Article

Corporate Mindfulness Culture and Neoliberalism

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Abstract

Corporate mindfulness is the favorite labor management technique of the neoliberal period. The formalized packaging of corporate mindfulness began in the late 1970s but was built on a long tradition of attempts to hack the minds of workers in the United States. What distinguishes these previous attempts from corporate mindfulness is the strong ideological connection between corporate mindfulness and neoliberalism, the ideological operant of this modern stage of capitalism. This research establishes and explores that connection and the contradictions wrought by it, by examining the ways in which workers' stress, anxieties, and complaints are elided and workers are instead subjected to the directed introspection of corporate mindfulness programs and further socialized to understand the workplace as community.

1. Introduction

Capitalism requires a compliant workforce. Maintaining the delicate balance between a worker who is just not-unhappy enough or desperate enough to continue working while also cutting costs to the bone presents a continuous challenge for business interests. This pursuit to squeeze more productivity out of workers while also managing worker discontent in the cheapest way possible has spawned innovations in labor management that reflect the institutional milieu of the historical setting.

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[1.] Corporate mindfulness is a distinct concept dramatically different from mindfulness therapy as practiced by professional psychotherapists. The present research is focused exclusively on the former.

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these previous attempts from corporate mindfulness is the strong ideological connection between corporate mindfulness and neoliberalism, the ideological operant of this modern stage of capitalism. This research establishes and explores that connection and the contradictions wrought by it, by examining the ways in which workers' stress, anxieties, and complaints are elided and workers are instead subjected to the directed introspection of corporate mindfulness programs and further socialized to understand the workplace as community.

The first section describes in brief this history of attempts to manage workers and to mold them into ever more efficient inputs in production. The section that follows examines the management technique of mindfulness in the context of the neoliberal period. The third section explores the means by which corporate mindfulness culture reinforces neoliberalism by further expanding the inauthentic agency of the neoliberal individual, while the fourth section examines how corporate mindfulness attempts to ameliorate the social dislocation wrought by neoliberalism through the creation of the corporation as a community and means of social connection for the neoliberal individual. The final section concludes with a call for collective action.

2.   History

The drive to control the production process has always been the aim of the owners of the means of production. Since the advent of capitalism and the separation of those means from workers, innovations in production have only aimed superficially for greater efficiency or technological innovation. Instead, the end-goal has always been one of control: control of the pace of production, control of the quantity and quality of output, and control over the further accumulation of capital. This control manifests in control over workers through the installation of surveillance layers within the production hierarchy, namely, managers. To the extent that managers or capitalists have a role in the organization, it is to pacify those who actually produce the good or service, and to do so at the lowest possible cost (Marglin 1974).

In the United States, the Gilded Age marked an intense period of productivity as well as intense study of how that productivity might be further intensified. In the first decade of the twentieth century, Henry Ford established the Ford Motor Company, introduced the Model T, and had already begun tinkering with the production process. By 1914, Ford's mass assembly via conveyor belt was in operation and gone was the previous need for mechanic craftsmanship. In one-tenth of the time from just six years prior, a Model T could be assembled by a line of nonspecialist workers, but efficiency was not the end goal. With the assembly line and the reorganization of workers around this particular mode of production, Ford was then able to control the pace of assembly and, as such, the intensity with which his employees worked (Braverman 1974).[2]

The study of both machines and the movement of humans around them is largely associated with the work of Fredrick Taylor (1911). Taylor's scientific management focused on controlling workers' movements and keeping workers' physical bodies injury free and from wearing down, much like the parts of a machine. Contrary to the label, however, there was nothing "scientific" about Taylor's management theories: there was no systematic testing of his theories and no reproducible results. Instead, the legacy of Taylor's work is the lesson of the marketability of management practices wrapped in scientific signifiers. Managers, bolstered by scientific claims, could enforce workplace conditions with the claim of allegedly scientific objectivity and accuracy (Caring-Lobel 2016).

[2.] Ford then used the assembly line and the elimination of skilled mechanics to cut wages. Workers were deeply unhappy with the resultant new wage structure as well as the monotony, tedium, and the disconnection from the final assembled product. See Braverman (1974) for an in-depth exploration of Ford's innovation.

As a result of the First Red Scare in the early part of the twentieth century, management became less concerned with worker physical fatigue and more preoccupied with avoiding the class relations struggle and revolution against capitalism that was unfolding on the Eurasian continent. Elton Mayo's study of the Western Electric Company factories in Illinois marks this definitive shift in focus from workers' bodies to workers' psychology: beginning with Mayo's work in the 1930s, management studies turned from the arrangement of physical bodies to the manipulation of workers' minds (Caring-Lobel 2016). Mayo's work was generally thought to humanize Taylor's work, which had treated the employee as an extension of the machine.

While Elton Mayo's work might have humanized Taylor's scientific management, it also individualized it. Mayo diagnosed complaints made by employees as "emotional reactions" and therefore not caused by their working conditions but rather as psychosomatic and specific to the individual worker. Mayo suggested employers should interview their workers in order to give the workers the feeling of being heard. These interviews, Mayo suggested, should frame discontent as a private, personal matter that the employer wants to help the employee to overcome within the workplace (Purser 2015). Mayo believed that civilization depended upon the continuation of capitalism. This personal ideology is obvious in the conclusions he reached, which attempted to quell worker dissatisfaction while also maintaining internal factory hierarchy and the current distribution of income. Likewise, Mayo diagnosed socialists, trade unionists, and most dissatisfied workers as suffering from various degrees of mental illness, neuroses, emotionality, and physical fatigue (Caring-Lobel 2016).

