



Agency and Neoliberalism

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Review

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With the advance of neoliberalism over the last forty years, examination of the exercise of agency within the context of this latest stage of capitalism must be explored. The argument set forth is that agency within the specific institutional/structural context of neoliberalism requires tailored cultural mechanisms and artifacts to construct and support a self-referential, yet inauthentic agency. Inauthentic agency sustains neoliberalism.

Key words: agency, self-reference, neoliberal, institutions, heterodox

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3 With the advance of neoliberalism over the last forty years, an examination of the
4 exercise of agency within the context of this latest stage of capitalism must be explored. The
5 argument set forth is that agency within the specific institutional/structural context of
6 neoliberalism requires tailored cultural mechanisms and artifacts to construct and support a
7 self-referential, yet inauthentic agency – inauthentic because individuals are not fully aware
8 of the difference between the rhetoric of neoliberalism and the reality. Inauthentic agency
9 sustains neoliberalism.
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18 The first section of this paper details the relationship between an individual's agency
19 and her respective institutional context, examining their evolution and interplay. The next
20 section focuses on the specific institutional context of neoliberalism, highlighting the
21 mechanics of neoliberalism and proposes that neoliberalism promotes a specific type of
22 agency that is inauthentic. The nature of inauthentic agency is then explored. The third
23 section outlines the means by which this inauthentic agency is created and perpetuated
24 through the fetishism of power, casting of neoliberal values and priorities within an
25 individual's own frame of reference, and the cultural articulation and socialization of
26 individualism. The final section remarks upon the success and the necessity of neoliberalism
27 in sustaining inauthentic agency.
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41 *I. Agency and institutions*

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44 All individuals engage and exercise agency during their decision making processes;
45 agency and its underlying cognitive processes, in other words, mental modelsⁱ constitute the
46 mechanism of discretion and agency is the impetus of action (Smith, 2010). Structure, which
47 manifests via the persistent, often tacit, contextual relations within and through which
48 individuals act, partially shapes the individual's agency through various social mechanisms
49 such as power relations, resource allocation, and both formal and informal constraints and
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3 obligations. The influence, however, of structure and institutions on agency consists of much
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5 more than a mere constraining mechanism.
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8 In order not to subsume agent into structure or structure into agent, the
9
10 interdependence of agent and structure must be acknowledged while also recognizing the
11
12 simultaneous independence of each – the autonomous and internal forces – which propel
13
14 agent and structure down their respective evolutionary paths. Thus, structure and agency are
15
16 approached as simultaneously sensitive to the workings of one another while also consisting
17
18 and evolving independently and of independent inertia (Archer, 2000; Lawson, 1997). This
19
20 interactive agency allows for mutual causation between institutions and agent and
21
22 simultaneously recognizes the interdependence and independence of agent and institutions
23
24 (Davis, 2003). Structures and agency thus exist independently and evolve in non-synopated
25
26 historical time (Hodgson, 2002). Such respect for the dichotomous forces which inform the
27
28 development of agent and structure leads not only to understanding each more clearly but
29
30 also serves as an important consideration in the development of economic policy. Structural
31
32 economic policy changes that do not consider or anticipate the interaction between structural
33
34 shift and the impacted individuals are not likely to succeed. One needs only to turn to the
35
36 application of shock therapy in Eastern Europe for a striking example of such failure, where
37
38 political and economic institutions were transformed quickly from centralized command
39
40 planned to market economies, leaving confused individuals, unaccustomed to these new
41
42 institutions in its wake (See Taylor 2003 and 2006).
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48 Moreover, the individual must possess the power of self-reference while recognizing
49
50 – regardless of accuracy – social influences and her power to act and react to them (Davis,
51
52 2003). Self-referential is meant to refer to the agent's ability to develop a perception of her
53
54 own position and part of the surrounding structure. Under this conceptualization, the agent is
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56 'socially embedded in a nonarbitrary manner.' This of course, doesn't mean that self-
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3 reference is automatic (Davis, 2003, pp. 113-4). Indeed, the issue of non-authentic self-
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5 reference fundamentally changes the character and consequence of this interactivity.
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8 Fundamentally, individuals are responsible for the exercise of their agency (Sayer,
9
10 2011). Individuals, however, might not recognize structure or the constraints of structure on
11
12 their agency. Further, individuals might not recognize the fallibility of their perception of the
13
14 surrounding structure. Individuals might indeed exercise agency while possessing the power
15
16 of self-reflection, but those individuals are engaging agency that is not authentic when that
17
18 self-reflection exists within institutional contexts which represent the veiled exercise of
19
20 agency of others who are more powerfully positioned. As such, well-intentioned individuals
21
22 might be accurately exercising self-referential behavior but within a frame of reference that is
23
24 positively misunderstood. The social meaning of an act in such a scenario does not parallel
25
26 necessarily with the individual's intended meaning (Pratten, 1993). Agency with the specific
27
28 institutional context of neoliberalism requires this type of "inauthentic" agency to sustain it.
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32 33 ***II. Agency and Neoliberalism***

