

# Class, Race and Corporate Power

---

Volume 7 | Issue 2

Article 7

---

2019

## It's Capitalism, Stupid!: The Theoretical and Political Limitations of the Concept of Neoliberalism

Bryant William Sculos

Worcester State University, [bsculos@fiu.edu](mailto:bsculos@fiu.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.fiu.edu/classracecorporatepower>



Part of the American Politics Commons, Applied Ethics Commons, Economic Policy Commons, Economic Theory Commons, Environmental Policy Commons, Environmental Studies Commons, Ethics and Political Philosophy Commons, Policy History, Theory, and Methods Commons, Political Economy Commons, Political Theory Commons, Public Economics Commons, Public Policy Commons, Social Psychology Commons, and the Theory and Philosophy Commons

---

### Recommended Citation

Sculos, Bryant William (2019) "It's Capitalism, Stupid!: The Theoretical and Political Limitations of the Concept of Neoliberalism," *Class, Race and Corporate Power*. Vol. 7: Iss. 2, Article 7.

DOI: 10.25148/CRCP.7.2.008326

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.fiu.edu/classracecorporatepower/vol7/iss2/7>

This work is brought to you for free and open access by the College of Arts, Sciences & Education at FIU Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Class, Race and Corporate Power by an authorized administrator of FIU Digital Commons. For more information, please contact [dcc@fiu.edu](mailto:dcc@fiu.edu).

---

# It's Capitalism, Stupid!: The Theoretical and Political Limitations of the Concept of Neoliberalism

## Abstract

This polemical essay explores the meaning and function of the concept of neoliberalism, focusing on the serious theoretical and political limitations of the concept. The crux of the argument is that, for those interested in overcoming the exploitative and oppressively destructive elements of global capitalism, opposing "neoliberalism" (even if best understood as a process or a spectrum of "neoliberalization" or simply privatization) is both insufficient and potentially self-undermining. This article also goes into some detail on the issues of health care and climate change in relation to "neoliberalism" (both conceptually and the material processes and policies that this term refers to) to highlight the theoretical and political arguments made throughout the article.

## Keywords

Neoliberalism, neoliberal capitalism, capitalism, socialism, postcapitalism, political strategy, climate change, healthcare policy

## Creative Commons License



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial 4.0 License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/)

## Cover Page Footnote

Bryant William Sculos, Ph.D. is Visiting Assistant Professor of global politics and theory at Worcester State University in central Massachusetts. Bryant was formerly a Mellon-Sawyer postdoctoral fellow at the University of Massachusetts Amherst and was 2019 Summer Fellow at the Institute for Critical Social Inquiry at the New School for Social Research. He is the Politics of Culture section editor for *Class, Race and Corporate Power* and contributing writer to the Hampton Institute. Beyond his work for the aforementioned outlets, his work has also appeared in *New Politics*, *Constellations*, *tripleC*, *New Political Science*, and with *Public Seminar*. He is also the co-editor (with Prof. Mary Caputi) of *Teaching Marx & Critical Theory in the 21st Century* (Brill, 2019). Bryant would like thank Ron Cox, Paul Warren, and other reviewers for their detailed and thoughtful comments that greatly improved the intellectual quality and coherence of this essay (such as it is).

## What's New in Neoliberalism?

First, despite the main title of this article, the argument here will not be that any particular theory or historical categorization of neoliberalism is wrong (nor that any of the exponents of any of those theories are stupid). In fact, most, if not all, of the scholars who have offered theoretical and/or historical descriptions of neoliberalism have produced not only excellent academic work, but are politically righteous as justifiable opponents of what they call “neoliberalism.”<sup>1</sup> Neither should it be inferred from what follows here that the majority of theorists of neoliberalism view neoliberalism as something completely distinct or separate from capitalism more generally. Many of these scholars argue precisely the opposite, that there is an important relationship between capitalism and neoliberalism and/or that neoliberalism is a particular iteration of capitalism—but still that there is something uniquely “neoliberal” that is worth describing. Many of these scholars are also critics of capitalism more generally. However, it is precisely the space for one to be a critic of neoliberalism but not necessarily a critic of capitalism that will be the primary focus of this article. Put more directly, by emphasizing the uniqueness of neoliberalism (even where conceptualized more specifically as “neoliberal capitalism”), the structural and theoretical continuity between the capitalist system and the enduring neoliberal age can fade into the background—or, at worst, disappear completely.<sup>2</sup> While the theoretical strengths and limitations will be covered generally here, the focus will be on the problematic political implications of the use of the concept of neoliberalism.

This article offers two interrelated contributions around the aforementioned argument: First, I provide a brief discussion of how neoliberalism has been theorized by critics of neoliberalism (critics of the reality of neoliberalism, not the cluster of ideas and claims that comprise the concept). Second, the essay emphasizes the specifically political limitations of the use of the concept of neoliberalism. The examples of healthcare and climate change are used here to briefly elucidate these limitations. Finally, given that this article is motivated by a particular political position and goal—the achievement of a democratic, egalitarian world beyond capitalism—the relationship between the psycho-social dimensions of political economy and the politics of achieving a just, democratic and egalitarian transition to a broadly socialist form of postcapitalism plays an important, if still underdeveloped, role in the argument here.

---

<sup>1</sup> Thomas Biebricher, *The Political Theory of Neoliberalism* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2018), p. 1.

<sup>2</sup> There are several recent exceptions. These are books that deal with the substance of what is typically referred to as neoliberalism, but treat it as a manifestation of longer, deeper trends of capitalism and also do not give pride of place to the concept or term “neoliberalism” or “neoliberal capitalism.” Though there are others, three important exemplars include: *The New Spirit of Capitalism* by Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello (trans. Gregory Elliot)(Verso, 2005); *Zombie Capitalism* by Chris Harman (Haymarket, 2010); *Buying Time* by Wolfgang Streeck (Verso, 2014); *Profitable Ideas* by Micheal O’Flynn (Haymarket, 2012); *The Long Depression* by Michael Roberts (Haymarket, 2016); and *Portfolio Society* by Ivan Ascher (Zone Books, 2016). Additionally, one book that deals with neoliberalism that is difficult to categorize is Ray Kiely’s excellent *Clash of Globalisations* (Haymarket, 2009), which describes the roots of globalization and neoliberalism in the capitalist mode of production, but then proceeds to focus nearly exclusively on the connection between the Third Way and neoliberalism, without much return to the deeper connection to capitalism. If one reads back through the book, the connection to capitalism is clearly discussed, but as one reads forward through the book, the connection back to capitalism progressively fades. The result is that the need to move beyond capitalism completely is only vaguely argued for. Regardless, *Clash of Globalisations* is useful as an introduction to debates about globalization, the Third Way, neoliberalism, cosmopolitanism, and left resistance strategy—while also offering original treatments of the same.