In the prosperity of the post–World War II period, and riding a swell of American optimism and exceptionalism, the power of positive thinking seized the US imagination (Bowler 2013). The midcentury preacher Norman Vincent Peale brought positive thinking to the masses with his book *The Power of Positive Thinking*, but the advertisements for his book also appealed to management: "EXECUTIVES: Give this book to employees. It pays dividends!" (advertisement quoted in Miller 1955: 24). Despite the direct appeal, positive thinking did not immediately catch fire in the business world where until the 1980s, the executive and management classes remained guided by the application of rational strategies premised on the "science of management." Positive thinking nevertheless found an initial foothold beginning in the 1950s in the area of sales, where it was deployed as both a motivational technique for salespeople and a tool in cajoling potential customers to buy (Ehrenreich 2009).

During this period, the Human Potential movement likewise began to grow popular in the broader cultural landscape with its promises of unlocking latent capacities and talents through the power of positive thinking. Finding its inspirational well in Maslow's self-actualization theory (1943) and scholarly expression in humanistic psychology, the Human Potential movement provided the individualist imperative for a generic, metamorphosing spiritualism that grew as traditional forms of religious expression loosened. Along the way, the Human Potential movement also began to influence the field of human relations theory, which found the individualistic focus of the Human Potential movement more conducive to individual worker productivity and less conducive to collective action and therefore more attractive (Bowler 2013; Nadesan 1999). With the accelerating ascent of the Human Potential Movement during the 1960s, the era of New Age philosophy in its sundry incarnations was born (Cloud 1998).[3]

With the Human Potential Movement as a springboard and finding fertile ground in the experimentalism of the 1960s, New Age spiritualism took firm root, while continuing to adapt and

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[3.] Fortunately for capitalism, much of this self-improvement centered on purchasing socially conscious products that, e.g., were not tested on animals or were environmentally friendly. In this way, conspicuous consumption became harnessed to the cause of personal self-improvement. Even decades later, in 1992, leftists in Berkeley criticized workers striking at the local Whole Foods for "interfering in the process of transformative consumption" (Cloud 1998: 131).

interact with the surrounding institutional framework over the following decades (Nadesan 1999). The New Age movement has always been difficult to define, in large part because as a belief system, it has proven to be highly malleable and adaptable, but the core belief sitting at the heart of all of these varied manifestations was that of personal self-improvement (Cloud 1998). In concert with the cultural shift of the 1980s' me-generation and the gaining momentum of neo-liberalism, the New Age movement turned definitively inward—introspection, self-help, and self-transformation/growth/improvement became the means as well as the objective of progress. Progress itself was (and continues to be) defined as the realization and activation of internal potential and the individual's creation and then manifestation of her own ideal (Nadesan 1999).

Corporations pilfered those pieces of New Age practice that could assist the individual in self-improvement *in the service of the corporation* (Payne 2016). Since the 1980s, labor management practices have been dominated by something we might broadly call corporate spirituality—a corporate iteration of New Age individualism. Unlike the rational/scientific management strategies that dominated most of the twentieth century, the corporate spirituality movement is based on feelings—feelings of empowerment, self-possession, and self-reinvigoration (Ashmos and Duchon 2000). The incorporation of spirituality into management practice constantly changes and adapts, appropriating whatever might be useful along the way: Native American traditions, Buddhism, Shamanism, or generically described "tribal" spirituality—whatever might already have resonance in the wider culture is often retrofitted for human management purposes while steering clear of religion proper.[4]

During the 1970s, Jon Kabat-Zinn, a student of Buddhism and molecular biology, decided to take the mindfulness practice of Buddhism and shake it loose of its traditional, religious attachments.[5] By the late 1970s, Kabat-Zinn's work evolved into a program designed to facilitate physical pain management with a clinic and center of study established at the University of Massachusetts Medical School. Kabat-Zinn's program was called Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) (Moloney 2016).

In the years that followed, the MBSR program evolved and seeped through to other public institutions, such as schools and prisons, with a much wider remit of teaching general mindfulness practices (Titmuss 2016). During the 1990s, mindfulness migrated into psychology and as a tool for the treatment of sundry mental illnesses and distress from depression to psychosis, then manifested into mindfulness based cognitive therapy (MBCT). In the early naughts, as cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) experienced another wave of disciplinary transition (see Moloney 2016 for a more detailed history), mindfulness practice became a staple therapeutic tool in cognitive therapists' arsenal. The incorporation of mindfulness into an established academic discipline complete with quantitative evaluation tools lent mindfulness a scientific credibility that took it from self-help to *scientific* self-help and a consequent widespread adoption into the health care schemes of Western developed countries like the US health insurance industry and the UK's National Health Service. The austerity-obsessed governments of the United States and the United Kingdom have been especially enthusiastic in their embrace of these therapies to help low-income

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[4.] One example out of many is the EST program: Erhard Seminars Training (EST) seminars (Purser 2015) that are featured in the television drama *The Americans*.

[5.] Western, secular mindfulness practice can be traced back to the colonization efforts by the British, specifically with the dissolution of the monarchy of Burma, which provided state support for Buddhist monasteries during the nineteenth-century Anglo-Burmese Wars. The monasteries had provided the edifice for education in Burma but were replaced by British educational structures. In an attempt to sustain Buddhist traditions and practices, Buddhists taught the colonizers the basics of Buddhism, including meditation. According to traditional Buddhist belief, the Buddha did not believe that meditation could or should be practiced by those who had not given up worldly attachments. This teaching of a secular meditation practice thus marks the first of its kind (Caring-Lobel 2016).

people—who are perceived as having some sort of mental deficit since they are poor—make better (read: more capitalism friendly) decisions (Moloney 2016).

MBSR reached critical mass in business management literature around the same time in the 1990s that the word "network" transformed into a verb. Both practices sought to establish connections within the workplace—social-business connections with networking and intra-firm connectedness with MBSR. Both represent an attempt to create ersatz social bonding within the confines of the controlled corporate setting while nonmarket social relationships frayed under the stress of neoliberal individualism. Mindfulness practitioners levered themselves into the corporate world proper by first appealing to those in power—mindfulness was sold as a product that could be conspicuously consumed (Caring-Lobel 2016).

