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Neoliberalism: The Ideology that Dares not Speak its Name



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The question, “What is neoliberalism?” invites a response similar to the old canard about art: “I don’t know what it is, but I know it when I see it”. Unlike art, which seldom rears its head outside a rarified, specially designated setting, neoliberalism is everywhere, which is why we seldom acknowledge its ubiquity, even as we endure its predations on every aspect of our lives.

If neoconservatism is late-stage capitalism on rage-inducing steroids, ranting about imaginary external threats, then neoliberalism is peak capitalism on hallucinogenic horse tranquilizers, dreaming about itself. Unlike its bug-eyed, more visibly bloodthirsty counterpart, neoliberalism doesn’t appear when the occasion demands it, but remains thoroughly entrenched in everything it touches, leaving nothing untouched or unscathed.

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The word itself brings to mind a host of vague concepts that add up to little in terms of understanding just what it is exactly. Can it be described as “free market fundamentalism”, the pushing through of democratic sounding reforms to jump-start a global feeding frenzy on another country’s resources? “The stealth deliverance of violence (economic and military) under an internationally agreed upon humanitarian framework, as opposed to a boots-on-the-ground occupation” might be closer to the mark. Or maybe it’s just some guy on a mountain bike staring at sunrise in an online video ad touting “Global Solutions”.

Whatever it is, you suffer under it gratefully, perhaps dimly aware of a darker, less “tolerant” age when you could shut off communication with the outside world long enough to sleep. Or perhaps, you can’t imagine not being tethered to a radioactive surveillance device that is collating your genome sequence in order to sell you a healthcare plan, or better cater to your growing fascination with assault weapons after being told for the umpteenth time that your password is incorrect.

Neoliberalism, under the subterfuge guise of technology and “progress”, keeps you interminably on hold and demands that you not only agree to, but rather embrace its terms of service in order to proceed with a transaction it invented five minutes ago to extract more data from you. It calls this sadistic vampire process of life-depleting exsanguination, “a time-saving solution”. You seldom notice that there was never a problem to begin with, only a confounding technology to now overcome in order to do something that was once as simple as blowing your nose.

You tend to overlook its authoritarian aspects, since it always uses its ‘indoor voice’, and presents you with choices. By now you may have noticed that from this vast menu of options, there is only one outcome: Your abject capitulation to its demands to access your data, or forsake the ability to perform necessary tasks altogether, forcing you “off the grid” and into a world inaccessible by non-digital means. Good luck finding a dumpster, or even cat food cans and old newspapers that haven’t been transformed by IOT.

This phantom killer is embedded in every molecule that makes up your life. It’s everything you consume, watch, listen to, discuss, anticipate and fear. It does to you inversely what you do with its devices and apps. Soon it will be absorbed directly into your skin as 5G millimeter waves, the new generation of electromagnetic radiation that promises to accelerate internet speeds and cancer cells concomitantly. For now,

neoliberalism is in the food you eat and the water you drink, or at least the lead and microplastics contained within. Contamination itself is a “smart” solution to the loss of profits a behemoth corporation might risk through regulation. It provides opportunities for start ups to make the world a better place by addressing, or rather, profiting from health and environment hazards with more carcinogenic, poverty-inducing technology.

Even as you deny the existence of an all-encompassing, interconnected surveillance dragnet closing in and microwaving you for profit, you begin to curb your impulses around it, and refrain from expressing a desire to shit kick Siri in the vicinity of any of your devices. You never know who might be listening. But you don’t really have a problem with that. You aren’t, after all a . . . I’d better not say that, or even think it, regardless of the context, or the justified urge to do some real damage. Isn’t there software that alerts the NSA to act on hyperbolic expressions of frustration with a virtual assistant who keeps directing you to Uber Eats in California, instead of finding ‘California Uber Alles’ on Spotify? Still, you are willing to make the necessary adjustments to your lifestyle, giving up privacy, free speech and inner thoughts so that you can make use of an app that superimposes kitten whiskers on your selfie, or gain access to your own refrigerator.

