

Consecrating Capitalism: the US Prosperity Gospel and Neoliberalism

Neoliberalism relies on optimism. Without faith in meritocracy – unwavering belief that rewards will eventually and justly come to those who work hard enough – support for the capitalist system and belief in neoliberalism would unravel. How that optimism is perpetuated in the face of persistent income inequality and exploitation within the workplace requires an examination of those cultural institutions which reinforce and reproduce optimism over practical experience. This research focuses on one particular religious institution of the US – the Prosperity Gospel.

The Prosperity Gospel is a modern, neoliberal variation of Pentecostalism that is premised on the belief that a Biblical covenant between the individual believer and God guarantees that believer blessings of health and wealth, provided she demonstrates adequate faith.

Accordingly, for those who are less adept at navigating the business world, financial success is still available for those believers who can dedicate themselves with the same frenzied ambition to the spiritual world. The Prosperity Gospel thus supports and sustains neoliberalism; the Prosperity Gospel is an institution which provides refuge to individuals from the exigencies of the market as well as a social practice which reinforces individual responsibility and fault. The Prosperity Gospel is the spiritual articulation of neoliberalism as well as a reinforcing institution.

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The theology of the Prosperity Gospel and Neoliberalism

Neoliberalism is the prevailing ideological operant of the most recent stage in the evolution of monopoly capitalism over the last nearly five decades. Neoliberalism embodies the ideological shift in the purpose of the state from one that has a responsibility to insure full employment and protect its citizens against the exigencies of the market to one that has a responsibility to insure protection of the market itself (Harvey 2005). Under neoliberalism, the state is thus preoccupied with the frictionless functioning and expansion of markets rather than the general welfare of society: the state legitimizes and prioritizes market activities above socially integrative ones. Individuals are left responsible for their own welfare under neoliberalism.

Indeed, neoliberalism teaches through the socialization process that each individual should be accountable to herself and in so doing, each individual's responsibility to others and to the collective is eroded. Society is then comprised entirely and solely of self-interested, atomistic individuals seeking to forward their own agendas. The emphasis on individual accountability and responsibility naturally segues into the power of the individual acting alone (Wrenn 2015).

The epicenter of the Prosperity Gospel theology is the individual's relationship with God. The Prosperity Gospel is thus a spiritual articulation of neoliberalism: the individualism of the Prosperity Gospel rejects state welfare assistance while it justifies and instrumentalizes class relations; individual responsibility is the core catechism of the Prosperity Gospel, much as it is the central ideological truism of neoliberalism; and the Prosperity Gospel loosely stitches back together the social dislocation wrought by neoliberalism and as a consequence, helps to sustain neoliberalism.

Wealth and Class

The Prosperity Gospel is subtly, if not explicitly, neoliberal. If all the individual needs to secure material wealth is a belief in God, then anything the state does is either redundant, irrelevant, or interferes with divine machinations - neoliberals would simply substitute free market for divine machinations. It is likewise an easy, parallel step between belief in the supernatural logic of a contractual promise from God to provide and belief in the supernatural logic of a free market which provides efficient and fair outcomes (Walton 2012).

The logic of the Prosperity Gospel and the logic of neoliberalism neatly align on the issue of welfare: both preach that an individual is responsible for her own welfare and that intervention of the state on behalf of the individual is tantamount to heresy. The anti-welfare rhetoric of Prosperity Gospel preachers castigates those whose beliefs aren't strong enough to make God's promises manifest:

And if you are on welfare and food stamps, I encourage you to get off them as soon as you can. Welfare is a poverty train that will keep you broke, because if you're always depending on somebody else to do something for you, you're going to stay in poverty (Thompson 1997 33).

Poverty is not a money problem. It's a spiritual problem. You can throw as much money at it as you want and, when you get finished, the poverty will still be there.

President Lyndon Johnson proved this. Back in the 1960s he spent literally billions of dollars in his 'war on poverty,' yet more people in this nation are living below the poverty level now, than back then. The president's intentions were good; he just didn't realize that poverty, as a spiritual problem, requires a spiritual solution" (K. Copeland 2017 9).

