specific communities, as well as the broader social and political systems they negotiate. In a world of intensifying social relations, ethnography requires engagement in both empirical research and critical theory.<sup>17</sup>

Anthropological attention to ethnographic detail is an important rejoinder to a vast globalization literature centered on macro phenomena, such as the relations between large-scale political and economic bodies like nation states, political unions, trade organizations, and transnational corporations. Undoubtedly, these "translocal" entities are of great anthropological interest as well. Thus, anthropology's contribution to this literature lies in its assertion that social change, viewed in both distance-defying connections and inequitable disconnections within the world, can be compellingly grasped in the daily practices of individuals and the groups, institutions, and belief systems they inhabit.<sup>18</sup>

The ethnographic emphasis has long been to follow the question, the person, the commodity, or the idea—all things that are continually mobilized or constrained by human activity. Some anthropologists have gone so far as to argue that empirically thin accounts of globalization, especially those that embrace it as a natural and ultimately unavoidable force in the world, actually obscure the means by which unequal relations of power are forged. The argument is significant, as anthropologists generally agree that the ability to define globalization and steer discussions pertaining to it greatly informs the decisions of wealthy and influential policymakers.<sup>19</sup>

While often understated in current anthropological scholarship on globalization, early anthropological attempts to grasp translocal phenomena greatly influenced the discipline's development. Indeed, anthropology has a history of engagement with translocal phenomena and has long argued that exchange across sometimes vast distances has been and is common to human social interaction.

### **2.3. Approaches to globalization : critical views**

Anthropologists today are apt to favor specificity and variation over generalization and central tendency, Instead of adopting a macro perspective that promotes a world map outlook, the author(s) proposes a closer examination of local

action in the context of global influence.<sup>18</sup> Anthropology has, subsequently, tended to shy away from grand theories that can essentialize peoples and characterize histories as predetermined. Indeed, a continued interest of anthropologists is to investigate how individuals and groups negotiate their social worlds in creative and unexpected ways. However, this has not prevented anthropologists from using macro theories as frameworks for inquiry nor from intimating how ethnographic detail is indicative of broader social configurations. The main point is that empirically supported arguments are paramount. This is where long-term, immersed fieldwork has been and remains a central element of anthropological contributions to the scholarship on globalization.

Yet the disciplinary interest in globalization has sparked debate about the future of fieldwork methodology. Indeed, while the ethos of anthropology continues to privilege singlesited fieldwork (as this has long been considered the best means to become versed in the social processes of a given community), many argue that a world of intensifying human relations has left traditional fieldwork approaches outmoded. In an effort to address this challenge, George Marcus (1995) outlined two strategies. The first argues for the use of archival data, as well as macro theory, to situate specific communities or individuals in larger socioeconomic processes.<sup>20</sup> The second method involves moving out from single sites to conduct "multisited" ethnography in order to examine movements of ideas, peoples, and things.<sup>21</sup>

These analysts call attention to the fact that, due to its magnitude, globalization is a concept that must be imagined rather than directly experienced. Yet this is not to suggest that a singular system is out there—that it is simply a matter of lacking the proper tools to see it in its entirety. *A metaphor commonly invoked to describe globalization imagines several blind men examining the extremities of an elephant.* The consensus among critical anthropologists like Cooper and Tsing disputes this, arguing that globalization is an analytic construct, not a coherent world-making system. Moreover, they argue that collecting the variety of exchanges shaping relationships in the world under a single moniker makes for an inadequate analytic category, for it fails to capture the specific mechanisms of interconnection and the histories in which they are embedded. This is a view that rejects a singular world-making system in favor of a pluralization and inconsistency of agendas, projects, and processes.

These anthropologists call for examining globalization from a critical distance, paying attention to the arguments and mechanisms by which theories of globalization are mobilized. Moreover, the critical distance approach is especially

important in light of the fact that influential discourses defining globalization inform the decisions of the world's powerbrokers, especially transnational governing bodies like the WB, IMF, and WTO, as well as powerful nations whose leaders read popular political pundits.<sup>22</sup>

To what extent can it be said that recent transformations have changed how states govern and with what efficacy? Globalist claims have often declared the demise of the state with the dissolving of national borders and the rise of international governing institutions like the WTO, WB, and IMF. Yet, as Tsing (2000) noted, this idea assumes that nationstates have been historically consistent and omnipresent. There is little doubt that the development of international law and institutions upholding it have changed the means by which many states govern their populations.

