

Overcoming Optimism (and Moving toward Hope)

US optimism, the belief in anyone's ability to overcome any obstacle, any oppression, is part of the country's social DNA. USians are heavily socialized and profoundly, culturally attached to ideas of reinvention and redemption, of hard work and domination of the self. As the ideological operant of capitalism over the past 50 years, neoliberalism further elevates and venerates the mythology of the individual and their individual agency while further deepening the capitalist mythology of the market as an esoteric and inevitable force of nature. Those cultural institutions which interactively reinforce these supporting mythologies of neoliberalism use optimism as an emotional lever to instill and enforce neoliberal self-governance. Building upon the extant socialization of optimism, neoliberal self-governance requires the individual to engage in the self-management of their emotions and emotional reactions, wherein success is always on the horizon and failure always the fault of the individual.

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“The basis of optimism is sheer terror” (Wilde, Dorian Gray)

Prologue

Roughly 10 years ago, in my ongoing, quixotic attempt to understand the persistence of neoliberalism, I wrote a paper on fear and neoliberalism (2014a). Through that research, I began to see just how much our surrounding cultural institutions influence and shape our emotions and emotional reactions. The death of a nearly century-old monarch/mascot last autumn in my adopted country proved to be particularly instructive in how entire populations are socialized into swallowing and supporting stark inequality and the myriad ways in which institutions instruct the population on proper expressions of mourning. It was, quite honestly, deeply disturbing.

After that initial paper on fear, I explored the emotion of envy (2015b), and then intent on working my way through various other emotions in order to perhaps one day assemble from them a picture of the mental state and the particular shaping of emotional experiences of the US individual under neoliberalism, turned to a study of optimism. What I had intended to be one paper on neoliberalism and positivity has now turned into my central research project of the last five years. For me, optimism is the key to understanding the persistence of neoliberal institutions; optimism provides, in other words, the critical, cultural, and emotional support system for neoliberalism.

To be clear, this is not an optimism of the future, nor is it an optimism that society is headed in the right direction, or that future generations might live better lives. The optimism of neoliberalism resides entirely at the level of the individual, that the individual holds their own power and has the capacity—regardless of circumstance—to use that power to build a better future for themselves. As Original Institutionalists, we understand perhaps better than most, that the true agency of the individual is circumscribed by institutions and power relations and that more than anything else, the capacity of any individual to construct a better future will largely hinge upon their proximity to power and position within the hierarchy of institutions which reinforce that ideological operant of this current stage of capitalism, neoliberalism.

Introduction

In the United States, the indoctrination in optimism runs deep and stretches back through time to the first waves of immigration out of Western Europe and into the lands of the indigenous peoples of North America. The mythology of the fearless Atlantic explorers,¹ the first intrepid settlers’ scramble to plant their Old-World flag on this already occupied land², the Puritans yearning for religious freedom³ are all part of the abstracted, cultural memory of the founding of the United States. In these mythopoetic retellings, the country’s history is at once sanitized and infused with the indefatigable spirit of optimism and adventure.

As well, the cultural hero of the self-made man looms large in the collective imagination and cultural memory of the US. Benjamin Franklin (2015), in his posthumously published autobiography, chronicles what would become the classic self-made hero’s arc: first, born into humble, struggling, salt of the earth circumstances, our hero armed with ambition and persistence remains resolute in his strong work ethic despite many setbacks and obstacles. Our hero eventually receives his just reward in wealth and acclaim, yet virtuously maintains his unflagging work ethic for the simple satisfaction of productivity. This notion of

¹ People did not really believe the world to be flat, at least, not in the 15th century.

² Romanticized stories abound: the Lost Colony, the ‘first’ Thanksgiving, and Pocahontas, to name but a few.

³ Freedom to build their own theocracy.

the isolated, struggling self-made man⁴ thus sits at the heart of the founding mythos of the United States.