The chances that you will ever holler ‘Allah Akbar’ in a crowded stadium are pretty slim, so you just accept the fact that some airport screener is laughing at what’s in your pants as you are boarding your flight to Cleveland. The NSA meanwhile, knows that you are going there to meet a hottie you met on a dating app, while her Fit Bit device knows that she’ll be dead in less than six months of Type Two Diabetes. Thanks to Google, her insurer will cite a “preexisting condition” to avoid covering the costs of treatment and burial.

YouTube, sensing that you are sad over the loss of your booty call, has already lined up a playlist of mournful power ballads, while Facebook targets you with ads for anti-depressants to help you get through your bereavement. In exchange for allowing yourself to be manipulated, monitored and humiliated in order to advance AI so that it can one day lure you and your self-driving car off a cliff, your new smartphone provides you with the perfect animated 3D poop emoji to express your present mood. Meanwhile, Tinder has already lined up a catfish in a Kentucky halfway house as your next “soulmate”.

You are not prepared just yet to hate this thing you can't quite name (but suspect the guy on the mountain bike had something to do with) despite having noticeably aged in the time it took to download an app – just so you can flush a “smart”, crowd-funded toilet, and make the world a better place by sending its contents to Kenya. When Neoliberalism speaks, it asks (rhetorically, of course) “How can we force another country to cede its sovereignty and hand over its resources without getting the anti-war crowd all worked up”? The implied almost universally accepted answer is “Send them your sewage, along with a volunteer aid worker on a ‘gap year’ wearing a flower crown”.

If you attempt to put a face to it, you start to picture the guy on the mountain bike, now dressed in business casual giving an upbeat forecast for the launch date of a solar-powered shipping container that can transport a globally connected network of freshly harvested human waste to now “empowered” farmers in Kenya. You see him now in a sunlight drenched boardroom where a woman in a sari is deep in thought. Mathematical formulae is superimposed across her face, now in closeup, as if the magic of PowerPoint has lit her up from within.

Together they are projecting the wisdom of the ages across a curved horizon that ends in a Sierra Nevada mountain range at sunrise. In fact, they are a photo stock image, a ‘simulacra rendering’ if you will, extracted from the neurons of white mice that have been subjected to near-lethal exposure to PowerPoint during clinical trials to determine their receptivity to phrases like ‘Global Solutions’ during REM cycles of web browsing.

Yes, neoliberalism is that guy, or sometimes even a woman with a name you struggle to pronounce. It is deceptively “diverse” in its packaging, despite exclusively prioritizing everything the man in business casual and his bro cohorts hold dear to the detriment of everything else on the planet. It's green, to be sure, as in the color of money. Being a good sport, it will endure a sixteen-year-old girl with a very large megaphone scolding it for that very reason.

Just as likely, it wears yoga pants, and takes it talking points from an advanced Women's Studies program. It might even write inspirational messages on a banana intended for a sex worker's lunch. Unlike its neoconservative flip side, which comes more honestly represented in Dick Cheney and John Bolton, it's hard to hate with the visceral revulsion brought on by imagining what a walrus mustache smells like.

Neoliberalism most often presents itself as your new team leader, a guy known for being charismatic and competent, upbeat and fair. Part of you knows that he's a condescending autocrat, inventing pointless and mind-numbing tasks for you to carry out that a lab rodent would refuse on the ground of cruel and unusual punishment. As his "associate" or "valuable team member" you forgive these micro-assaults on your selfhood because it's either that or face a dumpster that has caught fire after being "hacked by Russia".

At least in theory, this mini-overlord, representative of the ideological framework that produced him is the opposite of Donald Trump. Glib and clever as opposed to bellicose and demented. He's more likely to blow smoke up your ass than set off a firestorm of tweets. In practice, however, neoliberalism is more like Ivanka, unshakeable in the belief that unearned influence and privilege has the power to move mountains, or at least low-income people out of their homes, and "empower" them with the tools to oppress themselves.

Neoliberalism, like the 'spectacle' it evolved from, mediates all social relations. It reduces them to performative, choreographed transactions in the service of an ideology that dare not speak its name for fear of inviting unwanted scrutiny into the void at its center. It has the vampire ability to elude reflection. Put a mirror in front of it and you'll end up with a selfie that bears an uncanny resemblance to 'The Scream'.

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