34 35 36 ***A. The neoliberal narrative***

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39 Neoliberalism embodies the ideological shift in the purpose of the state from one that
40
41 has a responsibility to insure full employment and protect its citizens against the exigencies
42
43 of the market to one that has a responsibility to insure protection of the market itself (Harvey,
44
45 2005). The neoliberal narrative consists of three well-defined tropes: privatization of
46
47 currently state provided goods and services, de-regulation of industry, and retrenchment of
48
49 the welfare state (Dumenil, 2011). All three reinforce a central premise: the locus of control
50
51 is the individual exercising agency through (free) market operations. The tropes of
52
53 privatization and de-regulation both argue that erecting a wall between government and
54
55 business creates a more efficient market economy; private industry is brought to heel by
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3 competitive market forces – market forces that simply represent the aggregate of
4
5 autonomous, individual decisions. Likewise, the retrenchment of the welfare state erects a
6
7 wall between the individual and the state, which ‘frees’ the individual to exercise agency and
8
9 decide for herself where she wants to reside in the economic hierarchy.
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11
12 This analysis of the neoliberal narrative is not meant to suggest that there is a
13
14 comprehensive and complete ‘Neoliberal Agenda’ that is actively enforced by maniacal
15
16 powers-that-be. Rather, what is argued is that the neoliberal narrative consists of a central
17
18 ideological construct – that of hyper-individualism – upon which the justification of these
19
20 tropes rests, the consequences of which legitimize and prioritize market activities above
21
22 socially integrative activities. Neoliberalism teaches through the socialization process that
23
24 each individual should be accountable to herself and in so doing, each individual’s
25
26 responsibility to others and to the collective is eroded. Society is then comprised entirely and
27
28 solely of self-interested, atomistic individuals seeking to forward their own agendas. The
29
30 emphasis on individual accountability and responsibility naturally segues into the power of
31
32 the individual acting alone. Within neoliberalism, agents are not just taught the ethos of
33
34 individual responsibility, but more importantly that they are the drivers of destiny: the
35
36 individual can through the democratic process – via votes or money – determine the structure,
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38 individual can through the democratic process – via votes or money – determine the structure,
39
40 composition, and path of the state and the market.
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44 B. Neoliberal, inauthentic agency

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46 There is agency and then there is *neoliberal agency*. The former depends wholly on
47
48 the ability of the individual to exercise authentic, self-referential behavior (Davis, 2003). The
49
50 latter depends on the individual *perceiving* herself as authentically self-referential.
51
52 Neoliberal agency constructs and instructs the superficially empowered individual and
53
54 perpetuates the illusion of autonomous decision making. This is not to suggest that
55
56 individuals become puppets to the institutions of neoliberalism – there most certainly remains
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3 genuine interaction between individuals and institutions and the economic agent is still able
4
5 to exercise discretion and some authentic agency in her decisions. What is being suggested is
6
7 that while the exercise of agency is itself authentic – the individual is empowered to interact
8
9 with and superficially change institutions – the perception of agency within neoliberalism is
10
11 not.