In the late nineteenth century, prolific author Horatio Alger extended this self-made characterization to the nation's youth as he churned out rags-to-riches tales in which a boy, forced into dire circumstances by a twist of fate (not, notably, by his own folly) maintains his virtuosity, diligent work ethic, and optimism and is consequently rewarded with fame and/or fortune (Photinos 2007). In 1928, in a campaign speech in New York City, Herbert Hoover coined the term "rugged individualism" (149), although true to form, the concept originated much earlier, during western, frontier expansion—invasion across North America, when white Europeans could not rely on their state's infrastructure as they had in the past and were forced to fend for themselves (Stanfield 1991).

From these mythologized memories, we find the first ethnographic markers of optimism which would reinforce the growth of capitalist institutions over the centuries of what came to be the United States. The imagined exercise of the Protestant work ethic—that Puritan morality and Protestant dedication to hard work benefits both the individual and society writ large—continues to provide mythological fertilizer for the growth of capitalism and obscure the exploitation that is the true lifeblood of capitalism.

US optimism, the belief in anyone's ability to overcome any obstacle, any oppression, is thus part of our social DNA. Indeed, we can draw a thick and direct line from the founding mythology of the US to current manifestations and expressions of 'American exceptionalism.' USians are heavily socialized and profoundly, culturally attached to ideas of reinvention and redemption, of hard work and domination of the self. As the ideological operant of capitalism over the past 50 years, neoliberalism further elevates and venerates the mythology of the individual and their individual agency while further deepening the capitalist mythology of the market as an esoteric and inevitable force of nature. The self-made hero is now on steroids.

Neoliberalism

In *The Great Transformation* (1944), Karl Polanyi set out to examine and explain the economic and social impact of the intensification of capitalism during the 19th and early 20th centuries. Despite having written decades before the ascendance of neoliberalism within the US political landscape, Polanyi's work remains remarkably instructive, especially with respect to the subjugation of social relationships to market forces, which Polanyi referred to as the disembedding of the economic sphere from all other spheres of living. This disembedding and subsequent elevation of the economic sphere thus subordinated other spheres of living; political machinations, the family unit, social communities, cultural institutions all transformed into protective or supportive ancillary epiphenomena.

Neoliberalism heightens the Polanyian disembedding. Under neoliberalism, the market is the locus of control; reality is reframed and defined according to market logics. Validity and truths are assessed by the market test and neoliberal rationality is defined as accepting this validity, these truths, and that reality (Brown 2015). All individuals are thus recast as individual entrepreneurs hocking the productive output of their individual human capital. Individuals are no longer a worker, a manager, a CEO; class divisions disappear as these individuals are each hard scrabble entrepreneurs who operate alone and (conveniently) don't need unions. Every individual, in possession of their own human capital becomes a micro-capitalist under neoliberalism. Likewise, the focal point of markets is no longer exchange where individuals voluntarily swap subjective value equivalents, but of market

⁴ During Franklin's time, the self-made hero was culturally and exclusively cis male; the use of 'man' and he/him pronouns in this paragraph reflects this context.

competition, where there are winners and losers who are, importantly and definitionally, unequal (Brown 2015). Market competition drives economic growth, which is the only reputed barometer of the health of a society. The state is transformed into an obsolete governance form, an obstacle to and deadweight drag on progress, while cultural institutions and social relationships are posed as distractions. Freedom is narrowly defined as freedom to act within the free market.

Neoliberalism is furthermore understood as an organic system mechanistically following its own internal logic. The neoliberal version of reality manifests in and through ideological discourse which praises the virtues of a shrinking state disengaged from the economy through deregulation, privatization, and shrinking of social safety nets. This neoliberal reality is, however, only rhetorical: the neoliberal state does not withdraw resources from the economy, indeed, resources previously directed into public goods and to individuals is redirected to support the economy and capital interests under the guise of ‘privatizing’ government contracts, bailouts, and economic stimulus to industry. This contradiction between rhetorical neoliberal reality and material reality is only heightened during periods of economic crisis when the security of the individual is something they are forced to sort out on their own while the neoliberal state continues to and even escalates the pumping of resources into the economy (Wrenn 2016). Nowhere was this disconnect more obvious than in the juxtaposition of public health against the ‘health’ of the economy during the Covid pandemic.