Corporate spirituality then played—and has since continued to play—an instrumental role in enlisting the managerial class into the cause of the owners of capital and further defined the line between managers and workers through literature and workshops that aim to develop the leadership skills of the managerial class. The management class, which often fancies itself as the leaders—whatever that means—of their worker-flock, have fully embraced the idea (Caring-Lobel 2016). Whether defined as spiritual or transformational or charismatic, this line within corporate spirituality encourages the managerial class to see themselves simultaneously as distinct from worker bees and pivotal in the broader mission of the corporation.

Having centered the upper reaches of the corporate office and recruited the managerial layer, mindfulness has since been sold as a means by which to alleviate employee stress and reduce complaints without changing normal corporate practice or power relations. Mindfulness practices attack the unhappiness of workers directly while circumventing the conditions that make workers unhappy in the first instance. Moreover, failure on the part of workers to increase their productivity is then a failure of leadership, a failure of the managerial class for not making workers feel more inspired (Nadesan 1999). Mindfulness thus works to create another buffer of accountability between the managerial layer and the owners of capital, with fault and failure continually circulating between managers and workers.

Corporate spirituality writ large encourages workers to engage in self-care and to seek self-improvement. The core imperative of corporate spiritualism—much like neoliberalism—is the emphasis on the individual. In the many historic incarnations of corporate spirituality, the jargon might vary but the underlying message is consistent: change comes from within the individual. There is no need for the corporation to change its practices; instead, the individual needs to shift her mind-set (Nadesan 1999). The immediate aim is to cut down on absenteeism and turnover, but the ultimate goal is to create workers who are happy enough to be productive while still fearful they might lose their jobs (Budde 2007; Ehrenreich 2009). Given the rate of growth of mindfulness practice in the workplace, the remainder of this research focuses more specifically on mindfulness practice as originally inspired by the work of Kabat-Zinn and MBSR, although functionally, all practices that fall under the umbrella term of corporate spirituality operate under similar mechanisms and with comparable intent and results.

3. Neoliberalism and Mindfulness

Neoliberalism is the prevailing ideological operant of the most recent stage in the evolution of monopoly capitalism over the last five decades. Neoliberalism embodies the ideological shift in the purpose of the state from one that has a responsibility to ensure 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 unimpeded functioning and expansion of markets rather than the general welfare of society or the particular welfare of any individual or group: the state legitimizes and prioritizes market activities above socially integrative ones.

Under capitalism writ large, the economic sphere separates from the other spheres of living–it becomes, in Polanyi's terms, disembedded (1944). The disembedding intensifies under neoliberalism as does the encroachment into and subordination of the other spheres of living to the dictates and needs of the economic sphere. The economic sphere operates under its own internal logic—that of the market. All the other spheres of living become accommodating and facilitating of that logic; spheres that resist such accommodation are marginalized from normal daily life until they disappear. While neoliberalism is at its core an economic project, this disembedded dictatorship usurps cultural projects, sets the political agenda, and establishes social norms, although the individual living within this world is cast as a free and fully autonomous being. 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, it also leads to the erosion of each individual's responsibility to others and to the community as a whole. Society is then comprised 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 enabling myth of neoliberal capitalism as a meritocracy counters any examination of systemic injustice or structural inequalities. Even when larger social issues might be begrudgingly acknowledged, the narrative of individual responsibility takes over and the individual is encouraged to overcome adversity while the root social causes are never addressed. Individual fortitude and persistence, rather than social change, are prevailed upon to combat job insecurity and economic precarity; tough economic times for others are met with scorn rather than empathy (Scharff 2016).

During the 1980s and 1990s, as the corporate world roiled under waves of mergers, acquisitions, downsizing threats, and takeovers, Reagan, HW Bush, and Clinton all worked to trim the social safety net. Maximizing stock value has always been a priority for corporate interests, but with the reign of Reagan and the rise of financial capitalism, stock value became obsessively valorized. With this corporate cultural change, stockholders became more important than employees and even more important than customers themselves. This incredible sea change in a short span of time (1990–1997) is documented through policy statements issued by the Business Roundtable (Ehrenreich 2009; Khurana 2007).

It was during this same time period that corporations found they could—at least temporarily—inflate stock values with pronouncements of trimming the fat, by "downsizing" their employee roster. Despite media claims at the time, the downsizing primarily targeted rank-and-file workers, leaving those in managerial or supervisory roles—the bureaucratic fat—in place to monitor and enforce the corresponding necessary intensification in productivity of the remaining front line (Gordon 1996). With (nonmanagerial) work so precarious, intensification of workloads, and thin-to-disappearing social programs to fall back on, worker morale declined steeply. Disgruntled workers struggling over intensified productivity expectations required, in turn, intensified scrutiny by managers and supervisors (Gordon 1996).

Indeed, the neoliberal era is marked by the relentless quest for a flexible and compliant work force. International institutions, such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Trade Organization (WTO) have consistently pushed countries away from policies that support job security, pressuring Japan, for example, to eliminate lifetime employment, and toward policies that create greater economic precarity, such as the shrinking of the social safety nets throughout Western Europe (Budde 2007).

Neoliberalism is thus characterized by stockholder-centric corporations and austerity-driven governments. The result is a neoliberal workplace populated by individuals who are anxious, financially precarious, and unhappy. In 2017, the Rand Corporation conducted the American Working Conditions Survey (AWCS), which asked US workers across skilled and unskilled jobs pointed questions about their work environments. The report found "that the American

workplace is very physically and emotionally taxing, both for workers themselves and their families" (Maestas et al. 2017: ix). The pace and intensity of work appear to be problems for both US skilled and unskilled workers—two-thirds of workers in both categories claim that they work (at least 50 percent of the time) with "high speed" and under "tight deadlines." These findings suggest that two-thirds of US workers find their work stressful and demanding at least half the time (Maestas et al. 2017: 37). This stress spills over into their free time and personal lives: half (50.1 percent) of US workers claim to have worked outside of paid work hours in order to meet the expectations of their jobs (Maestas et al. 2017: 26–28).