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14 The neoliberal narrative of privatized, hyper-individualism perpetuates the illusion of
15
16 authentic and efficacious agency. Indeed, this is the grand illusion of neoliberalism: that the
17
18 individual is self-efficacious and therefore possesses free and uninhibited agency, or at the
19
20 very least, maintains the potential for such. Neoliberal, inauthentic agency is framed as
21
22 authentic, that is, efficacious, as part of the over-arching neoliberal and democratic narrative,
23
24 both of which venerate the sacredness of the individual acting alone (Ratner, 2000). This
25
26 veneration of the individual and her agency is neatly framed within the neoliberal narrative as
27
28 the power to change one's situation and station. Under this conceptualization of agency, all
29
30 inequalities, misfortunes, and tragedies are surmountable and dependent wholly on the action
31
32 of the individual regardless of her social context. This conceptualization removes social
33
34 change as a possibility because all fault and power of changes lies with the individual – social
35
36 change is therefore not necessary on a collective scale (Ratner, 2000). The conspicuously
37
38 hidden contradiction is that the individual cannot ignite lasting and systemic changes to the
39
40 social structure itself, nor can the individual do much to change her position within the social
41
42 hierarchy because of the restricted set of roles and positions that are open to her (Antonio,
43
44 1981). Neoliberalism thus falls short of its own claims.

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49 The individual exercises agency in her life decisions but primarily with respect to the
50
51 more mundane decisions that are made daily within the auspices of the market economy.
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53 These decisions are certainly self-referential with respect to the individual's present wants
54
55 and needs as well as to her financial/credit position and the social image she wants to project
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3 within her specific set of social relations. This is not – as specified here – authentic agency.
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5 Authentic agency requires the individual to understand fully that these decisions are by their
6
7 nature pedestrian and as such have no greater social consequence. The individual who
8
9 exercises authentic agency understands that the power to purchase is a prosaic expression of
10
11 agency. Authentic agency requires that the individual understands not just her power in
12
13 making decisions, but more importantly the *limits* to her power within the existing social
14
15 framework (Ratner, 2000).
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19 The difference between authentic and inauthentic agency as described here can be
20
21 explained and further refined by briefing exploring the difference between ‘consciousness’
22
23 and ‘awareness’ as broadly understood in the Marxist tradition. Callinicos (1987) suggests
24
25 that the more powerfully positioned individuals possess ‘class consciousness’ while those
26
27 lower on the economic hierarchy are merely ‘class aware’ – whereby the former recognize
28
29 and internalize their location and station while the latter only recognizes shared similaritiesⁱⁱ.
30
31 To merge this framework with that presented here, those at the top of the economic hierarchy
32
33 possess ‘class consciousness’ and as such authentic agency as they are able to choose
34
35 deliberately – with full understanding of the capacities and limits to their abilities and reach –
36
37 with the intended consequence of maintaining their position. The average individual as
38
39 merely ‘aware’ of shared characteristics with similarly positioned individualsⁱⁱⁱ is able to
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41 exercise agency, but not authentic agency insofar as catalyzing systemic changes. Those
42
43 individuals with inauthentic agency work independently to change their respective class
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45 identities but do not possess the apperception that they do not have the access to power to
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47 catalyze substantial change or to change significantly their relative position on the economic
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49 hierarchy; most importantly, these individuals are not conscious that they cannot perform
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51 either of those tasks.
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3 There are thus two essential layers of the neoliberal economic system: the superficial
4
5 layer in which individuals perceive themselves to be situated and the underlying layer in
6
7 which corporations operate and attempt to sustain the former other, public face of
8
9 neoliberalism^{iv}. Both layers are real, and the former is essential to the maintenance of the
10
11 latter.
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14 The skin of neoliberalism, that part of the social structure of accumulation of which
15
16 everyone is aware advocates for individual accountability and small government through a
17
18 minimized welfare state, privatization, and de-regulation. In this layer of reality, the
19
20 individual possesses and engages agency in decision making. The agent is completely self-
21
22 referential within this superficial layer, and more importantly, perceives herself as
23
24 authentically self-referential. Beneath the skin of neoliberalism presides the genuine
25
26 institutional framework of neoliberalism: the revolving doors between lobbying firms,
27
28 corporate boards of directors, and political office.^v By examining this deeper, veiled layer,
29
30 stripping away the rhetoric and studying the mechanism of operations, we witness the
31
32 contradiction between neoliberal rhetoric and reality.
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37 C. The veiled layer