Neoliberalism is dependent upon the existence of the welfare state - in a specific form - that helps to create and sustain flexible labor markets and defray the cost to capital of providing a living wage (Wrenn 2015). Neoliberalism is also dependent upon anti-welfare rhetoric that

shapes public beliefs on the merits of individual responsibility and the evils of the undeserving poor. The Prosperity Gospel doth provides.

Spiritual/cultural movements like the Prosperity Gospel are both born from and are instrumental to the management of class relations; as this is true for capitalism, it holds true for the neoliberal ideology (Walton 2012). The appeal of the Prosperity Gospel cuts across class lines: for the upper class, it further justifies their place in the hierarchy; for the middle class, it affirms their aspirations and opens the perception of possibilities; and for the poor, the Prosperity Gospel gives hope.

Poverty is a curse and the Bible says that we have been redeemed from it (K.

Copeland 21 1994 emphasis original).

Indeed, class mobility is grounded in the Biblical prophecy of the Rapture according to the Prosperity Gospel. Under traditional Evangelical eschatology, the Rapture occurs on Judgement Day when devout believers will be literally lifted from Earth to Heaven. Under the Prosperity Gospel, the Rapture is an ongoing process that lifts earthly problems from the believer; essentially, raptured believers can ‘ascend’ through the class ranks while still alive (Bowler 2013).

Moreover, the Prosperity Gospel justifies the distribution of income according to a spiritual metric and frames inequality as a spiritual battle between the have-belief and have-not-belief rather than as class warfare. In order to ‘win’ this spiritual battle and ascend class hierarchy, one must turn inward to strengthen her own belief rather than outward toward collective efforts - God will redistribute income according to faithfulness.

Now God is declaring the wealth of the wicked will begin transferring over to the innocent—and as impossible as that seems, it will surely happen. This message of wealth transfer literally runs throughout all of Scripture (Avanzini 1989 80).

It is the simple transference of the secular ideals of meritocracy and ambition which underpin neoliberalism to the non-secular ideals of spiritual worthiness and faith (Augustine 2010).

The Individual

The Prosperity Gospel aligns with and reinforces the core of neoliberalism - that of individualism. Within the Prosperity Gospel, the relationship a believer has with God is highly individualistic; salvation can only be achieved through the individual's covenant - a contractual relationship which exchanges belief and devotion for eternal salvation and earthly blessings - with God (Barker 2007). The Prosperity Gospel and neoliberalism are both premised on individual responsibility - in both systems, if an individual fails it is the result of incomplete dedication to their respective supernatural logics (Walton 2012).

Your future is stored up in your heart! It's not dictated by your history, or your current circumstances. Your future is determined by you... Now, consider this: Who stored up the evil things in the evil man's heart? Obviously, the man himself did it. Who stored up the good things in the good man's heart? Again, the man himself did. (G. Copeland 1994 8-9).

We know that in the presence of God there is healing, and I would give all that I have to see people healed, so I really believe it is the fault of the person. They have failed to enter into God's presence and allow Him to touch them (Hinn as quoted in Bowler 2013 151).

The rabid individualism of the Prosperity Gospel means that local community engagement and aid to individuals is limited. Engagement primarily takes the form of non-localized educational, self-help materials (for example, financial counseling) or in offering limited-run services. According to the causal determinism of the Prosperity Gospel, individuals are fully responsible for their own prosperity or poverty, therefore the mission of the Prosperity Gospel church is one of spreading the Word and global reach (Bowler 2013; Walton 2009).

Within neoliberalism, the individual is self-referential and within a limited, personal sphere, has agency. That the neoliberal economic sphere has disembedded from and subordinated the other spheres of living, however means that the individual is only empowered to interact with and change institutions superficially; the individual cannot ignite lasting and systemic changes to the social structure itself, nor can the individual do much to change her position within the financial hierarchy (Wrenn 2015). The Prosperity Gospel offers a powerful counter narrative to the inauthentic agency of neoliberalism - the individual is able to control her circumstances (as well as her salvation) through self-discipline and belief. Take this prayer for job seekers:

I now dissolve and put aside all negative, limiting beliefs about where I will work and what kind of job is available to me.... I call for a perfect, satisfying, well-paying job to manifest in my life. I am always in the right place at the right time, for the Spirit of God directs my steps. (Prov. 16:9; Rom. 5:17.)