Thus, the purpose of the neoliberal state is to—first and foremost—encourage economic growth and contingently, to shield industry from the vicissitudes of the market; indeed, the efficacy of the state is measured entirely by the metric of economic growth. Politically, all social issues are reframed as economic opportunities for growth: immigration reform means the country can attract talented and skilled people to contribute to our economy; addressing climate change opens new industries, new investment opportunities; in making university education more affordable, we are investing in the country's future labor force and economic growth. At once, economic growth is framed as a panacea to all social ills and thus can (conveniently) replace all social policy, while at the same time, its fragility requires constant infusion and intervention from the state. As well, competition—the ostensible fuel and provider of economic growth—also requires nurturing and care from the state. Meanwhile, the neoliberal micro-capitalist is increasingly forced to bear greater risk as the social safety net is steadily transformed into a safety net for the large players, the true capitalists: public goods and services become privatized and priced, further education requires towering debt, basic human needs such as healthcare become as precarious as permanent employment which is increasingly replaced by the piecemeal work of the gig economy and time-piecemeal of zero hour contracts (Brown 2015; Wrenn 2015a).

US institutions of predatory optimism

So far in my research on the toxicity of positivity, I have studied and analyzed three cultural institutions that both fascinate and disgust me: the Prosperity Gospel (2019, 2020b, 2021), the corporatization of mindfulness (2020a, 2022), and the multilevel marketing industry (2022; Wrenn and Waller 2021). In following the proverbial advice for writers to ‘write what you know,’ all three of these cultural institutions intersected with my life in some way. I was born and raised in ‘the buckle of the Bible belt,’ with Jim and Tammy Faye Bakker’s ministry headquarters and theme park close enough to feature frequently in the local evening news, so my study of the Prosperity Gospel in part satisfied some of my childhood curiosity. The marketization of higher education in the UK (a process much more advanced than that in the US currently), forced me to endure managerialism and constant corporate re-

shuffles to create a more ‘agile’ and ‘authentic’ institution of higher learning. Of course, the material reality of this corporate-speak⁵ is to protect the number of managers (for who else could have the ‘business sense’ to do all of this shuffling) and to shrink the number of academics while bloating the workload of those remaining few. As part of this experience, when colleagues would complain or seek redress, the offered solution was always a time management class, yoga during lunch, or a mindfulness seminar. The mindfulness paper was thus an attempt at a cathartic release, a way to simultaneously vent and articulate my frustrations. During the six years I lived in Utah at the beginning of my career, multilevel marketing organizations were a constant background hum; except of course when I was unwittingly duped into sitting through product demonstrations, an unfortunate event that occurred twice in my short time living there. I cannot say whether it is particularly well advised for Original Institutionalists to study institutions which intersect with their lives, but it does ensure that our approach remains grounded in material reality and day-to-day living.

What these three cultural institutions share is the use of what I have come to call predatory optimism. All three embody and employ a relentless optimism which builds upon, reinforces, and replicates that US social gene of optimism. In the following subsections, I attempt to trace the red thread which connects their respective social practices which interactively reinforce the institutions of neoliberalism while also enforcing a form of neoliberal self-governance.