It is a perverse and deeply ingrained ideological irony that one of the results of the focus on neoliberalism from within neoliberal capitalism, is that neoliberalism is reified. In other words, we can forget that neoliberalism is neoliberal capitalism, which is simply a specific historical and structural iteration of capitalism, and further that neoliberal capitalism still bears all of the problematic hallmarks of historical capitalism (e.g., exploitation, oppression, antidemocracy, and alienation, among others). There is thus a verifiable risk that by merely criticizing and opposing neoliberalism, the possibility, and indeed even the desirability, of maintaining a less aggressive and destructive form of capitalism remains pragmatically actionable and therefore this opportunistic avenue retains an excessive degree of political gravity. In turn, we can end up focusing our energies on resisting only the very worst excesses of the development of global capitalism, undoubtedly exacerbated by the sheer magnitude of thinking and organizing against the deeper, broader, and far more ideologically durable system of capitalism.

Before getting too far into things, it is useful to appreciate how it is that neoliberalism came to bear this apparently confounding label. The answer is represented by the treatment of thinkers like Milton Friedman, Friedrich Hayek, and Von Mises variously as libertarians, conservatives, and (neo)liberals. Neoliberalism represents an intersection of political-economic ideologies that makes the concept difficult to treat in any simplistic manner.<sup>3</sup> Over the course of the twentieth century, liberalism took on a more social democratic flavor, from its early progression in the late work of John Stuart Mill and his *Chapters on Socialism* (late nineteenth century), to John Dewey's social liberalism in various works like *The Public and its Problems*, through the political agendas of liberals such as FDR, up through the works of John Rawls and his academic progeny. This trajectory—along with the material political-economic contradictions of capitalism (embodied in both the “defeat” of supply-side approaches and the limits of post-WWII Keynesianism)<sup>4</sup> leading to the need for the capitalist class and supportive governments to pursue the privatization and deregulation policies associated with neoliberalism—overdetermined the rebranding of hyper-capitalist (now viewed as “conservative”) policies as a return to the foundational principles of classical liberalism in Locke and Smith (despite Locke's and Smith's more or less clear opposition to the kinds of politics based on justifying pure profit-seeking that neoliberals have deployed their names and theories to justify). Put even more simply, “neoliberalism” is the result of an ideological battle over two increasingly divergent trends of liberalism, in the context of the on-going material instabilities of capitalism, which all forms of liberalism have been continuously unable to deal with consistently or satisfactorily.

To capture the relationship between the diversity of treatments of the concept of neoliberalism, it is helpful to categorize approaches to neoliberalism in three general ways: 1. As a period of certain privatization and deregulation policies in the 1970s, 80s and beyond; 2. A political project pursued by certain capitalist ideologues, politicians, and representatives of the interests of capital(ism); 3. A governing, and increasingly-dominant, rationality or mode of

---

<sup>3</sup> But hey, let's give it a try. What follows in this paragraph is a hyper-simplification of the contours of the development of “neoliberalism.”

<sup>4</sup> These contradictions can be articulated by under-consumptionist, over-productionist, or more orthodox surplus-value/declining rate of profit theories, discussed in detail in Michael Roberts's *The Long Depression* (though Roberts offers a strong defense of the last approach).

thinking and being that is associated with the neoliberal period mentioned in point one.<sup>5</sup> Theories that prioritize one of these approaches over others also tend to mention the others' arguments or claims, simply with less emphasis (that is, the best theories of neoliberalism treat it as a political-economic project serving the interests of capitalism during this late twentieth and early twenty-first century and has become a kind of governing rationality or dominant social-psychology). While there are plenty of disagreements among proponents of one emphasis over others, this article is primarily focused on theories of neoliberalism that in some way engage with all three categories (and for the most part, though with some exceptions, this article treats them generally). Even insofar as we can discretely categorize theories of neoliberalism for the sake of argument, representatives of each approach still vary significantly (sometimes even within their own individual presentations) on whether neoliberalism is primarily political or economic, as well as the role of agency in (re)producing neoliberalism. These distinctions are important but are not the focus of this essay.

What this article focuses on are theories of neoliberalism (and neoliberal capitalism) that either by explicit argumentation or by the sheer fact of being written, assert the theoretical and political value of the concept of neoliberalism (again, primarily as an object of critique). Though there are plenty of excellent contributions to the theorization of neoliberalism that are left out here, mainly for a matter of space, some of the strongest, enduring, and recent books that meet the criteria, and serve as a generalized basis of analysis for this essay include: David Harvey's *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, David Kotz's *The Rise and Fall of Neoliberal Capitalism*, Pierre Dardot and Christian Laval's *The New Way of the World*, Wendy Brown's *Undoing the Demos*, Philip Mirowski's *Never Let a Serious Crisis Go to Waste*, William Davies *The Limits of Neoliberalism*, and Thomas Biebricher's *The Political Theory of Neoliberalism*.<sup>6</sup>

Capitalism is hard enough for the average person to define with any degree of rigor, and understandably so. Ask the average person what neoliberalism is and the political problem with the concept is made manifest. Surely it qualifies as jargon, which, however frustrating that reality

---

<sup>5</sup> Though it does not fit neatly into this category, Adam Kotsko's *Neoliberalism's Demons: On the Political Theology of Late Capital* (Stanford University Press, 2018) most closely resembles the kinds of arguments typical in this category.

<sup>6</sup> While Harvey and Kotz are included here in the general treatment, it is important to keep in mind that both do highlight the capitalistic qualities of neoliberalism (as neoliberal capitalism). William I. Robinson's various works on the theory of global capitalism (moving beyond the interpretation of capitalism as a world-system) also deals with neoliberalism within the context of the history of capitalism and as capitalism—and is probably not even best categorized as a theorist of neoliberalism at all. These thinkers are careful to not reify neoliberalism as something wholly or even primarily novel in the history of capitalism. Coming from more or less neo-Marxist perspectives, these authors explore and describe neoliberalism as capitalism, but, still, in my judgment lend themselves to less radical interpretations by, however unintentionally or against their actual political perspectives, fail to come down strongly against the idea that resistance to neoliberalism is best, or only possibly successful, in the context of a deeper and broader resistance to the fundamental aspects of capitalism, including its unpaid social reproductive and extractivist dimensions (though it is difficult and always problematic to make such a generalization, the purpose of doing so here is to develop a strong critical position, partly in the hopes of pushing readers to more deeply explore the treatment and political efficacy of focusing on or using the concept of neoliberalism. While there is admittedly some degree of reductionism and effacement of nuance in this analysis, the goal of this paper is a *politicized* political theorization of the issues with the prevailing treatments of neoliberalism over the past couple decades. There is more to value in this body of literature than this article shows. For example, the concept of “neoliberalization” discussed later in this essay shows a positive theoretical, and effective political, use of neoliberalism, was influenced by Harvey's use of the same concept.

may be, is not reason enough to cast it aside. The question of the value of the concept of neoliberalism is dually how accurately it describes a unique phenomenon, and, precisely because of the deeply harmful policies and practices that scholars are calling “neoliberalism,” whether the concept is politically useful. The task remains for scholars, activists, and organizers offering both a critique of capitalism and neoliberalism to distinguish more clearly between capitalism and neoliberalism—or, absent important or relevant distinctions, to ditch the critique of neoliberalism altogether and focus their critical work on capitalism itself.