(Capps 2004 35-6)

The Prosperity Gospel offers the individual a sense, a perception of control - and a new *spiritual* hierarchy to which she can aspire, one which also offers financial returns (Brouwer 1996).

According to Prosperity Gospel teachings, all solutions to overcome adversity come from the individual - there is no emphasis on institutional, systemic, or social change. As such, the Prosperity Gospel teaches that the oppressive frameworks within which adherents are located are irrelevant and deprivation is the result of moral failings of individuals rather than systemic issues subject to social redress (Walton 2012, 2009).

Christ destroyed the barriers that separated people by gender, race, age, or economic status, so that people could be reconciled to each other and to God... The world still lives according to the way life was before the cross, but when we accept what Jesus did

to restore equality, we receive the freedom to be exactly who God created us to be...

Christ has removed all inequalities... (T. Dollar 2017)

The Prosperity Gospel teaches that structural barriers and systemic obstacles are no match for the covenant between the believer and God. Individuals cannot therefore experience racism, misogyny, or any type of institutional discrimination or injustice without having explicitly invited that experience into her life through a negative mindset (Walton 2009, 2010).

The Prosperity Gospel movement and neoliberalism thus run in parallel. Both over-attribute agency to the individual - all of the individual's success and failure is the result of that individual's choices. Both offer a single, clear touchstone - that of faith, faith that God will provide and faith in the free market. This straightforward and simple frame of individualism and faith makes the Prosperity Gospel and neoliberalism even further compatible and allows the individual to adapt and interpret that frame on her own terms.

Polanyi and prosperity

As capitalism evolves, continual technological advance in combination with capital's relentless accumulation imperative simplifies material progress. The increasing momentum of market intensification encourages the extraction of the market from the other spheres of social life, in other words, Polanyi's disembedding of the economic sphere. In following the logic of its own momentum, the economic sphere enlarges, eventually encompassing the entirety of social life, subordinating the other spheres of livelihood to support its purpose and further intensification (Polanyi 1944). The concurrent intensification of the market mentality and the continued disembedding of the economy drives a deeper wedge into the development of personal relationships as anonymity of the market, pecuniary values, and the competition of emulation serve to distance individuals from one another by eroding, preventing, or calling into question social bonds and collective goals (Stanfield 1996). Although Polanyi wrote prior to the emergence of neoliberalism, his concept of the disembedded economy

nevertheless describes quite clearly how neoliberalism emerged and continues to evolve (Dale 2010; Wrenn 2018). The Prosperity Gospel is a clear case study of Polanyi's disembedding within the context of neoliberalism.

Prosperity Gospel churches have embraced the aesthetics of corporate America in their large, non-descript (in one case, a former pro-basketball arena) worship headquarters equipped with stages instead of altars, typically with a globe as backdrop instead of a cross. Services function more like conventions or TED Talks and the preachers look more like bankers than clergy. As well, these churches have adopted the standard capitalist operating and management practices: large payrolls; retail stores offering everything from books to clothing to home décor; production studios to polish the weekly services to a high shine for the millions in the global audience watching online. The Prosperity Gospel doesn't just support capitalism, it has harnessed capitalism for its own purposes (Ehreneich 2009; Walton 2009). Indeed, the Prosperity Gospel is a micromodel of capitalism: the preachers hold the 'means of production' - they are the gatekeepers, the owners of sacred space, and the liaison to God; the congregation are 'the workers' - apart from church service, they volunteer their time to keep the church running and are charged to recruit other workers/worshippers into the fold. The call to tithe is outright extraction, the support from church volunteers is exploitation (Bowler 2015).