However, proclamations of the global dissolving of nationstates are exaggerated, according to anthropologists. This does not mean that states have not changed at all. Indeed, contrary to the traditional doctrine of sovereignty, many states are now held accountable by international authorities and in many instances are forced to comply with their policies. The degree to which such states are actually constrained and reshaped by international institutions varies, of course, from context to context. Thus, one could argue that the sovereignty of states in the present has been to a large degree reorganized, if not in many instances greatly circumscribed.

Sharma and Gupta (2005), in their important volume *The Anthropology of the State*, argued that "sovereignty can no longer be seen as the sole purview or 'right' of the modern state but is, instead, partially disentangled from the nation-state and mapped onto supra-national and non-governmental organizations".<sup>23</sup>

The shifting nature of governance and states at present comes to heavily bear on conceptions of citizenship within countries. Many anthropologists argue that globalization has reformulated many notions of and policies pertaining to citizenship. Ong (1999), for example, used the term *flexible citizenship* to grasp how individuals and groups deploy various strategies to evade, as well as profit from, various national regimes of citizenship.

### **3. Neoliberalism and the anthropological awareness**

Anthropologists concern with neoliberalism tend to focus on specific effects of, and resistances to, neoliberalism, not on the phenomenon itself. The generally implicit understanding of neoliberalism in much anthropological work. But in fact, very little attention has been devoted to specifying what "neoliberalism" means in

anthropological inquiry. It would be most accurate to say that, although ever more anthropological studies are concerned with neoliberalism, there have been few steps made toward an anthropology of neoliberalism.<sup>24</sup> Mathieu Hilgers, wrote about “the three anthropological approaches to neoliberalism”, the term “neoliberalism” has no single definition on which all agree. He highlights the conception of neoliberalism and the epistemology on which the three approaches are based, also considering their shared presuppositions (cultural, systemic, governmentality), which enable us to look with new eyes at neoliberalism and its expansion across the globe.<sup>25</sup>

### **3.1 Situating Discussions of Neoliberalism ‘the historical moments’**

As a starting point, it useful to ask how “neoliberalism” is understood in social science discussions ? It is associated with a specific historical conjuncture in the 1970s and 1980s, delimited by the oil shocks, fiscal crises of states, perceived crises of welfare systems, declining productivity growth in many industrial countries, and the effects of collapsing world commodity prices on many non-industrial countries. This conjuncture is also marked by the emergence of neoconservative, neoclassical and libertarian understandings of these crises. Finally, this historical moment encompasses certain model cases : Pinochet’s Chile under the influence of the “Chicago Boys” ; the US and UK under Reagan and Thatcher ; Latin America under the “Washington Consensus,” policies of structural adjustment ; and post-socialist countries during the “transition” to a market economy.<sup>26</sup>

On the other hand, views on the scope of “neoliberalism” vary widely, ranging from those who see it as a limited intellectual movement of economists and political theorists to those who treat it as an encompassing hegemonic project. The McLuhan initial image of a “global village”<sup>27</sup> has been a fascinating mental pattern for all those living in the sixties who expected from the increased communication and interdependency among nations a boost of solidarity. The familiarity which a village provides was expected to exponentially spread through a world more and more connected, preserving and making different identities known to one another. This familiarity of so many cultural identities (in other words, this emerging multiculturalism) was supposed to be the origin of a global cooperation based on mutual respect and common ground values, such as democracy, prosperity, or the three famous “liberté, égalité, fraternité”.

In fact, is that McLuhan’s expression wouldn’t be so famous if he had been chosen for the new emerging world the image of a global metropolis, or a global state, or a global Westernization. All these are cold expanding trends, exporting



too much and too far away some smaller, historical, or imperfect structures in economy, politics and culture. As per Ralph Linton's anthropological meaning of culture as "the configuration of learned behaviors and of their results, the components of which are shared and transmitted by the members of a given society". The European specialist in political anthropology such as the French Georges Balandier was writing in 1967 about our world's increasing communication and technology in terms of simple modernity, seeing it as a "self-acculturating", mere objective process.<sup>28</sup> In this respect, Marc Abélès underlines the contribution of Georges Balandier to the consideration of social dynamics, but also underlines the importance of American anthropologists who questioned the question of the relationship to time and underlined the importance of writing in the face of dogma of the primacy of the field. The works of Gupta and Ferguson have had the particular merit of deconstructing the myth of the field and the authentic.<sup>29</sup>