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39 The corporate sector demands for the privatization of government projects mask the
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41 clamor for the signing over of government contracts to the private sector. Contracted state
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43 infrastructural production and services or the issuing of vouchers by which individuals
44
45 purchase such services via the private market are only superficial movements toward
46
47 privatization. This partial-privatization separates the consumer – indeed the public, writ large
48
49 – from the private producer with the state acting as a financial intermediary, essentially
50
51 removing public oversight without reducing state spending (Nasser, 2003). Examples abound
52
53 and continue to expand within the US: the privatization of prisons (Corrections Corporation
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55 of America), defense contracts (Lockheed Martin), infrastructure re-building in war-torn
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3 areas of the world (KBR) and even the privatizing of military operations (Xe, formerly called
4 Blackwater). Once government funded projects are contracted to the private sector, these
5 corporations are able to claim under the Fourteenth amendment to the US Constitution
6 personal rights^{vi} that include the right to free speech viz. political endorsements and the right
7 to privacy and protection of proprietary information, helping shield operations from
8 regulatory oversight. The neoliberal push for privatization thus veils the allocation of
9 government funds into corporate welfare programs and essentially deregulates industries by
10 removing transparency. Partial privatization demonstrates the power of the contradiction
11 between the ideal of the democratically empowered individual who can catalyze social
12 change and the reality of the opaque government funding provided to private industry
13 contractors within the neoliberal state.
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27 The shrinking of the welfare (or 'nanny') state translates to a retrenchment of social
28 welfare programs. The attack on social programs proceeds on moral grounds: the connection
29 between the need to restore morality and the retrenchment of the welfare state is made to
30 create reforms which are palatable to the working class (Piven, 2004). Arguments against the
31 welfare state portray poverty as a necessary evil which serves as incentive to remove oneself
32 from poverty or as unnecessary given the success of past social programs which had
33 effectively corrected any past inequalities (Karger, 1993). Accordingly, social programs are
34 painted as deleterious as such safety nets degrade the individual's perceptions of self-worth
35 and communicate a lack of faith in the recipient's ability to provide for her family (George,
36 2000). As well, one should not underestimate the expediency and effectiveness with which
37 cultural perceptions of individuals receiving assistance from the welfare state have been
38 molded so as to embarrass, humiliate, and socially degrade recipients while allowing others
39 to morally justify not fighting for the extension of government aid (Piven, 2004). Issues of
40 morality are often invoked to buttress support of welfare retrenchment as welfare policies are
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3 portrayed to the public as supporting a ‘culture of poverty;’ a culture which includes
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5 disincentives for marriage and traditional family units as well as the maintenance of ‘welfare
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7 queens’ (Piven, 2004) or of ‘skivers’ over ‘strivers.’ The neoliberal narrative instructs that
8
9 individuals exercise agency and *choose* whether or not to suffer poverty; obfuscating the
10
11 reality that individuals become trapped in cycles of poverty rather than electing to maintain
12
13 cultures of poverty. The impact of this manifestation of the contradiction works on two
14
15 levels: first, the popular removal of social programs which might assist lower income
16
17 individuals (even those opposed to social programs) in climbing the economic hierarchy and
18
19 second, by creating barriers to advocates of social change with the argument that poverty is a
20
21 choice.
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25 The theory of consumer sovereignty perpetuates the idea of the impartiality of the
26
27 market and the market as an efficient execution of the democratic ideal – consumers ‘vote’
28
29 with their money. While there is considerable choice in the market setting as the capitalist
30
31 cycle demands persistent product development and finer market segmentation, the choice set
32
33 is determined, priced, and therefore entirely determined by the producer, so that the reality of
34
35 the production of goods for the consumer market is more aptly described via Galbraith’s
36
37 ‘revised sequence’ where in reality it is the producer who is sovereign (1985, pp.221-9).
38
39 Invention is the mother of necessity; planned obsolescence, creative destruction, and
40
41 increasing market segmentation perpetuate its maternity. Galbraith eloquently explains,
42
43 however, that to describe this process as unilateral and paint consumers as victims, slaves, or
44
45 witless pawns is short-sighted and misses the mark entirely. Individuals are not dupes –
46
47 indeed, they must be increasingly sophisticated in order to navigate the saturated and overly
48
49 differentiated market (Migone, 2007). Consumers have the power to decide not to consume
50
51 particular goods, and to exercise a degree of choice in the selection of which goods she might
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53 consume. The most important point is this: that neoliberalism, reinforced by the ideals of
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3 free markets and consumer sovereignty, ‘... supports the conclusion that the individual is the
4
5 ultimate source of power in the economic system’ (Galbraith, 1985, p. 226). Inauthentic
6
7 agency is perpetuated and continually reproduced because the culture of neoliberalism
8
9 elevates the pedestrian choices the individual makes in her everyday life, especially choices
10
11 of consumption as expression and proof of the individual’s uniqueness, individuality, and
12
13 power (Ratner, 2000). Within the skin, the superficial layer of neoliberalism, the consumer is
14
15 sovereign and the individual is supreme – she is self-referential, she knows what she wants
16
17 and is empowered by free markets to decide and act.
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20 21 22 ***III. Building the power of choice*** 23