The size of the market for the Prosperity Gospel is difficult to judge. Industry figures - including sales, yearly income, or even congregation numbersⁱ – are difficult to uncover or assess. The closest proxy for marketing and merchandising within Prosperity Gospel churches is in the number of books authored by the central figure in the respective organization.

of “distinct works”

Joyce Meyer	727
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Creflo Dollar*	360
Kenneth Copeland*	272
Benny Hinn*	170
Joel Osteen*	149
Jerry Savelle*	69
Charles Capp*	60
Leroy Thompson*	19

All figures from each individual author's page on Goodreads

*author quoted in this paper

It should be noted that the number of books published by the central figure in the Prosperity Gospel ministry constitutes a very conservative proxy for the sales effort of each respective church. Each ministry's website sells much more merchandise than the numbered works listed here, including books authored by other members of the ministry (typically a spouse of the central figure), CDs, DVDs, study guides, conferences, and assorted gifts (candles, tote bags, etc).

The Prosperity Gospel provides believers an organized, structured world view that brings order to the chaotic disruption created by the continually disembedding economy (Polanyi 1944). The invisible forces of the market and the instability wrought by financial markets of intangible assets are given form through the Prosperity Gospel - invisible forces are 'evidence' of God's hand. National or global economic downturns are explained as evidence of God's displeasure of the general state of earthly affairs all while the disembedding of the economic sphere and the intensification of the market mentality creates social dislocation and cultural malaise which on an individual level takes on an apocalyptic portent. The Prosperity Gospel demystifies neoliberal capitalism by providing God as the grand orchestrator – the man with the invisible hand.

I'm not moved by the economy, the stock market, my job situation. I know God supplies all of my needs. He promised He would prosper me even in a recession (Osteen).

God's financial system transcends the national economy, the stock market and any company's layoff plan. And, He wants you and your family to take advantage of it...(K. Copeland).

In this way, the Prosperity Gospel provides a rationale for why neoliberal capitalism is not the meritocracy that it claims to be. By explaining economic hardship and precarity as tests of belief and devotion, the Prosperity Gospel essentially excuses neoliberal capitalism for not rewarding the hard work and effort that is supposedly required to achieve financial success. The luck - over which the individual has no control - that is actually required to succeed financially is transformed into devotion - which the individual can control (Barker 2007; Brouwer 1996). As previously discussed, the Prosperity Gospel promises that eventually, God will transfer wealth from the wicked to the believer.

By somewhat ameliorating the social dislocation wrought by neoliberalism, the Prosperity Gospel supports neoliberalism while also serving as a Polanyian countermovement against it. That is, the Prosperity Gospel in some part redresses the social dislocation and distance that is consequent of the disembedding of the economic from the social sphere without challenging the economic sphere, without challenging the neoliberal ideology which guides it. Indeed, the Prosperity Gospel mimics and replicates neoliberalism.

Concluding remarks

The Prosperity Gospel supports and sustains neoliberalism; the Prosperity Gospel is an institution which provides refuge to individuals from the exigencies of the market as well as a set of social practices which reinforce individual responsibility and fault. The Prosperity Gospel thus offers a spiritual version of neoliberal self-governance (Ruccio 2015). And the

formula offered is simple - if you don't like your life, change your lifestyle. Faith is the catalyst which ignites prosperity - and it is not a blind faith, for it is proven in the health and wealth of its truly devoted. Faith activates invisible forces (like an invisible hand) to bring the believer tangible returns (Bowler 2013). The Prosperity Gospel is the American Dream reshaped and given clear instructions - through devotion to God, patience, and belief in His blessings, prosperity will follow. Given the economic precarity of neoliberalism, it is easy to see why this message seduces.

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ⁱ The Prosperity Gospel preaching churches transcend denominational lines; most of the mega-churches who preach the Prosperity Gospel self-categorize as non-denominational. Prosperity Gospel preaching also transcends traditional media as the followers of the Prosperity Gospel learn and participate in its teachings through a sundry of mediums outside the traditional in-person church sermon, whether through watching televised services, books and videos, engaging with the material through social media or participation in workshops. For this reason, counting the number of believers is a difficult, if not impossible task (Bowler 2013).