

>NEOLIBERALISM AND ANTIESTABLISHMENT MOVEMENTS



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Image: Guy Fawkes's mask, the symbol of Anonymous, an international movement of anonymous activists that defends freedom of expression and which first appeared on the Internet in 2008.



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This chapter argues that the nebulous nature of neoliberalism helps to explain why the discourse has successfully convinced so many that its carceral capacities are somehow representative of our collective liberation. I trace the histories of antiestablishment movements and the influences that have shaped its current trajectories, from the rise of indigenous movements like the ELZN in Mexico to the global force of the Occupy Movement. In examining the solidarities that are being expressed in the form of anti-austerity movements and supports offered to migrants in the neoliberal fallout, this chapter insists that our collective capacity to engage in direct action and prefigurative politics will ultimately allow us to awaken from the neoliberal nightmare.

Introduction

Resistance to neoliberalism has become as pervasive as neoliberalism itself. As the world becomes evermore entrenched in the grip of a dystopian world order that views the market as the grand leveler of all human relations, more and more people are willing to fight back. The neoliberal narrative of equality that presumes ‘a rising tide lifts all boats’ has been shattered by the material reality of deepening divisions among the rich and poor. The ratcheting up of a security state to protect the status quo sends an important message to those who would seek to contest the imbalanced power arrangement that neoliberalism has wrought. Yet the prospect of intense conflict with the police and military forces employed by the state to protect the wealth of an elite minority poses less of a risk than watching the creeping darkness of neoliberalism consume the planet. No longer content to watch the sunset, where to stay the course would be to commit planetary suicide, people are gathering in greater numbers to push back. As twilight moves in and the neoliberal nightmare seems assured, there is increasing recognition that this state of affairs can only be met by a new dawn. And so we see the vestiges of hope beginning to entwine themselves through a broad range of social phenomena. Defiance of neoliberalism comes in the form of large-scale protests that capture global media attention, but equally, and arguably more importantly, in everyday acts of resistance (Purcell 2016), where people continue to organize their lives in ways that break with market logic, bringing light back into the world (White and Williams 2014). It is the intersection between mundanity and spectacle that marks the current moment of protest, where people are illuminating their struggles and enlightening their opposition

in a variety of spaces and encounters as they reassess the world we live in. Unraveling the lies that the apostles of neoliberalism have spun is not an easy prospect, and yet when committed in solidarity, the task becomes one that intensifies our proclivity for fellowship and convivial forms of being.

I begin this chapter by conceptualizing neoliberalism and its shape-shifting character, suggesting that this nebulous nature at least in part explains why the discourse has been so successful in its enchantments, convincing many that its carceral capacities are somehow representative of our collective liberation. I then trace some of the histories of antiestablishment movements and the influences that have helped to shape its current trajectories, from the rise of indigenous movements like the ELZN in Mexico in the 1990s, to the global force of the Occupy Movement in the 2010s. Next I draw attention to the situation in Cambodia, where resistance to forced evictions and land grabbing provides a case study within the wider trajectories of neoliberalism's new regime of accumulation. I then examine the solidarities that are being expressed in the form of anti-austerity movements and the supports that are being offered to refugees and migrants in the fallout that neoliberalism has produced. In the conclusion I insist that it is our collective capacity to engage in direct action and prefigurative politics that will ultimately turn the tides in allowing us to awaken from the contemporary neoliberal nightmare.

Towards a Global Harmonious Village or the Rise of the Prison Planet?

Neoliberalism is a difficult proposition. The concept is a difficult one to define and its amorphous character as it expands into new institutional settings means that precision is necessarily lacking. Yet in very broad terms neoliberalism refers to an emergent set of political, economic, and social arrangements emphasizing market relations, a recalibration of the state, and heightened individual responsibility. In short, neoliberalism represents the extension of market-based competition into all areas of life (Crouch 2011; Mirowski 2013). Paramount to this process is the construction of new subjects, defined by values and social practices that align with market logic (MacLeavy 2008). As they become embedded in individuals, these values also begin to appear in local level governance practices, giving neoliberalism the appearance of being everywhere (Peck and Tickell 2002). While omnipresence is seemingly the case, it is important to appreciate the diverse manifestations of neoliberal ideas as they have appeared in state projects and socio-political imaginaries. Neoliberalism should be understood as a dynamic and unfolding process (England and Ward 2007; Springer 2011), rather than a monolithic project or paradigmatic condition. The fact that neoliberalism continues to mutate as it enters into new political, social, economic and institutional contexts means that many scholars have picked up on the idea of 'neoliberalization', in the form of an active verb, as being a more

appropriate rendering of the concept insofar as it acknowledges hybridization and transformation as being imperative. This raises new conceptual challenges though, since the inability to pin down a 'pure' version of neoliberalism means that we instead have a series of geopolitically distinct blends (Peck 2004). Here again, we therefore once more find difficulty in pinpointing what 'neoliberalism' actually means. So while we may be inclined to paint with broad strokes in terms of resistance to neoliberalism, where the word itself can serve as galvanizing political slogan for desired change, we can't assume that all participants to any given protest or social movement are necessarily attuned to the same issues or desire the same outcomes.