24 25 ***A. Fetishism of agency*** 26

27
28 Commodification and capitalism are inseparable; the existence of the market economy is
29
30 predicated on persistent commodification. Social life itself becomes subjected to the forces
31
32 of commodification and consumption under capitalism; individuals within the intensified
33
34 market setting of capitalism become distanced and detached from personal relationships so
35
36 they must find connection through commodities. Individuals are conditioned, socialized, and
37
38 culturally disciplined by capitalism through advertising and political persuasion that the
39
40 possession of commodities will assuage their insecurities and need for expression and
41
42 meaning (Stanfield, 1977). These ideas are not new.
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45
46 What makes commodification in the neoliberal stage of capitalism unique is the
47
48 emphasis on commodities as fetishized emblems of agency. Ideas that support neoliberalism
49
50 are objectified, reified, and commodified to the extent that they are no longer ideals but idols
51
52 which are to be venerated, coveted, and collected. The physical commodification of these
53
54 ideas serves as a self-referential identifying mechanism for the alienated individual. The
55
56 individual feels socially connected to other individuals and a larger community through the
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3 shared fetishism of the objectified and commodified ideas of power, freedom, independence,
4
5 or even counter-cultural non-conformity – all of which enable the individual to construct her
6
7 identity and superficially define the social context within which she perceives herself to be
8
9 situated. The individual is thus able to find connection to her own power (self-
10
11 empowerment) through objects.
12

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14 Within neoliberalism, commodities become the cultural artifacts and physical proof of
15
16 an individual's identity, both uniquely chosen by the individual and shared with a larger
17
18 community with similar ideals. The patriotic purchase freedom in flags and lapel pins while
19
20 the rebellious purchase non-conformity and resistance to 'the system' in Che Guevarra t-
21
22 shirts and Kerouac novels. T-shirts and bumperstickers abound whatever the cause or call.
23
24 What these consumers have actually purchased is the veneer of empowerment through the
25
26 exercise of agency. The decision to purchase such cultural relics not only supports the
27
28 superficial social context that sustains neoliberalism, but it also hides the deeper layer of
29
30 neoliberalism, the political-corporate machinations that constitute the true institutional
31
32 structure. Culture or counter-culture, pro or anti, rebel or patriot makes no difference: all
33
34 feel empowered, commodities and production are supported, and the deeper, veiled layers of
35
36 neoliberalism continue to operate.
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41 The fetishism of the individual's free and fully autonomous agency sustains and
42
43 perpetuates neoliberalism. Individuals are not aware that they are not authentically self-
44
45 referential. Again, this is not to say that individuals act blindly and ignorantly or that all of
46
47 the aims of neoliberal proponents are neatly and completely executed, but rather to
48
49 underscore the point that the public face of neoliberalism is convincingly framed but
50
51 moreover, is not consistent with the machinations beneath the surface. Frustration with or
52
53 outrage against outcomes of neoliberalism, whether the focus be war, environmental
54
55 degradation, or cultural deterioration are channeled and (at least superficially) ameliorated
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3 through commodities that are emblematic of that frustration or outrage. Even the anti-
4
5 consumerist movement offers t-shirts. Counter-culture is at once commodified and mollified,
6
7 all while supporting accumulative drive of neoliberalism. Individuals exposed only to the
8
9 superficial face of neoliberalism are thus persuaded and lulled into making decisions without
10
11 understanding the deeper layer of neoliberalism wherein corporate institutions attempt to
12
13 exert influence on those decisions. Individuals are socialized into believing that their social
14
15 context consists of the reified institutions of democracy, freedom, and individual
16
17 independence; ‘an increasingly hegemonic discourse that equate(s) individual expression
18
19 with material possession’ (Migone, 2007, p. 176). Individuals exercise superficially
20
21 authentic, that is superficially self-referential, agency within this contrived institutional
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23 context.
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28 B. “Us versus them”