The optimistic, neoliberal individual

The dominance of the economic sphere within neoliberalism means that individuals are socialized and culture replicates the primacy and power of the economy in their daily lives. The language of the market bleeds over into nonmarket conversations which become infused with notions of competition, entrepreneurial impulses, and productivity: we are encouraged to pray (and tithe) in order to achieve financial success; to cure ourselves of stress in order to become more productive; to monetize our hobbies, interests, and lifestyle and to offer our friends and loved ones an opportunity to monetize theirs as well (Brown 2015). Logically, if self-reliance is made inescapable by withdrawal of social policies and attention to social issues by the state, and if neoliberalism creates conditions in which success is defined by economic status and survival by economic means, then the neoliberal individual must use the entrepreneurial drive and material accumulation in order to survive (Wrenn 2014a). Just as a fish can’t check out of water, individuals can’t check out of neoliberalism.

As such, *homo economicus*, the generic individual of economic calculation, evolves into a different being under neoliberalism. No longer Smith's self-interested individual, or Bentham's calculating figure, the neoliberal individual is above all else an entrepreneur—a walking, talking accumulation of human capital—self-constructed and self-governed to be amenable to the needs of the market (Brown 2015). The trend of predatory optimism made manifest through cultural institutions—religion, the self-help/self-care movement, and endless variety of business seminars/workshops/training/counselling—assists in transforming the individual into the neoliberal-individual-entrepreneur; a micro-capitalist primed for a narrow focus on individual performance and responsibility.

The Prosperity Gospel grew out of the New Thought movement which emerged in the late 19th century in the United States. New Thought, itself an outgrowth of late transcendentalism, preached the perfectibility of the self through an individual’s direct connection to a higher power. Pentecostalism, originating in the early 20th century and catalyzed by the Azusa Street Revival in California (1906-1915), preached that blessing and

⁵ Admittedly, I've included relatively mild examples of corporate-speak. I just could not bring myself to type the more reprehensible and groan-inducing terminology.

salvation come from a personal, individual relationship with God. The Prosperity Gospel is a cross pollination of New Thought and Pentecostalism with adaptations from the Charismatic movement of the post-World War II period. Its exponential rise into popular consciousness began in the televangelism of the 1970s, and its preachers and parishioners continue to export the faith; indeed, in 2018, I was able to attend an in-person, all day gathering of a US-based Prosperity Gospel church in Birmingham, UK. The Prosperity Gospel maintains at its core that the individual through their direct connection to God is able to affirm, access, and actualize the limitless blessings of God especially those connected to health and wealth (Wrenn 2019, 2020, 2021).

Workplace mindfulness, distinct from the therapeutic practice of mindfulness, is typically offered in one-off seminars or a series of classes within a workplace in order to safeguard the mental health of employees. This version of mindfulness teaches the individual to isolate the present moment, to give that moment their bare attention; in other words, the individual is taught to concentrate on the present moment in isolation with no distractions, no emotions, and no ethical considerations. By isolating and examining their feelings in that singular moment, employees are (supposedly) building their emotional intelligence; their capacity to self-monitor and self-regulate their emotions and stress. The stress or distress that an employee might feel is thereby framed as an individual response and thus an individual responsibility (2020a, 2022).

Multilevel marketing organizations pitch themselves as opportunities for an individual to become an entrepreneur, a business owner who is in reality a contract worker for the core organization. Casting this contract worker as an entrepreneur is an overt variation of Foucault's entrepreneurial self, wherein the individual employee is simultaneously harnessed to the goals and financial health of the core MLM while also solely responsible for the success or failure of their individual 'business' (2022; Wrenn and Waller 2021).

All three of these cultural institutions reinforce the entrepreneurialization of the neoliberal individual and their mythical incarnation as a micro-capitalist. As well in each, the individual is directly and solely responsible for their being, whether that is expressed as a direct negotiation of the individual with God, direct management of themselves, or direct application of their own business acumen and ambition. Thus, all three of these institutions atomize the individual and preach, teach, or boast neoliberal individual self-governance, the consequences of which we now turn.