In spite of the variations, one of the key tenets of neoliberalism is that it ostensibly advocates for a leveling of the playing field, where by assigning all social interactions, political connections, and economic transactions to market relations, each individual has an equal opportunity in advancing their status. This is an argument that was perhaps made most overt in Thomas Friedman's (2005) *The World is Flat: A Brief History of the Twenty-First Century*, which

"NEOLIBERALISM REPRESENTS THE EXTENSION OF MARKET-BASED COMPETITION INTO ALL AREAS OF LIFE."

unapologetically reduces us to 'lions' and 'gazelles' on the savannah of capitalism, where we can choose to kill or be killed. Lacking in such popular analyses is the fact that systemic conditions of impoverishment (Bush 2007), racism (Roberts and Mahtani 2010), gender discrimination (Kingfisher 2013), and other forms of social marginalization have meant that we have never had an equal shot. It further ignores the fact that a system that creates winners and losers will see those who come out on top necessarily attempt to manipulate the structure in ways that consolidate their elite status (Rapley 2004). In other words, Friedman and his ilk lack a theory of power, when neoliberalism is fundamentally entangled within and inseparable from this very question (Springer 2016c). Consequently, and in very tangible ways, we can see how neoliberalism has not led us not towards a promised 'global harmonious village', but instead lends itself to a vast system of poverty that imprisons the poor both metaphorically and materially through its carceral logic (Schept 2015; Wacquant 2009). Those who fail to come out on top are suspect, not only for their supposed lack of responsibility in accounting for their own lives and wellbeing, but also because of the threat they represent to revealing the lie we are all being sold through their very presence in public spaces. Incarceration then becomes a key medium for negotiating societies under neoliberal rule, where we see intensive criminalization of the homeless and a tightened policing on urban space to ensure that the grand neoliberal façade remains intact (Cloke et al. 2011). The squeaky clean neoliberal narrative cannot be allowed to be disrupted by bodies that do not conform to its desired subject position of 'good consumer', and so a violent order of security,

surveillance and outright authoritarianism increasingly defines neoliberalism (Bruff 2014, Springer 2009). When seen in this light it should be clear why anti-establishment movements have arisen in direct response to neoliberalism and the threat it poses to our collective wellbeing. When everything from our labour to our bodies to natural resources to the planet itself is reduced to a commodified relation, the terror of neoliberalism becomes all too real (Giroux 2005).

Anti-Establishment Influences and Expressions

Antiestablishment movements have deep historical roots, but when it comes to the current incarnation of capitalism in the form of neoliberalism we can trace a direct lineage to the so-called ‘anti-globalization movement’, sometimes called the ‘alter-globalization movement’ or the ‘global justice movement’. Within this movement of movements, diverse as they are, we see a general thematic emerge that distinctly aligns with an anti-neoliberal trajectory. The primary issue of importance is opposition to large multinational corporations and the lack of regulation that surrounds their activities, particularly when it comes to unfavorable trade agreements and profit maximization without regard for workplace safety, poor labour relations and compensation, environmental ruination, and respect for national sovereignty and legislative authority (Ayers 2004). Participants are thus not necessarily anti-global in their outlook, but rather want to see a more democratic and egalitarian basis of global relations wherein human rights, fair trade, and sustainable development are embraced (Epstein 2001). By the early 1990s, neoliberalism was already becoming firmly established in the policy and practices of many states on the heels of the reforms that Margret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan had implemented in the United Kingdom and United States of America (USA) respectively (Harvey 2007). The emergence of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development’s (OECD) proposal to liberalize cross-border investment and reduce trade barriers through its Multilateral Agreement on Investment in 1995 was a catalyst for explicit opposition to neoliberalism. Intensive public scrutiny and widespread protests in affected countries ensured that the agreement was scrapped in 1998, but this was not the end of neoliberalism or resistance to its ongoing implications. Around this time the Zapatista was becoming very active in Mexico (Stahler-Sholk 2007), the Homeless Worker’s Movement in Brazil was on the rise (Boito 2007), while the Narmada Bachao Andolan were ramping up opposition in India (Chandra and Basu 2014). Each of these movements expressed a distinct opposition to the now established logic of neoliberalism, organizing in ways that sought to not only undermine the influence of neoliberal policies, but also to express new forms of community and togetherness that broke with a competitive market-based approach to social organization.