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31 Working through social institutions and appealing to the market mentality, the
32
33 proponents of neoliberalism have been able to enlist citizen support of its agenda through
34
35 populist appeals which cast larger neoliberal priorities within an individual’s own frame of
36
37 reference. The neoliberal call for a balanced budget illustrates the tactic quite clearly. The
38
39 balanced budget issue works well for neoliberalism for two essential reasons: it makes sense
40
41 from the perspective of the individual who must balance her own budget, and is therefore
42
43 able rather easily to garner popular support, and secondly, a balanced budget is a convenient
44
45 means to an end. As discussed above, the ultimate aim of neoliberalism is not a balanced
46
47 budget, but rather the specific reduction of government spending through the elimination or
48
49 retrenchment of specific social programs which erode capital’s position with respect to labor
50
51 by mitigating worker insecurity and thus depriving the corporate sector of an effective
52
53 disciplinary device (Meeropol, 2000). The real objective is to reallocate social welfare to
54
55 corporate welfare.
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3 Proponents of neoliberalism are able to recruit supporters from the ranks of the
4
5 working class by obscuring wealth inequalities while emphasizing the distinction between the
6
7 'hedonistic poor' and 'hard working' citizens: the 'welfare queen' vs. 'Joe the plumber.'
8
9 Through this rhetorical framing of an 'other,' average citizens who would not benefit from
10
11 neoliberal policies such as trickle-down economics, tax breaks for upper-income brackets, or
12
13 the removal of social safety nets effectively become supporters. Furthermore, the specious
14
15 justification of job creation and maintenance is evoked to rationalize and recruit support for
16
17 corporate welfare over social welfare, even when the assistance in the form of either subsidy
18
19 or tax relief would be more beneficial to society in general and the poor in specificity if it
20
21 were channeled in to the production of education or other social infrastructural
22
23 improvements.
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27 The neoliberal packaging of financial markets as the common man's playground veils
28
29 the struggle over the distribution of income with the persuasive illusion of social mobility.
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31 The stock market is sold as a game that workers can play and win; another avenue by which
32
33 to achieve the 'American Dream.' Since experience eventually teaches the individual that
34
35 hard work does not serve to increase repressed wages, the stock market offers an alternative
36
37 possible means of entrée into the world of capital and thus serves to recruit individuals into
38
39 the campaigns for and acceptance of neoliberal market policies (Piven, 2004). Even if
40
41 individuals are not financially able to invest, the stock market is held up as a promising and
42
43 attainable opportunity, especially given the proliferation of internet discount brokerages.
44
45
46 Despite the illusion of access to stock markets, however evidence suggests that in the US, the
47
48 households of the neoliberal era hold a smaller percentage of stock (46 percent in 2000) than
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50 during the golden years of the welfare state (90 percent through the 1950s), the remainder of
51
52 public shares being held by institutional investors (Crotty, 2003).
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3 By persuading the general public that ‘we’ are all in the business of making money,
4
5 that all of us are ‘in the same (contextual) boat,’ proponents of neoliberalism are able to quite
6
7 effectively enlist popular support from individuals who do not stand to benefit from its
8
9 policies but believe at the very least, that they someday might benefit. The framing of the
10
11 inheritance tax within the US presents a compelling example. In the early 1990s,
12
13 Republicans were encouraged by political strategists to replace the term ‘inheritance tax’ or
14
15 ‘estate tax’ with the term ‘death tax’ in their calls for its repeal. This rhetorical manipulation
16
17 and the bombast against the tax that followed demonstrate how proponents for repeal have
18
19 been able to harness popular support for a tax that only impacts 2% of US taxpayers
20
21 (Schaffner, 2009).
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26 C. Expert vs. humble opinion

