

From mad to mindful: corporate control through corporate spirituality

Capitalism has always and will always depend on 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 which reflect the institutional milieu of the respective time. This research focuses on those labor management techniques particular to neoliberalism and the ways in which cultural movements and trends of the neoliberal period are mined and deployed as yet another useful resource in the disciplining of workers. 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 and mindsets of workers. Corporate mindfulness reinforces neoliberalism through the corporate individual, the transformation of the self of the corporate individual, and the creation of the corporation as a community and means of social connection for the corporate individual.

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Neoliberalism and mindfulness

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. Under neoliberalism, 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 disembedded (Polanyi 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 or those spheres are marginalized from popular living. While neoliberalism is at its core an economic project, this disembedded dictatorship usurps cultural projects, sets the political agenda, and establishes amenable social norms, although the individual living within this world is cast as a fully autonomous being with agency. Individuals are left responsible for their own welfare under neoliberalism; individual fortitude is prevailed upon to combat job insecurity and economic precarity (Scharff 2016).

The result is a neoliberal workplace populated by individuals who are anxious and financially precarious. The American Working Conditions Survey (AWCS), which asked US workers across skilled and unskilled jobs questions about their work environments was conducted and released to the public for the first time in 2017. Key findings within the AWCS report: "... indicate that the American workplace is very physically and emotionally taxing, both for workers themselves and their families" (Maestas 2017 ix). These findings suggest that two-thirds of US workers find their work stressful and demanding at least half the time (Maestas 2017 37). This stress spills over into their free time and personal lives: half (50.1 %) of US workers claim to have worked outside of paid, work hours in order to meet the expectations of their jobs while the study also states that: "most American workers face substantial time pressure at work that has important spillovers to their family and social lives" (Maestas 2017 26-28).

Major corporations hire external consultants to lead mindfulness workshops or programs in order to help employees reduce stress (Purser 2018). By hiring external teachers/speakers/experts, the corporation further cuts off critique of the workplace. Since an external mindfulness expert has no control over corporate practices or 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 (Caring-Lobel 2016). That the expert is an 'outsider' to the organization establishes them as a neutral third party, one without allegiances. 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.

Corporate spirituality generally and corporate mindfulness specifically offer a cheaper and quicker means of redress to these challenges than efforts which might address worker concerns, with the added benefit of maintaining the internal corporate status quo. As well, corporate mindfulness reinforces the narrative of individual responsibility and selectively re-embeds the workplace as the center of the individual's sphere of living. In the following 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 Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction (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.

The corporate individual

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 challenged¹ (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. 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 study of mindfulness in the organizational theory and human resources disciplines reduce mindfulness to the operational definition of "bare attention" – concentration – which contains no distractions, emotions, or ethical evaluations (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 self-monitoring and self-regulation of her own emotions and stress.

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 (Tan 2012).

"Emotional intelligence" is a buzzword in the mindfulness lexicon which purportedly encapsulates a worker's ability to regulate her emotions and responses². At most, mindfulness creates toleration for her "very physically and emotionally taxing" working conditions (Caring-Lobel 2016).

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 phenomena (Purser 2015; Titmuss 2016).

Problems are fine for math or physics homework, but in life there are actually no problems, only situations that require a response You make problem, you have problem (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 of yourself until you're over it (Caring-Lobel 2016). Corporate mindfulness offers prescriptions for the individual in how to handle stress, but never interrogates the causes of stress. The individual is pathologized, not the organization.

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).

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 business person or entrepreneur on whom the corporation depends for its success. The empowerment of the individual worker through this re-visualization 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 de-politicizes 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 rewritten and cast as internal factors under the individual's control if she changes her mindset, her attitude, and reprioritizes her spiritual, fully potentialized self (Nadesan 1999).

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... (Kabat-Zinn 2004 53).

To counter the worker anxiety which 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 work through the worry (Budde 2007). Thus, not only does corporate spirituality help the individual fit into 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).

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 do we want to wake up, and thereby dampen and perhaps even extinguish these cycles altogether 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...? (Kabat-Zinn 2005, 522-526).

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 to help the individual transform into the neoliberal individual who accepts sole responsibility for her well-being and her emotional condition.

The neoliberal community

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).

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 that which is valued under neoliberalism: position in the financial hierarchy, ability to add value, and above all, individualism. 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).

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).

Accordingly, corporate mindfulness programs encourage disengagement from the cultural sphere and attempt to re-embed the individual within the corporate sphere of living.

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 subsuming - replacing - the goals of the individual with the goals of the corporation.

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 (Tan 2012 140).

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 hyper-individualism of neoliberalism mean that the only social institution left through which the worker might find community is that of the workplace. Indeed, over half of US workers – 56% – stated that they are 'good friends' with co-workers in the AWCS (Maestras 2017, 35).

By turning the individual inward, corporate mindfulness practitioners claim that workers become calmer and more focused - traits which then (supposedly) transform the entire corporate edifice into a more beneficent and 'woke' organization.

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 2012 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 (Caring-Lobel 2016).

It is difficult to understand mindfulness advocates who claim that if everyone practiced mindfulness, then the world could be a calmer and more compassionate place given its long martial practices in China, Japan, Sri Lanka, and Tibet and its current use in the US Armed Forces (Moloney 2016; 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 others (Cloud 1998). In 2013, Janice Marturano led a mindfulness workshop at the annual gathering of world leaders at the World Economic Forum:

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.... Another person spoke of her hope that this training would help to equalize the disparity in opportunities for women in her Middle Eastern country (Marturano 2015, 137).

Mindfulness appeals to the capitalist left, which promises to improve workers' lives and happiness levels through behavioral nudges which place the responsibility on the individual and not on the system of capitalism. 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).

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. (Tan 2012 232).

According to this logic, what the world needs is a critical mass of mindful individuals.

Concluding remarks

The emphasis of mindfulness generally and MBSR specifically is to focus on the present moment in a non-judgmental way and is essentially teaching workers to comply, to accept their current circumstance without complaint, and is tantamount to oppression through suppression of worker voice and repression of worker emotions. Mindfulness thus reproduces the power structure within the organization and educates the individual on the entrepreneurial self, teaching the individual that the self is the source of stress and strife (Tomassini 2016). None of this is meant to cast aspersions on mindfulness or any other system of belief or practice which might make the navigation of the toxic institutions of neoliberalism more bearable. But to accept those systems instead of also confronting the toxic institutions is self-sabotage, denial, and supports neoliberalism. Corporate spirituality, whatever its form, functions to turn worker discontent inward so the worker focuses on improving herself rather than seeking change within the corporation or finding solidarity in collective action. Mindfulness in all its varied forms thus mystifies institutional context. Material reality is rendered as epiphenomenal. Stress and distress are rendered as atomistic and individual - just like neoliberalism (Purser 2015). A post-neoliberal future lies in the rejection of extreme individualism, the embracing of collective action, and in the challenging of those institutions which rely on the narrative of the self to veil the machinations of neoliberalism.

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¹ It is also antithetical to traditional Buddhist practice (Purser and Milillo 2015).

² What it actually measures is compliance but that could be just the author's personal experience.