### **3.2 Neoliberalism Anthropology: challenging perspectives?**

The American anthropologist Clifford Geertz brings at the beginning of 21st Century his critical point of view over an international situation which lacked the claimed consensus on fundamental notions such as shared values, conceptions and feelings. On the contrary, the author sees dispersion, disassembly, faults and fissures in all the transnational landscape : "Whatever it is that defines identity in borderless capitalism and the global village it is not deep-going agreements on deep-going matters, but something more like the recurrence of familiar divisions, persisting arguments, standing threats, the notion that whatever else may happen, the order of difference must be somehow maintained".<sup>30</sup>

Geertz launches a worrying conclusion, in our globalized world, *we have reached the point in which we don't know how to handle these new, fast changing realities*, on the background of old problems, conflicts and discriminations. His opinion seems to imply that *we lack a consciousness of our times*, maybe a collective selfhood, solidarity and understanding for all the complex phenomena we are witnessing nowadays. The old failures and prejudices seem to revive and contaminate the others, as if the negative aspects were more powerful than the positive ones, and as if differences were more decisive than resemblances and common ground.

If we are to somehow name this vast change and intricate interdependence in our contemporary world – says Geertz –, then we will have either the name of "global village", or the name that World Bank suggested: "borderless capitalism". And the author's irony continues, trying to imagine a fusion of the two: "But as it

has neither solidarity, nor tradition, neither edge, nor focus, and lacks all wholeness, it is a poor kind of village. And as it is accompanied less by the loosening and reduction of cultural demarcations than by their reworking and multiplication, and, as I pointed out above, often enough their intensification, it is hardly borderless".<sup>31</sup>

The French scholar Marc Abélès is one of the leading political and philosophical anthropologists, writing on the state and globalization, according to him, we live in a geopolitical universe that, in many respects, reproduces alienating logics. It is also a testament to anthropology's centrality and importance in any analysis of the global human predicament. Thinking beyond the state will find wide application in anthropology, political science and philosophy courses dealing with the state and globalization. He reaffirms his vision of anthropology and specifies in particular why the dichotomy between distant societies and close societies seems to him outdated. The importance of transnational phenomena that characterizes globalization leads anthropology to make intelligible the links that are woven between the different parts of the world.

He feeds his subject with a rich itinerary of critical readings and discusses the use of terms, preferring the word "mondialization" to that of globalization. He recalls that we have already witnessed in other eras periods of globalization and the term globalization underlines the specificity of an era which is characterized by an unprecedented level of integration and interconnection. This results, according to him, in the emergence of specific lifestyles for individuals and in the appearance of social institutions such as NGOs or international organizations, these requires emerging social relations also induce new places of politics that anthropologists must observe in order to understand the evolution of societies.

His definition of globalization - "people and places around the world today are extensively and densely connected to each other due to increasing transnational flows of capital, goods, information, ideas and human beings".<sup>32</sup>

Abélès recalls a first important point, globalization does not go in the direction of the absence of territory, there is a geography of wealth and that is not incompatible with strong states and with the existence of borders that are difficult to pass or even impossible to pass for some. However, it is totally wrong to reduce globalization to a domination of the North over the South.

Abélès rejects the posture which would consist only in pronouncing on the dangerousness of the positive virtues of globalization. He equally rejects the rhetoric of denunciation seeing in globalization either only an affirmation of the great powers or exclusively an impoverishment of the South.

To describe this world in the making, anthropology must rely on what has been the heart and the strength of its approach: “describing what is”. It is not reduced to the analysis of a dying world or culture but must decipher what is being born. To do this, it is necessary to follow the actors and leave the local, the identity to go towards human activity and follow these complex flows to understand the interdependencies which completely upset the family structure, the networks of solidarity. He recalls the pioneering work of Eric Wolf<sup>33</sup>, who shows that it has been a long time since the natives are no longer natives.

In this perspective, Abélès sees that “the anthropologist does not study the villages but in the villages”<sup>34</sup> and the field is only a methodological device: studying the microphone only takes on meaning in a larger device. The anthropologist sets himself the requirement of accounting for the intimacy of relationships at the local level, but always having the concern to highlight the relationships of scale between the local and other macro levels. This implies in particular today for the anthropologist to vary the scales of observation to apprehend the phenomena in force.