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28
29 The cultural articulation of the neoliberal movement would not be possible without
30
31 the transference of neoliberal values via the social structure. The individual learns from the
32
33 communal stock of knowledge shared through intersubjective relations, from the structural
34
35 repository of knowledge, and from her own experience (Hodgson, 2004). The hyper-
36
37 individualism of neoliberalism, however, diminishes reliance on social relationships so that
38
39 the structural sources of knowledge and the transmission of new knowledge increasingly fall
40
41 to expert analysis rather than shared personal experience or institutional forms independent of
42
43 neoliberalism.
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47 A significant contribution to the success in the propagation of the neoliberal mental
48
49 models has been the mass-market packaging of those ideals via news media channels. The
50
51 institutions of the neoliberal economy act as filters on the transmission of new information.
52
53 Filtering may be enforced or reinforced in a variety of ways: threats to advertising income,
54
55 increasing concentration of ownership of media outlets, corporate feedback and assistance, or
56
57 reliance on ideologically charged ‘expert’ perspectives (Jackson, 2004). Sound bites and
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3 condensed information are used to arm the public with easy to understand and communicate
4
5 talking points on current issues. The blogosphere and booming pundits formulate opinions
6
7 and outrage by neatly condensing complex issues into mimicable political stances. In a
8
9 disturbing example of news manipulation, a study conducted by the Center for Media and
10
11 Democracy found escalating employment of video news reports (VNRs) – ‘pre-packaged
12
13 ‘news’ segments’ – which are largely commissioned by corporate interests and offered free of
14
15 charge to the media. The VNRs, whose production values and graphics deliberately mimic
16
17 that of television newscasts, are designed to be inserted directly into a station’s news
18
19 programming without further editing. Researchers found that *none* of the television stations
20
21 tracked in a national study fully disclosed to the public the source of the VNR (Farsetta,
22
23 2006).

24
25
26
27 Proponents of neoliberalism also attempt to influence public perception and opinion
28
29 via widely publicized and doctrinaire work of scholars funded by neoliberal ideologists
30
31 through foundations. The establishment of think tanks and policy institutes which fund
32
33 speakers, authors, and flood the media with a bevy of expert commentators – often provided
34
35 free of charge – serves to inculcate the values of neoliberalism in the public mind (Blyth,
36
37 2002; Jackson, 2004; Piven, 2004). These propaganda machines have historically been
38
39 carefully crafted. Indeed, the original creation of many of these various institutes since the
40
41 1970s has followed a specific blueprint in order to maximize the spread of the neoliberal
42
43 ideology, with each institution assigned a specific goal such as the promotion of capitalism as
44
45 the superior system (the only alternative) or a specific legislative project geared toward
46
47 corporate interests.^{vii} Affiliation with a particular political party is incidental to the purpose
48
49 and direction of these ideological entities (Blyth, 2002).

50
51
52 Proponents of neoliberalism have not only proven quite adept at demoralizing and
53
54 defaming the welfare state, but also those who support it; the invention of an elitist class
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3 based not on income but rather intelligence^{viii} has effectively driven a wedge between the
4
5 traditional liberal supporters of the welfare state in academia and the general population. The
6
7 populist appeals of neoliberal advocates effectively pit the working class (or ‘Middle
8
9 America’) against the fabricated ‘intellectual elite,’ as represented by university professors
10
11 and Ivy League educated politicians, and the immoral poor. In many ways, proponents of
12
13 neoliberalism have been able to construct a straw man out of the intelligent elite and the
14
15 hedonistic poor as a manner of diverting the public from the origin of their insecurities which
16
17 are created in the capitalist drive to encourage mass consumption (Ehrenreich, 1987).
18
19 Although not a new phenomenon, this development has become more transparent in recent
20
21 years in renewed attacks on academia, with pundits claiming restricted access to both
22
23 conservatives and libertarians to the ivory tower (Tierney, 2004). By co-opting the trusted
24
25 sources of information in society and casting doubt on those critical of neoliberalism, the
26
27 proponents of neoliberalism are able to convince individuals that everyone faces the same
28
29 opportunities, has equal access to power, and that the outcomes of their respective decisions
30
31 are exclusively the result of their chosen exercise of agency.
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37 *IV. Concluding remarks*