Added to this seeping of workplace pressures into private lives is the increasing control of worker behavior outside of the workplace. Employer control of workers is increasingly pushing off-premises and into worker's personal lives through monitoring and regulating their access to birth control as exemplified by Hobby Lobby in 2014, workplace drug screening, and compulsory monitoring of exercise highlighted in the 2018 West Virginia teachers' strike (Anderson 2017; Burwell 2014; Alevey 2018). Although the neoliberal corporation might assume the powers of a state through its monitoring and regulatory practices upon the worker, it is not bound to the principles of the democratic state nor tempered by the threat of democratic pressure by its worker-constituents. Notice to workers of corporate plans to restructure or relocate are not required, mistreatment of workers is tolerated as long as the mistreatment is not applied in a discriminatory way, and at-will employment silences worker complaints (Anderson 2017). Financial precarity muzzles the disgruntled worker.

Major corporations hire external consultants to lead mindfulness workshops in order to help employees reduce stress (Purser 2018). And by hiring external teachers/speakers/experts to lead these seminars, the corporation further cuts off any critique of the workplace environment. Since an external mindfulness expert has no control over corporate practices and no sense of the institutional history, the only "help" this mindfulness expert can provide is in assisting the individual to change herself. The mindfulness instructor thus acts as a lateral buffer between management and worker. Indeed, since they are typically brought in via management consultancy services, mindfulness instructors are twice removed from employee complaints and workplace tensions and are thus freed to teach employees how to put themselves in the present moment without regard for workplace realities (Caring-Lobel 2016). The institutional distance of the mindfulness instructor is framed as fair-mindedness, so when an individual worker is inevitably told she needs to work on herself, the employee's unhappiness is effectively dismissed since the source of this advice is ostensibly unbiased. The problem is the worker, not the organization.

Moreover, US workers are struggling to find purpose and meaning in their work. Gallup, Inc (2013), reports that worker disengagement—workers who identify as "not engaged" or as "actively disengaged" in their work—affects 70 percent of workers. Active disengagement, which accounts for 20 percentage points of the 70 percent, is estimated to cost $450–500 billion a year. Of course, it is difficult to be engaged in work that one does not find meaningful: over two-thirds of US workers (67.8 percent) claim that their working conditions fall short in providing meaningful work, defined as either "essential" or "very important" job attributes related to job satisfaction (and unrelated to remuneration) (Maestas et al. 2017: 50). Without union support to advocate for them or a strong safety net to catch them, workers have little to no recourse against the intensifying workplace. With a priority placed on stock value, workers are epiphenomenal, their voices largely irrelevant.

In the following two sections, evidence of the neoliberal narrative thread which runs through mindfulness teachings is presented in the form of quotations taken from mindfulness literature, primarily: Kabat-Zinn, creator of MBSR; Chade-Meng Tan, former software engineer and mindfulness advocate at Google; and Janice Marturano, founder of the Institute for Mindful Leadership and invited speaker to the World Economic Forum in 2013 and 2014.

4.   The Neoliberal Individual, the Corporate Self

Capitalism has always relied on the atomization of the individual in order to function, but the atomized individual under capitalism and the atomized neoliberal individual differ in their perception of agency. With respect to the individual, there is agency and then there is *neoliberal agency*. The former depends wholly on the ability of the individual to exercise authentic, self-referential behavior (Davis 2003). The latter depends on the individual *perceiving* herself as authentically self-referential. The neoliberal narrative of privatized, extreme individualism perpetuates the illusion of authentic and efficacious agency. Indeed, this is the grand illusion of neoliberalism: that the individual is self-efficacious and therefore possesses free and uninhibited agency, or at the very least, maintains the potential for such. Under this conceptualization of agency, all inequalities, misfortunes, and tragedies are surmountable and dependent wholly on the action of the individual regardless of her circumstances (Wrenn 2015).

Although all individuals within neoliberalism are "neoliberal individuals," they are not equally endowed with agency: the degree to which any individual's agency is inauthentic is inversely related to the power she possesses in the material or corporate world. Workers, who have no power as individuals within the workplace, thus experience more inauthentic agency than a manager or CEO; this inauthenticity of agency is bolstered by corporate initiatives that ostensibly give workers a voice, including survey apps like Laborlink[6] and "worker-manager participation committees" (Anner 2017: 75). The inauthentic agency of the worker (this false empowerment) is reinforced by the corporate mindfulness agenda that consists of convincing workers who have no agency within the organization that they have power.

Neoliberalism and the mindfulness movement treat the individual as a neoliberal individual, a separative entity, and much like Veblen's "lightning calculator," this separative self has "neither antecedent nor consequent" (Veblen 1898: 389–390). Accordingly, the individual operates separate and free from any institutional configuration so that any discontent the individual might feel comes only from the individual. In this version of extreme agency, individuals are solely responsible for their own well-being (Purser 2018).

Corporate mindfulness takes the original Buddhist practice of meditation, strips it of context, dilutes its original practices, and narrows the focus to the individual sitting in the present moment. Through this attention to the present moment, practitioners are encouraged to accept the present moment dispassionately—in other words, the present moment should not be dissected, characterized, or challenged (Purser and Milillo 2015):

> Mindfulness means paying attention in a particular way: on purpose, in the present moment, and non-judgmentally. (Kabat-Zinn 2004: 4)

This obsessive focus on the present moment fetishizes both mindfulness and the atomization of time; time only exists as an "isolated datum" of the here and now (Veblen 1898: 389). Through the reification of the present moment, study and criticism of institutional context and the historical record are minimized and political dissent is hushed—a phenomenon Jacoby refers to as "social amnesia" (1997: 4). The neoliberal individual exists completely in the present moment and completely alone.