Social relationships in the age of optimism

Neoliberal self-governance is an articulation of the heightened and sharpened individual responsibility demanded by neoliberal institutions and rhetoric. As such, individuals solely and completely determine their success and happiness (synonyms under neoliberalism) and have the complete freedom to build (or destroy), expand (or diminish) on what they have fought to secure. It (neoliberal-) logically follows that individuals who are not thriving or who fail to muscle their way to success through sheer force of will must suffer from a lack of 'freedom.'

As that part of the state dedicated to social policy continually shrinks under the neoliberal imperative, lack of freedom can only be the result of social and familial ties which bind the individual. Dependency on social and familial relationships thus limits freedom and therefore limits the agency an individual can exercise, cutting them off from achieving success. The only way that the individual can take responsibility for and work toward success is to increase their social isolation and alienation, transforming themselves more fully into the atomized neoliberal individual dedicated to improving their entrepreneurial skills (Binkley 2011). In each of our three cultural institutions, the elevation of the individual as

entrepreneurial subject and subordination of the social and familial relationships of that neoliberal individual is clear.

In building on the individual's direct connection to God, the Prosperity Gospel preaches that victory—health, wealth, and salvation—already exist for the individual and that all the individual need do is claim that victory through positive confession (also sometimes called Word of Faith). God has set aside health, wealth, and salvation for each individual, and it is therefore the duty of each individual to proclaim and receive those gifts. Should those gifts not manifest in an individual's life, then it is because the believer did not speak positively and act as if they had already received those gifts. A critical part of this positive confession is the self-monitoring of not only speech but thoughts as well. Individuals must keep out negative thoughts in order to effectively claim these gifts from God, and the Prosperity Gospel preaches that if an individual is surrounded by negative people, then this negativity will infect the individual and stymie their receiving of those gifts. The individual believer is therefore encouraged to keep the company of only fellow believers, to distance themselves from anyone who does not share their positive belief that victory is forthcoming. The only acceptable community is thus the community which speaks in positive confessions; the only acceptable emotional state is one of confident, unbridled optimism (Wrenn 2019, 2020, 2021).

Workplace mindfulness is an individual practice. In teaching workers to self-regulate their emotions by turning their focus inward and blocking out external distractions, workers are taught that any dissatisfaction or lack of focus is the result of their own inability to disengage from other people, from external conflict, and from the cultural sphere more broadly. Worker unhappiness or discontent is thus the result of the individual not alienating themselves adequately. The work experience and working conditions are not the problem, the individual worker is simply not rising to the challenge. Collective action in the workplace, already in deliberate decline in the US since the 1970s through the legislative machinations and unionbusting efforts that are quintessential to the spirit of neoliberalism, is thus not the answer to job dissatisfaction. Even community engagement outside of work hours is discouraged through this disengagement of the cultural sphere in the self-regulatory lessons of workplace mindfulness. The individual worker, like the individual believer, sits alone, thinking only positive thoughts (2020a, 2022).

In my research on multilevel marketing institutions, I spent a lot of time listening to the people of the anti-MLM community. The anti-MLM community is populated by and large by people (usually women as they are the target demographic for MLMs) who participated and had ascended to the top tiers of their respective MLMs. Many of these anti-MLMs liken the practices of the MLM to that of a cult. While the definition and delineation of the term cult remains hotly contested by scholars, it is not difficult to see why people in the anti-MLM community use the term. When a new recruit joins in MLM—usually referred to as a family, a team, or sisterhood—they are love bombed. Love bombing when joining an MLM, consists of the lavishing of love on a new recruit, praising them, and engaging positively with them on social media. Much like the Prosperity Gospel, new recruits are instructed that they should only speak positively about this business opportunity and how their business is growing. Likewise, new recruits are instructed to cut out of their lives anyone who doesn't support their dream—any 'haters'—in other words, anyone who speaks negatively about the MLM. Since new recruits are trained to start selling both products and the opportunity to their warm market—their family and friends—this means from the beginning of their venture, new distributors begin to systematically isolate themselves from anyone who might be critical of multilevel marketing, anyone who doesn't share their positive vision (2022; Wrenn and Waller 2021).