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39
40 Neoliberalism is morally justified by the invocation of freedom, an ideal with which
41
42 US residents in particular have historically been heavily socialized. Freedom as such is
43
44 neatly reframed into the context of neoliberalism: free markets, freedom to choose, free
45
46 movement of labor and capital, free movement of currency (Nonini, 2003). To object to
47
48 neoliberalism is to oppose ‘freedom.’ Those who blaspheme the natural law of neoliberalism
49
50 and the ‘freedom’ it proffers are condemned to ad hominem attacks of anti-patriotism,
51
52 ‘communism,’ pro-terrorism, or as promulgators of class warfare. Neoliberalism teaches the
53
54 market mentality and the superiority of the individual.
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3 Within the context of neoliberalism, at least part of the agency an individual perceives
4 she possesses is inauthentic. The veneer of authentic agency veils the machinations of
5
6 channeled interpretations and choice restriction. The larger the distance between authentic
7
8 and inauthentic agency, the more freedom of movement is afforded to neoliberalism. The
9
10 difference between agency and agency within the context of neoliberalism is that the latter is
11
12 not self-actualized agency. The gap between these two creates space for the machinations of
13
14 neoliberalism. The bloating of the individual's self-perceived agency in turn reinforces the
15
16 neoliberal agenda; it is the mischaracterization/misunderstanding of the true nature of
17
18 authentic agency that reproduces neoliberalism. The result is an interactive agency
19
20 predicated on the lie of autonomous individual agency. The belief in the power of the
21
22 individual – in her own power – ultimately serves to strengthen the influence of
23
24 neoliberalism.
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29 Within neoliberalism, individuals wear symbols of power instead of authentically
30
31 exercising power. The power to choose is deftly re-angled into the power to choose between
32
33 commodities, and the potential for action narrowed into the act of exchange. The corporate-
34
35 owned media engage in the active shaping of the individual's assessment of self, attaching
36
37 identification and social meaning to objects while invoking the moral justifications for
38
39 neoliberalism (Herman and Chomsky, 1988).
40
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43 By controlling the exposure and content of information to the public, the veiled
44
45 corporate agenda behind neoliberal policies creates and constructs a convincing and easy to
46
47 understand picture of social context and institutional configurations amenable to
48
49 neoliberalism. Media institutions provide experts and analysis; the humble opinion of the
50
51 average Joe is not only channeled, but also pre-packaged with no further assembly required.
52
53 The deference on the part of the common man to expert analysis instead of personal and
54
55 proximate observation contributes to the weight of the information presented. The individual
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3 understands her position in her surrounding context and is thus able to exercise self-
4
5 referential agency, yet the surrounding context is not wholly described, the pieces are not
6
7 fitted together, and the sub-surface objectives of the proponents are not exposed. The
8
9 individual is therefore exercising inauthentic agency.
10

11
12 The advance of neoliberalism is the by-product of ad hoc and uncoordinated
13
14 responses on the part of politico-corporate entities that only have in common the goal of
15
16 survival and expansion of operations. Uncoordinated responses from individuals emerge
17
18 from efforts to cope with an inherently irrational system; to survive and make sense of a
19
20 world where there is an in-articulate disconnect between the rhetoric and the reality of
21
22 neoliberalism. The way forward requires individuals to recognize this disconnect and to
23
24 acknowledge the impotency of the individual acting alone. Only then can individuals work to
25
26 transcend the actual limits to agency and through coordinated, collective action, redesign
27
28 social institutions into structures which support authentic living and the broader flourishing of
29
30 individuals.
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25 _____
26 ⁱ Mental models so envisioned are not endowed fully formed at birth, nor are they constructed via internally
27 driven, universal maturation processes, but rather contain the antecedents and cumulative paths of the
28 individual's contextually situated history. For a more detailed explanation of mental models see Wrenn, 2007.

29
30 ⁱⁱ For evidence of the former's level of consciousness and how businesses have adapted to that, see the Citigroup
31 memo, "The Plutonomy Symposium – Rising Tide Lifting Yachts."

32
33 ⁱⁱⁱ This should not be interpreted as producing 'false consciousness,' but rather as the prevention of a shared,
34 class consciousness.

35
36 ^{iv} Recalling Gidden's description (1979) of "deeply layered" structures, the possibility of more than two layers
37 within neoliberalism most certainly exists. For the present purpose, only the superficial and political-corporate
38 layers will be examined.

39
40 ^v See the Center for Responsive Politics' Revolving Door Project for extensive analysis and data for the United
41 States of the relationship between K Street, Wall Street, and the US Congress.

42
43 ^{vi} See the 1886 Santa Clara County v. Southern Pacific Railroad Company US Supreme Court ruling and more
44 recent 2010 Citizens United v. Federal Election Commission US Supreme Court ruling for major landmark
45 cases establishing such rights.

46
47 ^{vii} See Blyth, 2002, chapter six for an excellent survey of these institutions and their respectively assigned roles.

48
49 ^{viii} The creation of this new 'intellegentsia' has its roots in the presidential platforms of Spiro Agnew and George
50 Wallace in their 1968 and 1972 campaigns (Ehrenreich, 1987, p. 166).