To put my argument here more directly, if neoliberalism is, as some scholars like Harvey have suggested, the political ideology of late capitalism<sup>7</sup>, it is more useful to focus on the particularly capitalistic aspects of neoliberalism and to emphasize the continuity of these aspects with historical capitalism, as opposed to being some unique political-economic ideology and/or system. Further, we can understand that capitalism itself has always been a political project, and how the increasing academic focus on the particularities of neoliberalism is more distraction than praxis.<sup>8</sup> If capitalism is, as is widely accepted on the left, a political-economic system (with broader social and cultural dimensions) rooted in generalized commodity production and the extraction of surplus value through wage labor (based on various forms of gendered, racialized unpaid social-reproductive labor and unaccounted for ecological destruction), with the role of the state to manage the overall health and stability of the system in the interests of the ruling class, what is novel about neoliberalism? What is new about neoliberalism besides the reality that what we are calling neoliberalism is merely the reality of the ruling capitalist class succeeding in the further expansion and instantiation, horizontally and vertically, of capitalism under dynamic global conditions?

While this last characterization could be interpreted as a kind of answer to the question of what is actually new about neoliberalism (namely, changing capitalist conditions tied to changes in forms of class struggle, state formation, and ideology), there is a political cost in implying that these developments are importantly discontinuous, historically or theoretically, with the admittedly diverse character of the capitalist mode of production, distribution, and consumption—including its social reproductive elements. Placing the emphasis on neoliberalism shifts the psychosocial focus and aim of political activity away from truly systemic transformation (from capitalism to some kind of socialism or democratic egalitarian postcapitalism with whatever label) and more in the direction of milquetoast reformism (from neoliberalism “back” to regulated capitalism).<sup>9</sup>

Returning to the question of the state, even some of the most discursively and ideologically-focused scholarship on neoliberalism (e.g., Brown’s *Undoing the Demos*, Mirowski’s *Never Let a Serious Crisis Go to Waste*, Han’s *Psychopolitics*, Koning’s *The Emotional Logic of Capitalism*, etc.) acknowledge that the state, despite the ideological claims of the proponents of the policies, practices, discourses, and ideas that are collectively referred to as “neoliberalism,” played and plays an important role in the production of neoliberalism. There is far too much debate within the Marxist tradition (most notably between Miliband and Poulantzas) to claim, as Dardot and Laval

---

<sup>7</sup> David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2007).

<sup>8</sup> Praxis here meant in the classical Marxist sense of the interpenetration and co-constitutiveness of theory and practice (theory produced in and through practice and practice informed by and rooted in theory).

<sup>9</sup> While I suspect he may remain dissatisfied, I want to express my appreciation for Prof. Paul Warren for his push to develop these points more explicitly.

do most explicitly<sup>10</sup>, that Marxism is too reductive in its treatment of the juridical and political realm to the economy to properly or fully understand the developments that are captured in the concept of “neoliberalism.” There is even a diversity of perspectives presented in Marx’s work regarding the content of what we today refer to as the base-superstructure metaphor, so much so that it would be justifiable to conclude that it is actually Dardot and Laval who are guilty of reductionism—reducing all Marxism to economism.

## The Critique of the Critique of Neoliberalism: Theory and Politics

One could reasonably argue that given the historical consequences of the Cold War, especially in the OECD world (global North), it might be politically easier to convince more people of the idea that neoliberalism needs to go than the idea that capitalism, as a whole, needs to go. The thinking goes, since people like the idea of capitalism, in whatever abstract way people think about that word, and neoliberalism stimulates less ideological intransigence, we should take the path of least resistance and first delegitimize and turn back the clock on the developments of neoliberalism. Once accomplished (or in the process of opposing neoliberalism without success), the enduring contradictions of capitalism will remain as limitations on the achievement of the kind of world that a rigorous opposition to neoliberalism would necessarily be rooted in, a more robust, explicit opposition to capitalism can be organized and enacted.

I cannot say *for sure* that that perspective is wrong—but the goal of this polemic is to convince you that there are very good reasons to believe it is indeed wrong. While the critique and abolition of whatever is captured in the concept of neoliberalism may well be a necessary step in the historical process of delegitimizing capitalism and building a serious alternative from within capitalism in order to move beyond capitalism—that is, before the planet becomes uninhabitable for all but the very richest among us (whom at that point will have undoubtedly developed protections from the worst aspects of global climate change and thus will no longer be “among us”), the question remains whether targeting neoliberalism is *more* politically useful than targeting capitalism. Spoiler alert: there’s very little evidence that it is—but I still do my best here to show the use of the concept of neoliberalism at its strongest and most useful, particularly in the context of understanding various left positions on healthcare and the environment.

Before proceeding to the political limitations of the concept of neoliberalism, it is fair to consider the strengths of the concept, both theoretically and politically. Politically, one of the important contributions is that it avoids controversies around capitalism versus socialism. One can oppose neoliberalism, or so it is assumed, and not necessarily be opposed to capitalism as such. Certainly, or so it is assumed, one can oppose neoliberalism but not be any kind of socialist (or perhaps one is merely required to be a “*democratic socialist*”<sup>11</sup>).

---

<sup>10</sup> Pierre Dardot and Christian Laval, *The New Way of the World: On Neoliberal Society* (trans. Gregory Elliot) (New York: Verso, [2009] 2017).

<sup>11</sup> “Democratic socialist” here meaning either a social democrat or welfare state liberal, though there are many people who use this label to refer to a wide array of non-revolutionary socialists as well. The first part of the “democratic socialist” label is also historically meant to distinguish between the twentieth century state communist projects and conceptions of socialism that are critical of these totalitarian perversions and even of Marxism as such, despite the historical and contemporary reality of innumerable Marxist socialists, including Marx himself, who are imminently democratic in their conceptions of socialism/communism.