In all three of our cultural institutions, the individual is taught or socialized to dissolve existing social relationships and reconstitute themselves within that social sphere which serves these organizations which reinforces the institutions of neoliberalism. The Prosperity Gospel preaches the danger of associating with negative influences and even entertaining negative thoughts. As a result, the individual believer must create a new social community with other positive confessors, in other words, other constituents of their church community. In the workplace, the individual worker is instructed to cope with stress and the intensification of work through individual self-evaluation and self-regulation and disengagement with the distractions of the cultural sphere. The possibility of collective action becomes more distant as the individual worker engages in an endless cycle of self-improvement and thus becoming a better and more optimistic corporate citizen. MLM organizations encourage social isolation, the distancing of the individual entrepreneur from negativity or information critical of the MLM. Through this self-taught alienation, all three cultural institutions encourage the re-situation of social relationships within the institution as well as the creation of ersatz familial bonds. Leaving the institution thus means that the individual believer/individual worker/individual entrepreneur must also leave their new social sphere (or as in the case with workplace mindfulness, leave their current employment). And that self-imposed alienation thus leaves the individual socially untethered.

The optimism of overcoming

The optimism of overcoming the odds stacked against you is a critical piece of US mythology and it is predicated on the individual's struggle; the individual is the virtuous underdog and while social forces conspire against them, those forces are no match for the ingenuity and work ethic of the individual. Likewise, the US myth of 'self-made man' so narrowly focuses on the efforts of the individual, that the only inclusion of the institutional setting in this lore is as an obstacle to overcome or setback to endure. Institutions only serve to hinder the self-made man's efforts, never as a support structure or a tool used in their epic quest. When Jefferson, inspired by capitalism apologist Locke, declared the right to "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness," it was on behalf of this atomized individual.

The agency that US neoliberalism imposes on this atomized individual is, however, of a very specific form: the neoliberal individual is hyper-atomized and the agency they possess is likewise hyperbolic. The neoliberal individual as the micro capitalist, self-entrepreneur, bears the entire weight of their existence; survival is their responsibility. And if society is composed of nothing but neoliberal individuals, then there ceases to be any need for discussion of politics or the state, nor for power outside of individual agency. The neoliberal claim of devolution of power from the state down to the individual is as disingenuous as it is fictional. Without resources from the state, the agency of the individual is limited to that which they and they alone can cobble together (Brown 2015). Our three cultural institutions all contain narratives which support this mythical construction.

In the Prosperity Gospel, the Abrahamic covenant and crucifixion of Christ are proof of the ironclad contract between the individual believer in God. Accordingly, the overcoming of adversity, the attaining of wealth, health, salvation, already exists. God is infallible and thus it is inconceivable that the individual could not overcome whatever adversity they might face whether physical, mental, or financial. Preachers of the Prosperity Gospel often hold up their own wealth and well-being as an example of what can be overcome through faith and as a model by which believers should live. The corollary to this is that if an individual is not successful in overcoming adversity, then they simply haven't been as faithful as is required or it is because there is some greater lesson for the individual, much like the righteous suffering of Job. After Job's wealth and family are destroyed, he questions whether God has made a mistake in punishing him as God is understood by man to punish sin and reward piety. Job's

fortunes were restored and increased after his trials in reward for his unwavering faith in God while also repenting for his doubt in God's judgment. Prosperity Gospel believers thus hold that intractable obstacles are individual tests and that with individual fortitude, positive confession, and relentless optimism, the individual can overcome (Wrenn 2019, 2020, 2021).