Anthropologists must thus think about change and in the idea of change the question of otherness is reshaped. The question of knowing, “where is the other”, “where is the strange”, must be rethought in the idea that there is a modification of the borders. In this context, the idea that the apprehension of cultures takes place in a globalized world goes against an exotic anthropological tradition, in its relationship to space and time. Abélès thinks that an ethnography of the global is possible when three complementary elements are taken into account: the influence of external forces on local life, the existing connections between different places, the representations that shape everyday life and which feed on the global.<sup>35</sup>

The most clearly articulated and influential starting point for many scholars of this school of thought is David Harvey, a Marxist geographer who in his significant work *The Condition of Postmodernity* (1989)<sup>36</sup> argued that economic restructuring and associated social and political changes in Western economies in the early 1970s sparked a fundamental reorganization of global commerce that sped up the turnover times of capital. These changes were characterized, according to Harvey, by an increasing sense of spatial attenuation and temporal acceleration in human economic and social relations. Harvey referred to this sensation as time-space compression, which was brought on by the collapse of significant geographic and temporal barriers to commerce.

This collapse was a by product of an economic experiment promoted during a crisis of capital accumulation and subsequent recession that existing Keynesian fiscal and

monetary policies could do little to stop. The experiment involved the transition from the Fordist model of standardized commodity production and its related system of political and social regulation (the dominant mode of capitalism since the end of World War II) to the post-Fordist model of flexible accumulation. The increased velocity and reach of market transactions this new regime of accumulation prompted were realized through substantial innovations in transport and information technologies. Harvey's 2005 book, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*<sup>37</sup>, traces the neoliberal influence behind this shift, arguing that the transition was a political project intended to reinvigorate elite class power and capital accumulation mechanisms.

David Harvey defines neoliberalism as, first of all, a hegemonic project that seeks to “reestablish the conditions for capital accumulation and to restore the power of economic elites.” This project, in turn, is associated with a stable package that includes “a theory of political economic practices,” a “hegemonic mode of discourse,” and policies that seek “to bring all human action into the domain of the market.” Finally, Harvey ascribes to neoliberalism remarkable geographical scope and temporal continuity.<sup>38</sup> “capitalistic-imperialism”<sup>39</sup> hegemony and hegemonic transitions.

Perhaps the most recent and representative anthropological effort to further develop this perspective is Jean and John Comaroff's "Millenia! Capitalism: First Thoughts on a Second Coming" (2000)<sup>40</sup> The Comaroffs argue that neoliberal globalization at the turn of the millennium is a process that alienates capital from labor and marshals consumption as the primary shaper of social and economic phenomena like popular civil society discourses, occult economies and religious movements, and global youth cultures.

Much of the anthropological literature on neoliberalism thus far has focused less on the logic and mechanisms of its production and administration (though this is increasingly a field of study, as some anthropologists turn their eyes to understanding the inner workings of institutions like the WTO, IMF, and World Bank), and more on the impact of, and resistances to, neoliberal globalization. June Nash's *Mayan Visions : The Quest for Autonomy in an Age of Globalization* (2001)<sup>41</sup> is a representative ethnography of this focus, as is Jeffrey Juris's *Networking Futures : The Movements Against Corporate Globalization* (2008).<sup>42</sup>

What strategy, according to Professor Harvey, will replace neo-liberalism and new imperialism? He remarked that, within the scope of any capitalist mode of production, the only feasible plan (in spite of its being a temporary plan) is to

practice a new "New Deal" in the whole world. Or the power of state is to be reorganized in the principle of more extensive interventionism and redistribution by liberating the logic of capital from neo-liberalism so as to constrain finance and control everything from international trade clauses to those we can see or hear from the media. "Such a road of imperial development does seem to propose a far less violent and far more benevolent imperial trajectory than the raw militaristic imperialism (like Iraq war) currently offered up as neo-conservatism of the USA".<sup>43</sup>

To sum up, in *The New Imperialism and A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, David Harvey expounds the logic of neo-liberal hegemony that extends from production and manufacturing industry hegemony to finance hegemony, from liberalism hegemony to neo-liberal hegemony and from classical imperialism to new imperialism.<sup>44</sup>

#### **4. CONCLUSION**

While anthropology is a latecomer to the field, anthropological studies of neoliberalism are now displaying great theoretical and empirical creativity. The discipline's contribution is based on the specific angle from which it approaches and problematises the phenomenon and produces new empirical material that sheds light on its sometimes unsuspected consequences..neoliberalism itself is flexible<sup>45</sup>. Due to this, it should equally be stressed that every view of the global is always a view from somewhere.

Through this article, we have studied a three-dimensional subject, globalization in its new version, neo-liberalism, from within the perspective and field of study "anthropology", the specialty that focuses on the partial levels more than the two colleges and digs up what the rest of the disciplines forget. It was important to study the different perspectives of neo-liberalism, which deviate from the central and monistic view, because understanding the ideology, the system, which is reconfigured every now and then, is a way to adapt and understand how to live in today's world.

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