The other suggested political advantage is that neoliberalism, whether understood as a distinct political project from the broader political project of capitalism (or neoliberalism as the political project of capitalism in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century), it is useful to both consider the particular iteration of capitalism, including its distinct ideological political project, at the current historical moment and that by emphasizing the political dimension of the (contemporary) political project of capitalism, through the use of the label neoliberalism, repoliticizes debates and struggles over capitalist political-economic practices.

Whereas for many non-academics, non-activists, and non-organizers, capitalism may be viewed strictly as an economic system that proceeds, more or less, of its own accord. This depoliticized conception of capitalism, as described in somewhat different terms by J.K. Gibson-Graham<sup>12</sup>, makes political resistance or alteration to the capitalist economy seem to be non-starter, either because it is inherently not susceptible to political control (rooted in a rigid liberal distinction between political and economic spheres, or public and private realms) or that such attempts are futile because the power of capitalism in practice, even if theoretically susceptible to political control, makes such attempts to actually gain control over the capitalist system ineffective. By using the concept neoliberalism as a kind of discursive alternative, capitalism's political project is in actuality brought to the forefront from the outset. If one is talking about neoliberalism, one is automatically talking about more political-economic phenomena, implemented through intentional policies by particular factions of the ruling class in the service of the whole of capitalist class. Or so this line of argument generally goes.

Put a bit differently, the ostensible theoretical or historical value of the concept of neoliberalism is that neoliberalism refers to a specific set of policies, goals, and ideological assumptions and conclusions that pertain to a particular historical period of capitalism that differ in crucial ways from the previous history (or theorizations) of capitalism—and therefore in order to develop appropriate political strategies to deal with contemporary (neoliberal) capitalism, we must have a proper theory of neoliberalism.

Even if neoliberalism is *just* capitalism during a historical period with some, even if mainly superficially, novel political and economic traits (but still basically capitalism), as I am more or less arguing here (as others cited above have before me), understanding those novel traits and their distinctive manifestations and effects in our contemporary world, especially as they affect how effective resistance and transformation can be pursued, insofar as the concept of neoliberalism/neoliberal capitalism draws productive attention to these characteristics, it has genuine political value. The assumption here is (one that will only be determined accurate or inaccurate over time and with self-reflection): the distinctiveness of neoliberalism/neoliberal capitalism necessitates making different strategic and tactical choices by those interested in systemic change. This is especially true when one gives increased attention to the psycho-social dimensions of neoliberalism/neoliberal capitalism.

Indeed, one of the noteworthy emphases in many theories of neoliberalism and neoliberal capitalism is the production of certain collection of psycho-social dispositions, or a mentality, that

---

<sup>12</sup> J.K. Gibson-Graham, *The End of Capitalism (as we knew it): A Feminist Critique of Political Economy* (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1996).



is distinct from previous periods of capitalism, and may even, as Dardot and Laval argue, signal a reconfiguration of the relationship between the economic base and the ideological superstructure (especially in terms of the law) that is, perhaps with exaggerated rigidity, attributed to the Marxist tradition. Even with the ferocity of their criticisms of the Marxist approach to neoliberalism, even Dardot and Laval say “...we must refer to *neo-liberal society*, and not merely a neo-liberal *policy* or neo-liberal *economics*. While unquestionably a capitalist society, *this* society pertains to a unique form of capitalism that must be analyzed as such in its irreducible specificity.”<sup>13</sup> So while these authors are certainly well-within the camp of asserting the uniqueness of neoliberalism, even for them neoliberalism is still a kind of capitalism, and it is capitalism that must eventually be overcome.<sup>14</sup>

However, one need not rely on more recent poststructural theories of neoliberalism, such as Dardot and Laval’s and Brown’s<sup>15</sup>, to understand and appreciate the importance of the psycho-social conditions of capitalism—even how they may evolve over time. Not only is some of this work pre-figured in the early Marx, Lev Vygotsky, Theodor Adorno, Max Horkheimer, Erich Fromm, and Herbert Marcuse each made similar arguments, connecting the political economy of capitalism to the social-psychological realm (including discussing how this shapes or should shape approaches to revolutionary socialist transformation).

Fromm’s work is crucial here. Throughout his career Fromm presented a historically-nuanced presentation of the evolution of the psycho-social character of capitalism (privileging more cautious, restrained psychologies in its earliest period to the hyper-marketing character that became dominant through the emergence of consumer society in the global North), while leaving open the possibility that capitalism could even evolve further in terms of what social-psychological traits are best suited to the endurance of capitalism.<sup>16</sup>

There are correlative dangers in the neoliberal theorists’ assumption about the value of emphasizing the uniqueness of the conditions of neoliberalism—one that Fromm’s work highlights retroactively. In reality, it is Fromm’s theorizing of the marketing social character and the psycho-social harms of the alienating, hyper-individualizing effects of capitalism in the early twentieth century that speaks to the intimate connection between what is described as neoliberalism and the fundamental psycho-social traits of capitalism in general. Neither for Marx, as far back as his early work in the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, nor for the Frankfurt School Critical Theorists, Fromm being just one example, was capitalism ever merely an economic system. It was always also a political project with social-psychological and cultural dimensions and implications. The novelty with which theorists of neoliberalism treat these aspect of neoliberalism, plus the intersection of politics and socioeconomics (with the former used to allow the latter to overtake

---

<sup>13</sup> Dardot and Laval, *The New Way of the World*, p. 11.

<sup>14</sup> Beyond the contribution of Dardot and Laval, the idea of neoliberalism as a kind of socially-penetrating and increasingly hegemonic affective discourse or governing rationality is also a central element of some of the most innovative treatments of neoliberalism, such as (excluding ones previously mentioned): William Davies’ *The Happiness Industry* (Verso, 2015); Martijn Koning’s *The Emotional Logic of Capitalism* (Stanford University Press, 2015); and Byung-Chul Han’s *Psychopolitics: Neoliberalism and New Technologies of Power* (trans. Erik Butler)(Verso, 2017).

<sup>15</sup> Wendy Brown, *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism’s Stealth Revolution* (Brooklyn, NY: Zone Books, 2015).

<sup>16</sup> Erich Fromm, *Escape from Freedom* (New York: Holt, [1941] 1994); Erich Fromm, *The Sane Society* (New York: Holt, 1955).

the former), is itself surprising—and fundamentally unoriginal (if not outrightly incorrect, if attributed to neoliberalism exclusively and not shown to be produced, at least in part, through all forms of historical capitalism).