The 1990s culminated with the largest mobilization of the movement to date, as a massive 40,000 person strong protest erupted on the streets of Seattle in response to the World Trade Organization (WTO) meeting in the city (Smith

Demonstrators from Occupy Wall Street, which began in Zuccotti Park in New York on September 17, 2011 and has promoted the movement against economic inequality worldwide.

2001). Beginning on November 30th and lasting the duration of the meeting until December 3rd, protesters clashed with police resulting in over 600 arrests. The city was effectively placed under marshal law and a curfew was imposed, thrusting the 'Battle in Seattle' onto the world stage as media coverage intensified. The City of Seattle has since paid over \$200,000 in settlements for lawsuits filed against municipal police for assaults and wrongful arrests. The protesters employed Black Bloc tactics first developed in Europe in the 1980s, marking the first time that they were used on such a large scale in North America (Dupuis-Déri 2014). The targeting of corporations like Old Navy, Starbucks, and other multinational retailers forced the media to respond. Prior to this event 'anti-globalization' was almost entirely absent from US media reporting, but this time the protests provoked some shallow soul searching to gain insight into why anyone would oppose the WTO. The media was baffled and bemused and misrepresentations were rife. The New York Times ultimately printed a retraction on a story that claimed protestors threw Molotov cocktails at police, yet in spite of their subsequent indication that the protests were largely peaceful, wilful distortions and false reporting remained commonplace (Kahn and Kellner 2004).

Seattle was a moment of awakening for the movement, as subsequent protests in Washington, Gothenburg, Quebec City, and Genoa, would employ a similar ethos of contestation on the streets. A little over a decade latter, in 2011, we can



see how it helped to lay the groundwork for the Occupy Movement. Like the Seattle protest, this was a leaderless movement against social and economic inequality. There were a range of issues prioritized among various local groups, but the overarching imperative was to question how large corporations and the present global financial system was undermining democracy (Gitlin 2012). The idea for Occupy originated from an art piece in the Canadian anti-consumerist magazine *Adbusters*, which depicted a ballerina standing atop the Wall Street Bull, with the hashtag “#OCCUPYWALLSTREET” (Gould-Wartofsky 2015). People showed up on Wall Street on September 17th, 2011, and a movement was born as the idea was replicated in cities around the world as news broke. The slogan for the movement, “We are the 99%,” credited to anarchist scholar David Graeber, speaks to the vast inequality that now exists under neoliberal rule, where 1% of the population controls an inordinately disproportionate amount of the planet’s wealth (Bray 2013). It is the inclusiveness of this sentiment that at least in part explains its rapid dissemination and replication outside of New York City. Within a month of the first occupation in Zuccotti Park, Occupy protests had popped up or were ongoing in over 951 cities worldwide (Steinberg 2016). While the movement was criticized for not articulating clear demands, doing so would legitimize the type of power structures that the movement was calling into question through its commitment to participatory democracy (Graeber 2011). Ultimately, inspired by the global wave of anti-austerity movements that sought to push back against neoliberal belt-tightening, the Occupy Movement forced the issue of inequality onto the world stage like never before. It made us recognize that equality is a deeply political question that touches us all. To stay the course of neoliberalism was not in keeping with the ethics and ethos that inspired the many participants of this global mobilization.

Anti-Eviction and Land Grabbing

Occupy was critiqued for not having support in some of the most impoverished places in the world, like sub-Saharan Africa and mainland Southeast Asia. Yet rather than lack of support, the absence of Occupy in these locations may be more related to the authoritarian structures that presently exist than with a lack of sympathy for the objectives of the movement. Indeed, in places like Cambodia, where the ripple effects of colonialism still permeate the landscape, we have seen neoliberalism arrive in the form of an intensified push to construct a property regime (Lim 2013; Springer 2010). What this has meant for many rural Cambodians is an intensive pattern of proletarianization as they are stripped from their land and thus their ability to sustain themselves, having been transformed into a working class that now labors for wages (Springer 2015). In the urban context similar patterns play out, as traditional landholding practices have prioritized possession, or actual occupation, while the new juridico-institutional system of land tenure has constructed a cadastral system around formal written documentation (Springer 2013). And so we see profound violence meted out against so-called ‘squatter’