The study of mindfulness in the organizational theory and human resources disciplines reduce mindfulness to the operational definition of "bare attention." Bare attention is another isolated human datum of mindfulness—it is of the individual, of the present moment, "self-poised in elemental space." The bare attention of mindfulness is synonymous with the act of mere concentration—it contains no distractions, emotions, ruminations, or ethical evaluations (Veblen

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[6.] Laborlink by Elevate, https://www.elevatelimited.com/services/advisory/worker-engagement/

1898: 389–90; Purser and Milillo 2015). The corporate mindfulness movement teaches that the individual must be mindful of herself, not only diverting focus away from oppressive institutions but also instituting an independent, unpaid means of monitoring the individual through her self-regulation of her emotions and stress, such as Google's teaching of "emotional skillfulness":

> Emotional skillfulness frees us from emotional compulsion. We create problems when we are compelled by emotions to act one way or another, but if we become so skillful with our emotions that we are no longer compelled, we can act in rational ways that are best for ourselves and everybody else. And we will play nice, share candy, and not bite our co-workers. (Tan 2012: 32)

Whether this neoliberal individual succeeds or fails, thrives or withers, is happy or miserable is thus her own responsibility and fault (Purser 2018). "Emotional intelligence" is a buzzword in the mindfulness lexicon that purportedly encapsulates a worker's ability to regulate her emotions and responses (Caring-Lobel 2016). At most, mindfulness creates toleration for the toll her working conditions take on her mental and physical health: "The AWCS findings indicate that the American workplace is very physically and emotionally taxing, both for workers themselves and their families" (Maestas et al. 2017: ix).

Accordingly, mindfulness teachings emphasize that stress is located internally and is internally controlled, so that the individual is solely responsible for the production and management of her own levels of stress. Stress, in other words, is a self-generated and controlled phenomenon (Purser 2015; Titmuss 2016). Problems, which might be the source of an individual's stress, are also created by the individual:

> Problems are fine for math or physics homework, but in life there are actually no problems, only situations that require a response, hopefully adequate to the circumstances and the challenges each one presents. . . . You make problem, you have problem. You make insult, you have insult. You make an interpretation, you have an interpretation. There are infinite opportunities for us to get stuck in fabrication, for us to latch on to some event or other and make it into something, something much more than it really is. (Kabat-Zinn 2005: 462 and 471)

Corporate mindfulness treats stress as though it were the common cold—everyone eventually catches it and you should take care of yourself until you're over it because like the common cold, there is no externally available cure. Corporate mindfulness thus shrugs its shoulders at the causes of stress and focuses narrowly on helping individuals figure out how to manage their symptoms on their own (Caring-Lobel 2016). Corporate mindfulness offers prescriptions for the individual in how to handle stress but never interrogates the causes of that stress—the working environment and structures of organization never come under the microscope. The individual is pathologized, not the organization. Stress is thus a form of self-victimization:

> Stress is part of life, part of being human, intrinsic to the human condition itself. But that does not mean that we have to be victims in the face of large forces in our lives. We can learn to work with them, understand them, find meaning in them, make critical choices, and use their energies to grow in strength, wisdom, and compassion. (Kabat-Zinn 2004: 30)

After all, it is the organization in all its equanimity and generosity that offers these lessons in corporate mindfulness to the individual to help her treat her self-induced stress (Purser and Milillo 2015). While ostensibly, corporate mindfulness programs are put into place to help employees manage stress and tap into latent talents, the true aim is to transform employees into a disciplined, productive "team" and preserve the organizational practices and hierarchal structure of the corporation (Purser 2015).

Corporate spirituality/mindfulness casts the individual worker as a businessperson or entrepreneur on whom the corporation depends for its success. The empowerment of the individual worker through this revisualization of herself as the driver of her own destiny within the corporation and the economy writ large simultaneously underscores the imperative of individual responsibility as it depoliticizes issues within each: worker concerns are essentially rewritten as individual challenges. External factors under the corporation's control, such as workhours, pay, or demands on employees' time are cast as issues of the individual's attitude toward those factors; if the individual changes her mindset, her attitude, and reprioritizes her spiritual, fully potentialized self then she will accordingly transcend those problems (Nadesan 1999). Kabat-Zinn provides us with an example:

> To let go means to give up coercing, resisting, or struggling, in exchange for something more powerful and wholesome which comes out of allowing things to be as they are without getting caught up in your attraction to or rejection of them, in the intrinsic stickiness of wanting, of liking and disliking. It's akin to letting your palm open to unhand something you have been holding on to. (Kabat-Zinn 2004: 53)

To counter the worker anxiety that comes from job insecurity and economic precarity—and which impacts worker productivity—corporations in the neoliberal era have incorporated spirituality into management strategies deployed through workshops, seminars, and on-campus facilities to enable workers to cope with the worry (Budde 2007). Thus, not only does corporate spirituality help the individual adapt—fit in—to the corporation, it also helps the individual to cope with her broader economic circumstances and enlists an unwitting advocate in neoliberalism who cheerleads for individual responsibility and initiative (Nadesan 1999). Kabat-Zinn, for instance, teaches people to ignore systemic issues and world events instead and focus on their inner response to those issues/events in order to transcend them:

> All the things I am objecting to have been going on for centuries. . . . There have always been cycles of relative tranquility and overriding mayhem, of relative security and rampant insecurity, of relative honesty in public affairs and flagrant dishonesty, of relative goodness and unequivocally evil actions. We can make it personal, blame it on specific individuals, and also take it personally, but it goes much deeper than that. . . . Do we want to keep cycling in this dream sequence by taking sides in the usual for-or-against struggle, and fight for the best temporary outcome we might manage to get, even as we stay within the dream and sooner or later, will encounter once again the "degenerate terminator" in the form of a Hitler, a Stalin, a Pol Pot, a Saddam Hussein, a Pinochet, or some other horrific personification or faceless spasm of ignorance capable of galvanizing and spreading that virus by appealing to and inflaming fear, hatred, and greed in vulnerable and dissatisfied people? Or do we want to wake up, and thereby dampen and perhaps even extinguish these cycles altogether by inviting in an entirely different, orthogonal understanding of the dream itself, the root of the dis-ease, into our consciousness, and by finding ways to catalyze a healthier dynamic equilibrium that recognizes ways to work with and keep in check the impulses that drive so many of our actions as individuals, and therefore, of so many of our institutions, and which, sooner or later, always seem to seduce us back to sleep or into trance? . . . "We" can be as ignorant in our indignation as "they" are in their "nefarious machinations," whoever they are, and whoever we are. (Kabat-Zinn 2005: 522–26)