Having read thousands of pages of work on neoliberalism at this point, I remain highly skeptical that this “neoliberalism: is really categorically new. Maybe it is not categorically new, but the specifics are new. Well, of course they are. Things are never the same all the time. No one would ever expect them to be. The question then becomes not just one of *how novel* the various traits typically attributed to neoliberalism are, but *how politically useful* highlighting them specifically as elements of neoliberalism versus attributing them to capitalism is (or, put a bit differently, not more generally the result of the historical victories of capitalism is).

### **The Political Trap of (Critiques of) Neoliberalism**

One can look at capitalism without homogenizing its history, but one can look at neoliberalism and forget that what is really being talked about is capitalism. The concept of “neoliberal capitalism” contains less of this potential, given that it maintains the capitalist component. However, “neoliberal capitalism” still contains a danger. If I say I am a critic of neoliberal capitalism, can you be sure which of the parts I am a critic of? Am I a critic of neoliberal capitalism and capitalism as a whole, or am I simply a critic of the particular manifestation of capitalism in the neoliberal period (or a critic of the neoliberal project—depending on where one is on the spectrum of views on the intentionality of neoliberalism as a political project or as an agent-less historical period or process)?

In practice, the problem can be represented by the figure of Bernie Sanders (though we will get to how Barack Obama fits in this conversation as well shortly). Bernie Sanders can rightly be viewed as a critic of neoliberalism and neoliberal capitalism. While one might conclude, based on reading Sanders’ memoir, that he holds genuinely anti-capitalist views, his policies and campaign rhetoric are certainly not anti-capitalist, despite his “liberal” (in both senses of the word) use of the label “democratic socialist.”<sup>17</sup> This, along with a lot of historical development in the use of labels, also produces (or at least relates to) the complicated situation where Bernie Sanders can be both a (democratic) socialist and a supporter of capitalism (so long as it isn’t neoliberal capitalism). While scholars and politicians may have a similar interest in avoiding the grotesque and intellectually immature red-baiting that making overtly anti-capitalist arguments incurs, the result is an intellectual and political confusion that undermines basically all of the possible political advantages of the concept of neoliberalism, perhaps with the exception of not scaring off progressive liberals who are not quite ready for the full-on anti-capitalist critique that comes from a genuinely socialist perspective. Sanders certainly pushes the limits of acceptable politics in the US by being an ardent critic of neoliberal capitalism and using the label “democratic socialist,” there is a lot of curb-appeal, especially among young people, for a less onerous conception of socialism and for mitigating the very worst elements of (neoliberal) capitalism—but this is a vision of “socialism” that deliberately eschews genuine systemic transformation.

---

<sup>17</sup> Bernie Sanders (with Huck Gutman), *Outsider in the White House* (New York: Verso, 2015).

While it would be hasty to dismiss the possible benefit of this strategy completely for all time, it is unclear from history just how effective it has been for socialists to prioritize concerns for not alienating near-left liberals (By this I mean it is unclear whether any benefit has ever been produced by being concerned about alienating politically-engaged ideological liberals.). Tactful, persuasive engagement is still vital for any socialist movement with hopes of earning mass support, but the question here is whether it is useful to attempt to enlist the support of progressive anti-neoliberal (but not anti-capitalist) liberals by focusing our critiques and organizing energies against neoliberalism or neoliberal capitalism, as opposed to capitalism as such, in all of its historical forms. Persuading well-meaning progressive liberals of the need to be anti-capitalist seems likely to be more (and at least not less) likely to be effective towards building a broad-based socialist movement than playing strategic word-games around neoliberalism would be (and has been).

To elaborate further on the political and theoretical value of the concept of neoliberalism (and the corollary limitations), it is useful to think through an argument made by Jeffrey Goldfarb in *Public Seminar* in 2017.<sup>18</sup> Goldfarb explores the problems of the term and concept of neoliberalism, specifically its inconsistent application by those on the left. He claims that neoliberalism is used to describe a wide range of policy positions from public-private ventures up to the complete deregulation of private industry or “market fundamentalism.” Goldfarb also argues that “neoliberalism” is a kind of “elite-speak,” incomprehensible to anyone outside of a narrow coterie of left-leaning academics. Despite these cogent observations, I contend that neoliberalism as a concept is both more coherent and more problematic than Goldfarb’s analysis suggests.

My response to Goldfarb, a version of which was published with *Public Seminar* as well<sup>19</sup>, connects most closely to the last example of political and theoretical usefulness just mentioned above (not alienating those who aren’t quite ready for the full anti-capitalist plunge), while also again pointing to “neoliberalism’s” limitations. First, taking neoliberalism as proceeding in degrees, we could understand politicians as diverse as Paul Ryan and Barack Obama as neoliberals, without the concept losing complete coherence and/or instrumental-critical value. Second, there is a countervailing limitation to the value of any critique of neoliberalism if such a critique, as they typically do, too easily maintain belief in the false possibility of the fundamental reformation of capitalism. If neoliberalism is perceived as the central problem, our critique of capitalism is weakened. The critique of neoliberalism, often regarded as a unique political perversion of a nicer, more humane capitalism, too easily moves the goal posts of radical and progressive change.

In this context, in order to retain the coherence of neoliberalism as a concept, we need to distinguish between the ideal-typical political ideology of “neoliberalism,” represented in the work of thinkers like Friedrich Hayek and Milton Friedman, and the process of “neoliberalization.” Neoliberalism, as an ideal-type, is best understood as a government-driven<sup>20</sup> market-based political economy, which places the private property rights and profits of corporations above the democratic

---

<sup>18</sup> Jeffrey C. Goldfarb, “What Do You Mean When You Use the Term Neoliberalism?: A Question to My American Friends, Colleagues, Students and Comrades on the Academic Left,” *Public Seminar* (April 7, 2017). Available online at: <http://www.publicseminar.org/2017/04/what-do-you-mean-when-you-use-the-term-neoliberalism/>.

<sup>19</sup> Bryant William Sculos, “On Theorizing Neoliberalism: The Problems and Politics of a Critique,” *Public Seminar* (April 20, 2017). Available online at: <http://www.publicseminar.org/2017/04/on-theorizing-neoliberalism/>.

<sup>20</sup> Despite neoliberal thinkers’ insistence that neoliberalism is foundationally antithetical to government intervention (a belief that has been too often accepted by those on the left), this is a mythology that has been debunked by many critics of neoliberalism. Thus, this component is included here.

control and interests of the people. Again, how this differs fundamentally from capitalism is unclear, but, regardless, neoliberalization then would be any policy, process, or movement that in some form advances neoliberal interests or ends. Neoliberalization, as the process of moving towards the “normative horizon” (or cliff) of neoliberalism, thus typically involves the erosion of public-democratic services, spaces, and even “the public” itself. When most academics refer to something as neoliberal, what they really mean is that it contributes to neoliberalization, not that it represents some pure ideal-type. This is likely the source of Goldfarb’s and many others’ quite justifiable confusion, which is itself relevant to the broader argument of this article regarding the limitations of the concept of neoliberalism: beyond shifting the goal posts, if people are so excessively confused about what a term means, it is difficult to build a coherent and effective struggle against it.