settlements that are forcibly removed by police and military forces to make way for casinos, hotels, and modern apartment buildings. This is all done in the name of 'development', which is clearly not meant to serve the needs of the poor and marginalized, but rather the interests of capital accumulation for an elite minority. So not only do we see the marketization of vast swaths of the country in the guise of securing land rights, but so too do we see vulnerable people rendered even more so as they now have to contend with the vagaries of a job market that makes little use of unskilled labour. Homelessness is consequently rampant in the capital, Phnom Penh, and the strains of neoliberalization in the country have become abundantly clear (Springer 2016b). For most, neoliberalism represents a miserable failure and Cambodians have accordingly pushed back in the form of major protests. The social movements that have come to define contemporary Cambodia are not explicitly targeted against an enemy called 'neoliberalism', where instead protesters will acknowledge and identify a range of factors that have ultimately persuaded them to pursue a course of action that strives for the realization of social justice.

A masked protester in front of a line of police during the Million Mask March on November 5, 2016 in London. The anti-establishment demonstration, which falls on Guy Fawkes night, is one of several that take place in cities around the world.

Many of the emergent protests are centered on very specific experiences of forced eviction, or particular employers, rather than wider movements against land grabbing and labour relations more generally. There are obvious limitations to how effective such movements can be when wider solidarities have not been as forthcoming as one might hope. Yet there are indications that a broader movement is beginning to emerge, particularly around election times. The official opposition party in Cambodia has been quick to claim that the swelling discontent is in fact an affirmation of their political platform, but this is simply the hubris of party politics and not a reflection of the intentions and interests of the population as a whole (Morganbesser 2017). Indeed, when we look at policies, what the opposition offers is really more in the way of neoliberalism, but with different leaders at the helm. They are not offering systemic changes to the orientation of the country's economic or political systems, and in this sense they are decidedly out of touch with the frustrations of everyday Cambodians (Brickell and Springer 2016). The importance of discussing the Cambodian context here is not limited



to the country itself, as indeed we have seen similar patterns arise in a variety of countries that have been embroiled in intensive processes of neoliberal reform. Contextual variations are an inevitable part of this larger picture (Brenner et al. 2010), but it is nonetheless worthwhile to consider how the unfoldings of resistance in one location may afford teachable moments to other locations when we reflect on what works and what doesn't. The emerging lesson from Cambodia is the importance of solidarity. For resistance to be more effective in the country there needs to emerge a greater sense of solidarity among those affected by neoliberalism's regime of accumulation, recognizing that they are not alone either as individuals or communities. Fragmentation and individualization plays into the hands of a neoliberal modality, and so if we are to succeed in dethroning this worldview, we must seek to come together.

"EQUALITY IS A DEEPLY POLITICAL QUESTION THAT TOUCHES US ALL."

Austerity, Migration, and the Monopoly of Violence

Relations of solidarity are much more obvious in some of the anti-austerity movements that we have witnessed with increasing frequency since about 2010 when the global financial crisis hit full stride. Ireland was the first European country to see major opposition to austerity, as protesters took to the streets of Dublin en masse in November 2010 (Kearns et al. 2014). In the UK, students were becoming increasingly mobilized as spending on higher education and tuition subsidies were cut by 80% in December 2010 (O'Hara 2015). The Indignant Citizens Movement in Greece was another particularly marked example of people coming together with a common cause against austerity, as between 300,000 and 500,000 people assembled in front of the Greek Parliament in Athens in a protest that lasted over a month before brutal police crackdowns in August 2011 (Gerbaudo 2017). Major protests were also held in Spain and Portugal that same year. The response by the state in each of these incidences was to use violence against protestors, who were for the most part very peaceful in presenting their concerns and demands. The implication insofar as neoliberal austerity is concerned, is that violence is part and parcel of its logic (Springer 2016d). Should the people disagree with the exclusionary and divisive status quo that the neoliberal conjuncture has produced, they put themselves at the mercy of the full force of the monopoly of violence claimed by the state. So while neoliberal states represent a rolling back of social supports like education and health care as part of their austerity measures, spending on the security and policing apparatus has not been subject to the same sorts of cuts, and indeed there appears to be an increasing appetite for states to funnel money into these particular channels. What this says about neoliberalism as an ideological system is quite clear: it is an expression of a deeply held authoritarianism that positions the interests of financial elites and the security of their wealth as the apex of its concerns (Tansel 2017).