The appeal to corporations (and neoliberal governments) is clear—instead of addressing social and structural issues, it is cheaper and fits the bootstrap ethos of neoliberalism to instead offer personal therapies. While corporate mindfulness culture reinforces the inauthentic agency and isolation of the neoliberal individual, it also heightens the contradictions of capitalism generally and neoliberalism specifically. Power asymmetries within the corporation reinforce the asymmetry of authentic versus inauthentic agency: workers who have the least power within the corporation are taught through corporate mindfulness that they possess authentic agency and are therefore empowered to create their own happiness. Any stress, anxiety, or misery the worker experiences, she also has the power and the sole responsibility to change. Meanwhile, those

with power in the corporation can avoid responsibility for the miserable working conditions they have created.

5. Great Transformations: The Neoliberal Individual and the Corporate Community

Socialization practices within any given society are influenced and shaped by the dominant institutions within which those practices are formed and evolve. This is not to say that there isn't interactive influence between socialization practices and institutions, but rather to underscore that the dominance of the economic sphere over all other spheres of living under capitalism results in socialization practices that ultimately serve the economic sphere. Under neoliberalism, the individual's identity, sense of self, and self-reflection are all defined, influenced by, and measured against standards set within the neoliberal frame (Wrenn 2014). To draw on the work of Foucault, individuals become entrepreneurial subjects (Brown 2015; Foucault 2008; Scharff 2016).

> The secret is to create a situation in which your work is something you do for fun, so you are doing it for your own entertainment anyway and somebody just happens to pay you for it. (Tan 2012: 141)

The socialization of the individual-as-entrepreneurial-subject emphasizes what is valued under neoliberalism: position in the financial hierarchy, ability to add value, and above all, individualism. In other words, individuals begin to think of themselves as business entities and make personal decisions primarily based on market or economic consequences for the individual and corporation rather than on potential social or political consequences for the collective. Instead of social change, the individual engages in self-transformation: "Social critique is transformed into self-critique, resulting in a prevalence of self-doubt and anxiety" (Scharff 2016: 108).

Mindfulness practice within the corporate setting molds the individual's understanding of her self and the organization within which she works. In the vein of Foucault's confessional techniques, corporate mindfulness practices provide the vocabulary and the system within which individuals are asked to engage in self-reflection. These techniques provide individuals with the language and social practices (often referred to as tools) within which they are to express and therefore think of themselves and their respective place within the corporation (Nadesan 1999). Through the emphasis on individual introspection and self-transformation, corporate mindfulness subtly reinforces the reality that the self is the only part of the worker's experience over which she has any control. Teaching the individual worker to feel empowered by this self-transformation instead of controlled, corporate mindfulness obscures the contradiction that in reality, the worker has no power in the workplace and that her self-transformation is directed toward creating compliant employees and fulfilling company goals: individuals should find self-transformation as the key to success, yet workers who do not toe the company line will be disciplined.

Corporate mindfulness programs obfuscate the neoliberal disembedding of the economic sphere by framing the cultural sphere as that which is disembedded. Following the mindfulness logic, employees are chronically dissatisfied, unfocused, or disengage as the result of cultural rather than material conditions, relations of production, or the distribution of income (Caring-Lobel 2016).

> We have a national—if not worldwide—epidemic of continuous partial attention. We go on autopilot for much, or all, of our lives. We begin to believe that this is just how it has to be in the fast-paced, distraction-filled world we work and live in. (Marturano 2015: 52)

> Although we may have a vague sense of our busy-ness, it isn't until we actually put down the electronics and the other distractions for a time that we begin to reinhabit our bodies and minds, and usually our hearts. (Marturano 2015: 141)

Accordingly, corporate mindfulness programs encourage disengagement from the cultural sphere and attempt to re-embed the individual within the corporate sphere of living. While corporate spirituality places an emphasis on the individual—the individual should take care of herself, tap into her own spiritual well—there is an emphasis on one very specific community: the corporation. Solidarity and community are very carefully crafted and directed toward the worker's team, division, or the company itself (Budde 2007). Corporate mindfulness programs aim to help the individual reengage and find meaning in her work as well as create social connections *within the workplace*.

As part of these efforts, corporate mindfulness programs reframe the goals of the individual as the goals of the company—corporate mindfulness enforces the corporate vision by replacing the goals of the individual with the goals of the corporation.

> Interestingly, we instinctively chase after pleasure believing it to be the source of sustainable happiness. . . . We should be spending most of our time and energy working on higher purpose, sometimes enjoying flow, and every now and then, savoring rock-star pleasure. This is the most logical path toward sustainable happiness, at least in relation to our work. This insight also suggests the best way to find motivation at work is to find our own higher purpose. If we know what we value most and what is most meaningful to us, then we know what we can work on that serves our higher purpose. When that happens, our work can become a source of sustainable happiness for us. We can then become very good at our work because we are happy doing it, which in turn allows us to enjoy the happiness of flow with increasing frequency. Finally, when we become really good at our work, we may gain recognition. . . . Once we are working toward fulfilling our higher purpose, the work itself is the reward. (Tan 2012: 140)

Employees in the meantime, feel valued (distinct from *are* valued) since the corporation is providing mindfulness programs for the benefit of the employee. It is presented as a mutually beneficent exercise—a positive sum game where corporation and employee alike win (Caring-Lobel 2016). Corporate spirituality thus addresses the individual's needs for connection and community and then neatly redirects focus and effort in pursuit of the corporation's goals (Forray and Stork 2002). The social dislocation and aggressive individualism of neoliberalism mean that the only social institution left through which the worker might find community or connection is the one social institution most invested in the neoliberal paradigm—that of the workplace. The security offered through an established workplace community papers over the contradiction that the worker has that much more to lose should she lose her job.