### **Healthy Profits, Unhealthy People**

That neoliberalism, at its most conceptually-valuable, is a matter of degree can be understood by looking at the on-going debate over health care in the US (though the logic can be applied in any context). There are three policies, which are each, to varying degrees, part of a neoliberalization process.

This is where neoliberalism can connect to the problematic discussions and categorizations of someone like Barack Obama. We have the Affordable Care Act, or “Obamacare,” wherein the government mandates that individual citizens buy health care from private companies. This individual mandate leaves the roots of the American healthcare system in the market, and even forces citizens into that market to the benefit of private insurance companies. On the other hand, the ACA also expanded the government’s role in providing health insurance by offering citizens subsidies and offering states increased funding to expand Medicaid coverage. Thus, the ACA contains elements that contribute to neoliberalization and others that hedge against full-scale neoliberalism.

Compare the ACA to the Ryan-Trump plan that was eventually withdrawn from a planned floor vote in the House of Representatives.<sup>21</sup> This bill was a more aggressive form of neoliberalization than the ACA in that it removed the individual mandate (the penalty for violation being paid to the federal government) and replaced it with a rule allowing private insurers to charge up to 30% more for people who lacked health insurance for more than 63 days in the previous calendar year. There is still a government-allowed penalty for failing to buy insurance, but in the case of the Ryan-Trump plan the penalty money is paid directly to private companies. Additionally, while the plan retained subsidies, they were substantially more regressive than with the ACA.

Another alternative bill proposed by the so-called “Freedom Caucus” of the House GOP, called for the complete repeal (without replacement) of the ACA. No subsidies to help people buy insurance. No individual mandate in any form. Insurance companies would be able to charge more or less whatever they wanted to anyone. They could discriminate based on age, gender, and pre-

---

<sup>21</sup> David Lawder and Steve Holland, “Trump tastes failure as U.S. House healthcare bill collapses,” *Reuters* (March 24, 2017). Available online at: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-obamacare-idUSKBN16V149>.

existing conditions. This bill is much closer to — if not fully representing — neoliberalism in its ideal form.

Privatization can take many forms, but when we think about the drift towards neoliberalism, it is fundamentally a matter of degree, with few policies ever likely to fully meet the ideal-typical definition of neoliberalism sketched out above. This is where the concept of neoliberalism has value; it allows us to understand how policies as diverse as the ACA and the Freedom Caucus proposal each embody neoliberal values in distinct ways and why all degrees of neoliberalization need to be resisted.

One can also put the ACA against various proposed versions of Medicare-for-All. In his earliest comments on Medicare-for-All, Bernie Sanders, considered the political father of this proposal in the popular imaginary, simply stated that Medicare-for-All means dropping the age limitation from the existing Medicare statute. However, while the existing Medicare statute is an example of a kind of single-payer (though still with co-pays and premiums, depending on the plan and the procedure), it is primarily processed through private, for-profit insurance companies, which the ability to profit off of is increasingly difficult for the public to find information about (but obviously happens or these for-profit companies wouldn't provide Medicare plans at all). If Medicare-for-All were to proceed under the current conditions of Medicare, it would be a regression of neoliberalism and neoliberalization, without removing us from the overall structure of a capitalist political economy. If the prescription drugs are still produced and distributed within a for-profit model, if medical devices are still produced and distributed within a for-profit model, if nurses and doctors and medical workers of all kinds still produce surplus-value for for-profit health care companies, Medicare-for-All is still progress, but it does not represent moving outside of neoliberalism or neoliberalization, at least not completely, but it is certainly moving in the right direction. In other words, Medicare-for-All, in its various interactions, is a challenge to neoliberalism as neoliberalization, but it is not automatically a fundamental challenge to capitalism. Certainly, if one views Medicare-for-All as a last-ditch effort to maintain the legitimacy of for-profit health care, even through its single-payer model, it fits contradictorily within the ideological and structural-historical parameters of capitalism—and may even serve some of the forces of neoliberalization, even as it is obviously less neoliberal than the Freedom Caucus plan or the ACA.

Conversely, there are other versions of Medicare-for-All that are more aggressively progressive and anti-neoliberal (though still not necessarily anti-capitalist). Sanders' newest (2019) iteration of his Medicare-for-All plan represents the strongest left position on offer at the moment, but even this improved proposal fails to address some important aspects of the broader systemic context.<sup>22</sup> If Medicare-for-All was provided through a publicly-controlled and managed system, without using private insurers as middlemen, and if Medicare-for-All includes negotiated prices for tests, treatments, prescription drugs, and devices, under more fully-democratic political conditions, this would appropriately be considered outside of neoliberalism and neoliberalization.

---

<sup>22</sup> Jacob Pramuk, "Bernie Sanders introduces new 'Medicare for All' bill as he tries to set 2020 health-care agenda," *cnbc* (April 10, 2019). Available online at: <https://www.cnbc.com/2019/04/10/bernie-sanders-unveils-medicare-for-all-bill-amid-2020-democratic-primary.html>; Catherine Kim, "Read Bernie Sanders's 2019 Medicare-for-all plan," *Vox* (April 10, 2019). Available online at: <https://www.vox.com/2019/4/10/18304712/read-bernie-sanders-2019-medicare-for-all-plan>.