Workplace mindfulness teaches that all obstacles the individual faces are ones they have created themselves. Stress in other words, is self-generated; it is internally located and internally controlled. According to workplace mindfulness logic, if the individual is the source of stress, then it is the individual who must awaken to this reality and moreover, it is their obligation to conquer this self-induced stress. Mental health is thus at once not only the responsibility of the individual to care for, but it is constructed by the individual. All mental health distress and general stress are the consequence of an individual's own thoughts and actions, their own responses to workplace demands. It is the individual worker then who is pathologized, not the work environment, the workplace, or the workload. Overcoming obstacles is a task left to the individual for they only need to dismantle what they have themselves constructed: with the correct emotional discipline, stress withers and positivity grows (2020a, 2022). Unfortunately, I was unable to complete this fieldwork at a session held at my current university as the sheer absurdity of the session compelled me to leave after only five minutes lest I express my emotional dysregulation out-loud.

Multilevel marketing organizations rely heavily on the mythology of choice in overcoming obstacles. In the recruitment phase, potential candidates are pitched the luxury of choice in work: they can choose their own hours, where they will work, their level of commitment to their business. After becoming a distributor, choice is the drumbeat to which they are marched: distributors can choose to surround themselves with positive influences, they can choose to work hard or quit, and most importantly, they will choose whether they succeed or fail. Distributors are often reminded of their obstacles, which are transformed into opportunities for growth and motivation to succeed: distributors are encouraged to remember their 'why'—their reason for joining the MLM. MLMs begin with individual choice and end with individual responsibility, while obfuscating important organizational details, such as the insignificant income generated by retail sales alone (recruitment is the only way to generate significant income within these organizations), the local market saturation, or that all of the training the individual will receive is from other distributors. Despite all of these structural obstacles, distributors are incessantly informed that they ultimately choose whether they will overcome any obstacle in their path (2022; Wrenn and Waller 2021).

Neoliberalism is predicated on the rhetoric—but not practice—of freedom: freedom *to* act and to choose and freedom *from* state action. Freedom from state action means the individual is cut off from social safety nets and programs, so that the individual is set free and thereby empowered to pursue success. According to the neoliberal rationality, every obstacle is an opportunity for the individual, to learn, to grow, and ultimately to overcome. Structural barriers, systemic issues, machinations of power outside the individual's grasp are irrelevant or made invisible through the rhetorical fiction of individual agency in overcoming obstacles. Under neoliberalism, success or failure depends entirely on the individual's own initiative, ambition, and efforts. And feverishly optimistic outlook. Of course.

Conclusion

Power is not exerted through brute force or down the barrel of a gun; it is not enacted through bribes or backroom deals, nor does it reside within corporations or cabals. Power is made manifest through the molding and disseminating of truth, knowledge, reason, language, jurisprudence, and discourse (even counter – discourse) and is sustained through institutions and socialization processes. This constructed truth is superficial, the rhetoric and framing of

which obfuscates, downplays, or disguises power. Nowhere is this more evident than in the lauding of and longing for free markets and a small state.

In the super ordination of the economic sphere over all other spheres of living, these nonmarket spheres are framed with market rhetoric and imbued with market norms and values. The sphere of politics is recast as a marketplace for ideas, elections as the market test, and voting as a mechanical matter of consumer–voter choice. Once the political is surrendered to the economic, it logically follows that political speech, particularly in the form of campaign donations, merely represents a particular expression of capital investment. Moreover, consumers who object to corporate campaign donations are able to express their preferences by voting with their feet, thereby hitting the corporate bottom line and keeping corporate politics in line with their own in a (perverted) suggested extension of democracy. In his majority opinion, Justice Kennedy articulated these points in his ruling on the *Citizens United* case, providing an alarming example of the subordination of the juridical sphere to the economic through the interpretation of the political sphere as a marketplace (Brown 2015).