It is logical that corporations would enlist programs and services that would support and nourish that sense of community and loyalty to the company. The alienated, socially isolated worker with social connection only through her workplace community is a compliant worker. Reminiscent of dependency fostered through scrip and the company store, mental health services or dependency recovery programs offered through the workplace add to the worker's economic precarity as losing her job also means losing access to the company resources. Moreover, the corporation, which offers these employee programs either in-house or contracted out, has no stake in the well-being of the worker beyond her ability to contribute to the corporate mission.[7] Restoration and enhancement of worker productivity is the overarching goal of any corporate-sponsored employee program (Budde 2007).

By turning the individual inward, corporate mindfulness practitioners claim that workers become calmer and more focused—traits that then (supposedly) transform the entire corporate edifice into a more beneficent and "woke" organization (Purser and Mililo 2015).

[7.] Indeed, when the author developed a repetitive stress injury (RSI) recently, the required workplace form only asked questions about how the RSI would impact the author's work: no questions about how work created/impacted the RSI were asked.

> In Google, the effort to make these [mindfulness] methods widely accessible began when we asked ourselves this question: what if people can also use contemplative practices to help them succeed in life and at work? In other words, what if contemplative practices can be made beneficial both to people's careers and to business bottom lines? Anything that is both good for people and good for business will spread widely. If we can make this work, people around the world can become more successful at achieving their goals. I believe the skills offered here will help create greater peace and happiness in your life and the lives of those around you, and that peace and happiness can ultimately spread around the world. (Tan 2016: 18)

This belief echoes the focus in the 1960s that the transformed self could and would with enough time create the transformed society (Purser and Milillo 2015). Likewise, mindfulness is perhaps especially attractive to the baby boomers who make up the bulk of the corporate class—it represents a throwback to the counterculture of their youth stripped of its pesky radicalism: consciousness that is neutered and depoliticized (Caring-Lobel 2016).

Despite the claims by mindfulness advocates, if everyone practiced mindfulness, then the world could be a calmer and more compassionate place; mindfulness has a long history as part of martial practices in China, Japan, Sri Lanka, and Tibet and currently also in use in the US Armed Forces (Moloney 2016). Indeed, the US Marines use a mindfulness training program to help troops remain calm and centered in the midst of armed conflict and violence[8] (Purser and Milillo 2015). Moreover, even when calls for mass political change through world peace or a more compassionate society are part of the mindfulness discourse, it remains individual-centric: institutional or societal change happens through the individual changing herself and then spreading the gospel of self-improvement and individual social consciousness to other individuals (Cloud 1998). Mindfulness practice is thus often framed (with unintended irony) as an awakening from the false consciousness that is echoed in today's discourse about "woke"-fulness. Mindfulness discourse and practice has even found an eager audience at Davos, home of the World Economic Forum. In 2013, Janice Marturano led a mindfulness workshop at the annual gathering of world leaders:

> One young leader from Africa spoke with me about his hope of bringing mindfulness training to the new generation of leaders in his country, where a common belief was that every leader over the age of forty had been corrupted. The young people wanted a different kind of leadership. Another person spoke of her hope that this training would help to equalize the disparity in opportunities for women in her Middle Eastern country. A few people shared stories of the hardships in their organizations caused by the shaky economy, and the sadness they had felt when having to close factories and put people out of work. They wondered if mindful leadership training could have any impact on the events leading up to those decisions. Some people I spoke with had simply reached a point where they were tired and needed to find another way to deal with the complexity of their lives and the ever-increasing responsibilities of leadership. (Marturano 2015: 137)

Mindfulness appeals to the capitalist left, which promises to improve workers' lives and happiness levels through behavioral nudges that place the responsibility on the individual and not on the system of capitalism (Caring-Lobel 2016). Likewise, with its "exotic" foundations and multicultural mythos, mindfulness appeals to the cosmetic, identity-obsessed center-left without confronting structural or material issues. Indeed, mindfulness experts have been able to convince otherwise left-leaning individuals that by turning workers' focus inward, the resulting calm would filter through the rest of the organization and transform the corporation into a more ethical entity and the world into a better, more peaceful place (Caring-Lobel 2016).

> If you take care of your mind, you take care of the world. (Huffington 2014: 214)

[8.] The program is an offshoot of the MBSR (Purser and Milillo 2015).

> We might find that when we listen with our analytical minds and our wise hearts, we see more, and we are more inspired, more compassionate, and more able to find ways to make a difference in taking on some of the significant challenges in our workplace and in our world. (Marturano 2015: 119)

> The way to create the conditions for world peace is to create a mindfulness based emotional intelligence curriculum, perfect it within Google, and then give it away as one of Google's gifts to the world. The alignment is perfect. Everybody already wants EI [emotional intelligence], businesses already want EI, and we can help them achieve it. They can then become more effective at achieving their own goals and at the same time create the foundations for world peace. (Tan 2012: 232)

According to this logic, what the world needs is a critical mass of mindful individuals. These mindful individuals will then self-actualize, practice compassion, and the nastiness of the unenlightened—war, oppression, hatred, violence—will all dissipate. The contradiction between attempting to teach emotional intelligence and the hubris required to make as grandiose a claim as the ability to initiate world peace is startling. Yet, mindfulness advocates promise that when all that is solid melts into air, the individual will awaken in a world of peace, harmony—a singular focus on the corporate mission.