It would be a complete rejection of privatization, and even some of the fundamental aspects of capitalism; health care would be less commodified and provided based on need—and while surplus-value extraction would still be a systemic component of even this expansive version of Medicare-for-All, surplus-value would be more equitably redistributed based on need and not profit-seeking. While Sanders’ new approach meets many of these criteria, it would need to be accomplished without compromise, and would likely demand deeper structural transformation in regard to how democracy works in the US (including in relation to the rest of the planet’s population). This speaks to the importance of critical engagement with campaigns such as Sanders’ in the US, and other more socialistic ones around the world, without sowing confusion or delusions in the ability of capitalism to be substantially reformed or that we can merely turn back the clock on the neoliberalization occurring within the global capitalist system without opposing capitalism (and thus neoliberalization) wholesale. These distinctions can be observed in other single-payer health care systems around the world and their distinct funding methods and degrees of privatization for different aspects of their respective health care systems.<sup>23</sup>

## Verdant Capitalism, Decrepit Planet

Similar to the preceding discussion about health care, neoliberalism, and the critique of capitalism, we can see the problems with a “mere” critique of neoliberalism (even understood as neoliberalization) in the context of debates around climate change, neoliberalism, and capitalism. There are three general positions on climate change that are prevalent in various specific iterations: 1. Green capitalism, 2. Against green neoliberalism, and 3. Ecosocialism (or ecological anti-capitalism more broadly). These categories can be best represented by major figures in these debates: 1. Thomas Friedman<sup>24</sup>, 2. Naomi Klein<sup>25</sup>, and 3. John Bellamy Foster, Chris Williams, Paul Burkett, Jason Moore, and Andreas Malm.<sup>26</sup>

---

<sup>23</sup> For example, Canada, with a single-payer system, still has nominally private providers (though plenty more publicly-controlled providers as well), but it also has anti-profiteering regulations in place, such as price controls, especially for hospitals. The United Kingdom on the other hand, despite decades of austerity, still maintains not only a single-payer system of sorts, but there are very few providers that are not under the umbrella of the National Health Service (NHS). Even the education and training of doctors and nurses is largely done under the auspices of the NHS. While neither are fully outside the influence of neoliberalization, each maintains different distant relationships to neoliberalism (and both are quite obviously superior to the current US system or even the most Medicare-for-All plans currently proposed, though the plan proposed recently by Sanders is quite similar to Canada’s system in most important respects).

<sup>24</sup> Thomas Friedman, *Hot, Flat, and Crowded: Why We Need a Green Revolution--and How It Can Renew America* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2008).

<sup>25</sup> Naomi Klein, *This Changes Everything: Capitalism vs. The Climate* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2015).

<sup>26</sup> So there isn’t a single major figure that captures the range of ecological anti-capitalist (socialist, Marxist, and/or post-Marxist) positions, and there is a range of theoretical and political differences around the boundaries of the different positions within this diverse camp, but what ties them all together is the position that climate change and ecological destruction are integral to capitalism and capitalism cannot exist without its ecologically harmful elements (and therefore the reverse is true, that any serious approach to climate change must be anti-capitalist). Some important relatively recent texts from this category include various books by Bellamy Foster, including *The Ecological Rift* (Monthly Review, 2010) and *The Ecological Revolution* (Monthly Review, 2009), Jason Moore’s *Capitalism in the Web of Life* (Verso, 2015), *Ecology and Socialism* by Chris Williams (Haymarket, 2010) and also by Williams with Fred Magdoff is *Creating the Ecological Society* (Monthly Review, 2017), Paul Burkett’s *Marx and Nature* (Haymarket, 2014), and Andreas Malm’s *Fossil Capital* (Verso, 2016) and *The Progress of this Storm* (Verso, 2018).

Friedman's position is the most laughable, and yet is probably the one taken most seriously by politicians and centrist-liberal and moderate conservatives who accept the mainstream scientific evidence on climate change. While there are many distinct theories of green capitalism, ranging from neoclassical, supply-side, and demand-side approaches, they all more or less share important elements. The first element, fundamental to Friedman's position, is that capitalism is not viewed as the fundamental problem at the heart of climate change. Similar to, and building on, the Third Way complicity with neoliberalism in the mid-to-late 1990s and early 2000s, according to supporters of the green capitalism position, capitalist markets are viewed as not just *a* path towards defeating climate change, but capitalist markets (with some help from targeted, narrow government policies and encouraged partnerships, including tax breaks for "green" technology and "green" corporations) is the *only* viable solution to climate change. Friedman is specifically well-known for advocating public-private partnerships and the need to ensure that the price of goods in the marketplace take into account their environmental costs (but the suggestion is actually merely to subsidize "green" products—for which there is no actual definition and could include products made and sold using polluting and GHG (greenhouse gases) releasing production and distribution processes just so long as they are *less* polluting and *less* carbon-intensive—and making "dirtier" products more expensive) thus that "green" technologies and products can gain market dominance. This is a kind of neoliberalization of climate change (non-)solutions.

The deep flaws and dangers of thinking in terms of green capitalism, a perverse kind of dystopian magical thinking, is well-articulated by thinkers in the next two categories. While critical of Friedman, touching the limits of a mere critique of neoliberalism (after all, she even mentions capitalism in the title of her book on the subject of climate change and in the book itself), is best represented by Naomi Klein and her work *This Changes Everything: Capitalism vs. the Climate*.<sup>27</sup> Despite Klein's (and others' who may fit in this category) broaching the issues of capitalism, much of the critical energy is directed against privatization and deregulation associated with neoliberalism and neoliberalization. The suggestions offered by those in this category include: building social movements against corporations and politicians who don't have aggressive climate change mitigation plans; calling for regulation and taxation of carbon intensive production and distribution; and demanding the use of taxation to ensure that those most responsible for climate change bear the disproportionate cost of dealing with mitigation. Despite their attempt to point to these issues as elements of contemporary capitalism—of neoliberal capitalism—there is nothing in the suggestions that thinkers and activists in this category offer that gets at the *systemic* heart of the connection between ecocidal climate change and capitalism. This category of climate change thinkers would have us believe that the commodification of the environment and our alienation

---

<sup>27</sup> George Monbiot's diverse work would also fit into this category of getting so close to moving beyond a mere critique of neoliberalism, especially in the context of climate change, yet fails to bring the critique specifically to the fundamental elements of capitalism. See *Out of the Wreckage: A New Politics for an Age of Crisis* (Verso, 2017). Additionally, Adrian Parr's *The Wrath of Capital: Neoliberalism and Climate Change Politics* (Columbia University Press, 2013), explicates the connection between capitalism and various elements of climate change, also fails—despite the title of the book—to bring the critical tools offered by the tradition of critical theory to bear on the connection between capitalism, as such, to climate change. The frustration produced by Parr's work is that it is fundamentally a critique of capitalism—but it is one that is characterized by the author as a critique of neoliberalism. The hard core of the whole of this second category is clear good intention and excellent scholarly work, but it is also a category of political shortsightedness and on-going and eventual failure.

from nature were extreme products of the new age of neoliberalism or neoliberal capitalism.<sup>28</sup> It would perhaps surprise them to find out that the commodification of nature and the corollary alienation from nature were theorized by Marx as far back as 1844.<sup>29</sup>

This is where the thinkers in the third category come in, focusing on the problems with approaches in the first two categories, affirming directly that ecocidal climate change cannot be mitigated by or within any form of capitalism precisely because capitalism is a root cause of the environmental destruction that we are only just beginning to experience the consequences of. For the theorists and activists in this category is it a fundamental truth that capitalism cannot function without the exploitation of wage workers, without the unpaid racialized, gendered labor involved in social reproduction, and it certainly cannot exist without the devaluations of extraction and pollution that are inherent aspects of capitalist production, distribution, and consumption. The only “green” that capitalism cares about is money—and how the devaluation of nature, workers, and reproductive and care work enable an increasing transnational capitalist class make more “green.”