The subordination of cultural and social institutions to the market mentality of economic sphere is as serious and entrenched as that of political and legal institutions. Higher education is framed as an investment, a means by which an individual can acquire and accumulate human capital, the rewards for which are not a fulfilling life as a fully engaged, curious citizen of the world, but rather can be measured in pecuniary terms as a return on investment. The media propagation of perseverance porn, stories which feature a low-wage worker walking several (8-17 appears to be the sweet spot) miles to and from work or students fundraising to help their substitute teacher pay for his spouse's healthcare, are celebrated by media outlets as inspirational—a valorization and veneration of a tenacious work ethic—rather than as a sanitization and indictment of the state's failure to provide critical infrastructure like public transport and guaranteed healthcare (Shirazi and Johnson 2018). As herein examined, religious expression, mental health therapies, social and familial relationships are likewise stripped of their humanity and subjected to the lexicon and logics of the market.

If economic growth is the only yardstick by which we might measure social progress and the health of an otherwise emaciated state, then we as humans have nothing to contribute other than our productivity. Indeed, under neoliberalism, an individual's contribution to society is replaced by the neoliberal-individual-entrepreneur's contribution to economic growth. Once the neoliberal individual's ability to contribute to economic growth wanes or if their accumulation of human capital no longer aligns with the needs of the economy, their usefulness is extinguished—they become dispensable to the neoliberal economic project, to the economy, just another failing micro-capitalist. With no safety net to catch them, the useless neoliberal individual is sacrificed, "for the greater glory of the great god Capital..." (Sweezy 1998).

Perhaps the most insidious rhetorical sleight-of-hand in neoliberalism is the positioning of alienation as agency. Leaving the individual to eke out their own existence with only gumption, smarts, and shoe leather is not the same as empowering the individual (Wrenn 2015a). Survival is a social endeavour made possible through community and family. The individualism wrought by neoliberalism is lethal, but while any given neoliberal individual balances precariously on the edge of existence, neoliberalism as a system of thought and ruling rationality is in no grave peril. Even if overt neoliberal practices and policies could be stopped and the economic prioritization of deregulation, privatization, and retrenchment of the welfare state suddenly ceased, neoliberalism could survive. The infection of neoliberal rhetoric, standards, norms, and values into all of the other spheres of living would sustain the neoliberal organization of life and perpetuate the neoliberal individual en

masse (Brown 2015). But to submit to the neoliberal impulse, to resign oneself to neoliberal living, is to allow markets to write our future history.

The neoliberal rationality—so deeply embedded in our socialization practices, our institutions, our conventional wisdom, in the very air we breathe—cannot reconcile the continued struggle of those who work hard and yet cannot climb. The supposed meritocracy of neoliberal capitalism is time and again proven wrong in the reality of the material (Wrenn 2014a). Individuals who cannot cope with this deviation from the natural laws of neoliberalism unsurprisingly turn to more desperate measures, grasping at divine intercession, pushing ever harder toward perfectibility of the self, and turning every quotidian interaction, every social bond into a business opportunity.

But we find within Original Institutionalism, the antidote to this poison. As Original Institutionalists, we reject the Moreau-vian transmogrification of humanity into isolated neoliberal individuals and the transubstantiation of optimism into its doppelgänger predatory optimism. We refute the twisted, perverse representations of material reality within the neoliberal rationality and abjure the pathological subversion of the human instinct to joyfully engage in meaningful work and celebrate communal bonds. It is from this understanding, from this insight, that Original Institutionalists build a counter-narrative, one that sees the inherent moral dignity of humanity.

We counter the hegemony of the neoliberal narrative by rejecting our own capitalist socialization and by processing and exposing humanity's shared social trauma wrought by the cruel machinations of toxic institutions like neoliberalism. As educators and (real) economists, we practice an ideological patience through compassion instead of contempt for those still ensnared in the death grip of hustle culture. We reject rabid individualism and embrace solidarity. We reject a future written by markets and instead write a narrative grounded in the power communal bonds and the hope of human flourishing. The construction of this counter-narrative is continual, and it is one to which we all contribute. And therein lies hope.

Optimism is not required.

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