6.   Concluding remarks

Americans are deeply, culturally attached to the ideas of reinvention and redemption. This unrelenting enthusiasm underpins the American enthusiasm for self-help and self-improvement, for the idea that any obstacle, especially those addressed in isolation, can be overcome. The roots of this cultural mythos trace directly back to the stories of colonization into and pioneering across the North American continent; stories wherein through sheer determination and perseverance, the rugged individuals of American mythology could tame the Natives and stake their claims. Mixed with Puritan morality and Protestant dedication to hard work, labor and domination over the self were thus indelibly sewn into the early cultural tapestry of the United States (Payne 2016). It is that strained strand of rugged individualism that proves to be a bottomless well for neoliberal institutions and social practices to tap.

Corporate spirituality made manifest through an endless variety of business seminars, workshops, training programs, and counseling sessions in mindfulness transforms the individual into the neoliberal individual—one primed for a narrow focus on individual performance and responsibility to the neglect of systemic and structural issues in any society and in the various communities to which he belongs. The neoliberal individual is first and foremost an individual, operating free of all social connections and without a social safety net. Through workplace mindfulness, corporations are able to exploit and expand the inauthentic agency of workers, reassuring workers that they are both the origin and solution to all of their problems despite having no real power within the institution. The integration of "spirituality" generally and mindfulness more specifically into the management of workers represents an attempt to ameliorate the anxiety of workers over issues like job insecurity and wage inequality. Worker disengagement and absenteeism due to mental distress pose informal threats to productivity and therefore profits. The spirituality discourse also helps to construct communities within the workplace (Ashmos and Duchon 2000) and serves as a potent illustration of the subordination of social relationships to the dictates of the market.

It should be no surprise that the self-improvement movement and the forces of capitalism have made such easy bedfellows. The driving engine of capitalism is the accumulation imperative, and what better match could there be than the never-ending, ever-evolving quest for the perfectibility of the self? Not to mention that mindfulness is a $4-billion industry (Purser 2015: 10). Corporations have adapted the self-care movement to assuage employee stress while discouraging, through individualized activities like mindfulness meditation, collective action. Encouraging employees

to take up yoga or meditation during their breaks by providing space and instructors does not grow out of the beneficence of the company—it is born out of an attempt to do two things: one, manage the emotions of employees in the hopes of harnessing greater productivity and, two, to individualize as much as is possible the employees' focus so that any gathering of workers promotes a sense of corporate community. It is cheaper to provide these self-care amenities (yoga, Pilates, mindfulness) than it is to offer secure work in a low stress environment (Price 2017). The most cartoonishly dystopian example of a corporation ignoring workers' safety concerns, stress, low pay, and basic human need to go to the bathroom comes from Amazon.com. In a May 2021 press release titled: "From Body Mechanics to Mindfulness, Amazon Launches Employee-Designed Health and Safety Program called WorkingWell Across U.S. Operations" the company introduced the "ZenBooth" under a program called "AmaZen":

> AmaZen: Guides employees through mindfulness practices in individual interactive kiosks at buildings. During shifts employees can visit AmaZen stations and watch short videos featuring easy-to-follow wellbeing activities, including guided meditations, positive affirmations, calming scenes with sounds, and more. (Amazon press release 2021)

The creator of AmaZen further explains:

> With AmaZen, I wanted to provide a place that's quiet that people could go [to] and focus on their mental and emotional well-being. The ZenBooth is an interactive kiosk where you can navigate through a library of mental health and mindful practices to recharge the internal battery. (Brown 2021)

Amazon announced the program to the public via a social media post and received such a strong backlash of derision and mockery that the video and tweet were quickly taken down (Perper 2021).

While there are certainly benefits to mindfulness training (see Purser 2015), those benefits accrue in conditions where the causes of trauma are immutable or slow to change and the individual must learn to cope with that trauma—for example, in recovering from an accident, a cancer diagnosis, or a violent assault. Stress, especially chronic stress, does not respond well to corporate mindfulness training because corporate mindfulness treats stress as pathologically interior to the mind. Potential external causes of stress are not addressed or even acknowledged as problematic within corporate mindfulness practices (Purser 2015).[9] The emphasis of mindfulness generally and MBSR specifically is to focus on the present moment in a nonjudgmental way; it teaches workers to accept their current circumstance without complaint, and is tantamount to oppression through suppression of worker voice and repression of worker emotions. The ultimate contradiction of corporate mindfulness is that it grants the workplace heightened control over the workers' emotional management and even social relationships within the workplace, all while depriving workers of their ability to exercise their own agency and dismissing their material and mental concerns. Indeed, corporate mindfulness reproduces the power structure within the organization by teaching the individual that the self is the source of stress and strife (Tomassini 2016).

Mindfulness, New Age spirituality, and similar belief systems and techniques have no doubt helped make the navigation of the toxic institutions of neoliberalism more bearable for some

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[9.] The empirical research on the efficacy of mindfulness training is problematic. There is no uniformity or consistency in the manner in which efficacy is measured, primarily because there is not a discrete unit or set of discrete variables that constitute mindfulness—it is not possible to analyze mindfulness using psychometric methods. See Hsu (2016), Moloney (2016), Purser and Milillo (2015), and Tomassini (2016) for more on the impossibility of empirics of mindfulness.

people. But to accept those beliefs systems without also confronting the toxic institutions is to engage in self-sabotage and denial and, in effect, to support neoliberalism. Corporate spirituality, whether generic warm-fuzziness, Eastern meditation inspired, or Christian infused, all function to turn worker discontent inward so that the worker focuses on improving herself rather than seeking change within the corporation or finding solidarity and solutions in collective action. The corporation is thereby able to transform job insecurity, economic precarity, and other workplace dysfunctions into therapeutic opportunities for self-enhancement (Budde 2007). Mindfulness in all its forms mystifies institutional context. Material reality is rendered as epiphenomenal. Stress and distress are rendered as atomistic and individual (Purser 2015). A post-neoliberal future lies in the rejection of extreme individualism, in embracing collective action, and in challenging those institutions that rely on the narrative of the self to veil the machinations of neoliberalism.

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