Aside from the austere nature of neoliberalism, the unfolding of its policies undoubtedly plays a central role in economic migration (Mitchell 2016). As its competitive relations manifest in the form of speculative and extractive economies, neoliberalism tears apart local communities by stripping the basis of their livelihoods, which sets in motion a process of what in many ways can be considered a forced migration. This phenomenon is particularly acute in the Mexican context as people risk their lives to enter the USA in search of a better life having been denied that within their own villages, towns, and cities (Bacon 2013). The frequency of migration is often expressed as internal displacement, but it has an increasingly international composition, where wealthy nations like Australia, Germany, and the UK are viewed as ideal destinations. The response, both unofficial and official, from these states has been one of considerable xenophobia and fear mongering against ethnic 'others' in support of a nationalist agendas (Hogan and Haltinner 2015). Yet there is a glimmer of light amid the dark racist shadow that hangs over neoliberalism, which is to be found in the ways that communities are organizing supports for migrants, often in direct defiance of state policies. The Sanctuary City movement in North America, the UK, and Ireland can accordingly be seen as an anti-establishment approach

A protester
outside the
Bank of England
protesting
against welfare
cuts.



that responds to the broader currents of neoliberalism (Bauder 2017). At a smaller scale migrant supports are being set up by anarchist communities in Greece to provide shelter to those fleeing the carnage in Syria, a war triggered by economic liberalization and lack of political reform (Hinnebusch and Zintl 2015). Greece has received over 1 million refugees since 2015, and as the country struggles to deal with the implications, some are taking direct action by re-appropriating abandoned buildings and setting up squats for migrants, reconnecting the water and electricity to ensure livable conditions (Mudu and Chattopadhyay 2017).

“NEOLIBERALISM ESPOUSES AUTONOMY IN THE SENSE OF MARKETS UNFETTERED FROM REGULATION SO THAT THE ACCUMULATION OF WEALTH CONTINUES TO FLOW IN ONE DIRECTION.”

Conclusion

One of the key lessons to come out tracing the lineages of the various iterations of anti-establishment movements that have arisen around the world in response to neoliberalism is that taking action into our own hands may be the best and only response. The reclamation of our own authority in the face of neoliberalism represents a means without ends. It is a constant struggle, where winning means that resistance is an ongoing and continuing commitment to the unraveling of the world we knew in the hope of stitching together alternatives that are empowering and affirming for us all (White 2012). Those who would seek to disempower the majority to their own benefit come in many guises, and even when neoliberalism does finally recede into the annals of history, there will be new threats posed to our collective wellbeing and the bonds of solidarity that we forge. The remaking of the world then is fundamentally up to each one of us. What we do with our lives and how we interact with our fellow travellers on this journey we call ‘life’ actually matters. While some on the political left, like David Harvey (2012), may lament the notion that matters are always in our own hands as being an avenue for the intensification of neoliberal values, such an argument entirely ignores the substantive content of the forms of direct action and prefigurative politics that are evolving. It misses the point of collective resistance and paints in broad strokes, where any an all initiative outside of the parameters of the state is somehow pro-capitalist. Unyielding Marxist that he is, Harvey (2017) is more than willing to caricature anarchist ideals and disingenuously misrepresent their intentions.

Fortunately it doesn’t require much in the way of critical thought to see how stunted the political imagination is that would align neoliberalism to anarchism, as the forms of prefiguration that are evolving in the form of anti-establishment movements break significantly with capitalism and create new and alternative ways of relating

with each other and being in the world (Springer 2017). Prefigurative politics are a practicing of a movement's shared political vision in here and now of our daily lives (Springer 2012). They are a creation of a new world 'in the shell of the old' (Ince 2012), a making of other worlds possible (Roelvink et al. 2015), or what Carl Boggs (1977: 100) called "the embodiment, within the ongoing political practice of a movement, of those forms of social relations, decision-making, culture, and human experience that are the ultimate goal." So instead of waiting for state or municipal authorities to do things for us, we instead take action for ourselves. Instead of handing over our autonomy to the interests of a minority of individuals who purport to have our best interests in mind, we articulate and realize the vision of our best interests by ourselves. This is the heart of what an anti-establishment ethos is and should be all about. Neoliberalism espouses autonomy in the sense of markets unfettered from regulation so that the accumulation of wealth continues to flow in one direction (Springer et al. 2016).

Prefiguration in the form of anti-establishment movements espouses autonomy in the sense of people unfettered from the chains of both state and capital so that accumulation is undone, and instead redistribution is ensured on our own terms through our collective means in the here and now (Springer 2016a). The realization here is simple: if we are to shift the direction of the planet toward the realization of a more equitable arrangement for all, we have to be willing to do the hard work ourselves. It is a path that we cannot be lead down. In fact, there is no trail to follow, for "the reinvention of daily life means marching off the edge of our maps" (Black 1986: 33).

Idomeni's
refugee camp,
on the border
of Greece with
Macedonia, on
March 4, 2016.
Hundreds of
refugees try to
follow the route
towards Wes-
tern Europe.



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