Accepting much of Klein’s analysis of the exacerbating relationship between neoliberalism/neoliberal capitalism, this last position, the anti-capitalist position, sees the issues that Klein points out, as well as others, as fundamentally rooted in capitalism as such, not a particular iteration of capitalism. This ecosocialist position is one that challenges both the neoliberalization characteristic of the current period of capitalism, but more deeply articulates various positions on how ecocidal climate change is rooted in the metabolic rift that the interherly extractive character of all forms of capitalism create between humanity and nature (even where some scholars in this category may not buy this specific conceptualization of the problem, [see Jason Moore’s world-ecology approach<sup>30</sup>]). Capitalism inherently produces this metabolic rift<sup>31</sup>, and therefore capitalism must be overcome and replaced by an ecosocialist alternative in order to produce any semblance of an ecological equilibrium between humankind and the planet’s various ecosystems and biospheres.

---

<sup>28</sup> For a spectacular theorization of contemporary (and future!) climate change politics, particularly the limits of the first two categories here: green neoliberalism and green neo-Keynesianism, see Mann and Wainwright’s *Climate Leviathan: A Political Theory of Our Planetary Future* (Verso, 2018). This book served as an inspiration for element of the argument in this article, particularly in thinking about the important theoretical and political differences between these three approaches, especially between categories two and three.

<sup>29</sup> See Marx’s *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*. Available online at:

<https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/download/pdf/Economic-Philosophic-Manuscripts-1844.pdf>.

<sup>30</sup> For Moore, capitalism discursively and materially creates particular conceptions of nature that are suited to exploitation by and through capitalism (and more specifically criticizing Foster’s and others’, that the dualist conception of society and nature or capitalism and nature is a kind of thinking that could lend itself to capitalist exploitation of nature as well—or at least misses the way that conceptions of nature are co-produced through the development of capitalism). Instead, Moore argues for a fundamentally monist approach, which aims to highlight the co-constitutedness of society, capitalism, and (particular ideas about, and policies toward) nature. Both of these sub-positions, despite their theoretical differences, view capitalism as the fundamental horizon that must be superseded in order for a genuinely habitable planet to be maintained for all people.

<sup>31</sup> Metabolic rift, as theorized by John Bellamy Foster and other ecological Marxists, to put it overly simply, refers to this imbalance that capitalism produces between humanity and nature; capitalism incentivizes the production of this imbalance by underappreciating the “value” of nature and the limits of its largely non-renewable capacity to be exploited, while placing near-exclusive emphasis on the possible production of exchange value, surplus value, and profit.



When we keep either climate change politics and/or health care policy within the murderous confines of capitalism—not merely neoliberalism, itself a product of historical and contemporary failures to overcome capitalism—people suffer needlessly from preventable causes and die prematurely. Revolutionary movements should not separate these issue areas from one another, nor should they separate them from workers’ rights, racism, cisheterosexism, or endless imperial war, but climate change is a truly catastrophic horizon.<sup>32</sup> It can longer be avoided; the question will be in what context climate change occurs and precisely how many people suffer and die prematurely, living horribly degraded lives? Health care policy is part of this, but unless climate change is approached with a sternly anti-capitalist perspective, our future capacities to maintain any semblance of a universal health care system (or a world without, or with decreased, cisheterosexism, racism, and war) will be seriously undermined. Rearranging the deck chairs on the Titanic was never a good use of time, but perhaps people didn’t and continue to not see that that is what they were and are doing. However, it is imperative that we gain clearer perspective: when it comes to the critique of neoliberalism in the context of climate change, the political—and indeed planetary—stakes could not be more immensely pressing.

### **It’s (Still) a Trap!**

The question lingers still: does the concept of neoliberalism, even understood as neoliberalization, offer a better theoretical understanding than a perhaps more reductionist move to think in terms of capitalism? While the answer to that question may be a tentative yes, this still does not necessarily mean that the political costs are worth the academic nuance, at least insofar as left movements are concerned. Neoliberalism (even understood as neoliberalization) is still a flawed concept, but less for analytical reasons than for the political-strategic reasons discussed earlier. While there is an analytical coherence to the concept, especially when thought of as a spectrum in relation to an ideal-type, Goldfarb is right to point to the conceptual drift that occurs too often with the concept of neoliberalism. This looseness that Goldfarb, discussed above, identifies is closely tied to, though not solely caused by, the academic left’s general desire to avoid directly criticizing the capitalist system. If you criticize capitalism, you “become” a socialist or Marxist, tough identities to maintain within the academy. Being a critic of neoliberalism quite simply does not hold that same stigma.

When the Left aims its criticism against neoliberalization (e.g., austerity) however helpful it may be to avoid ostracization and motivate movements in the short-term, it too easily allows activists and critical scholars to lose sight of the broader oppressive horizon of global capitalism. Yes, welfare-state capitalism is better than pure neoliberal capitalism, but both have, historically, been actively criticized by the Left. Now it seems like the Left’s goal is “less neoliberalism,” not

---

<sup>32</sup> While not explicitly anticapitalist, in the summer of 2019, shipyard workers in Belfast seized control of one of the oldest and most iconic shipyards in the country after it was announced that it would be closing. Not only are the workers demanding that the shipyard be nationalized and kept open, but also that the shipyard be retrofitted to build renewable energy infrastructure. In terms of the relationship between working class and oppressed peoples’ struggles against climate change, this is just the tip of the iceberg (no pun intended, but this shipyard is the very same one that built the Titanic—which fittingly enough has a similar relationship to icebergs as an ecologically-vibrant planet has with capitalism). At the time the final version of this article was completed, the shipyard was still being occupied by its workers. See: [https://www.vice.com/en\\_us/article/8xwanz/workers-seize-the-shipyard-that-built-the-titanic-to-make-renewable-energy](https://www.vice.com/en_us/article/8xwanz/workers-seize-the-shipyard-that-built-the-titanic-to-make-renewable-energy).

“no capitalism.” The political trap here is that one builds a movement against “neoliberalism” that never becomes what it needs to be in order to be truly effective: anti-capitalist; that it never sets its sights properly or practically against the deeper systemic elements that produce the phenomena typically referred to as neoliberalism, but which are better understood as the historical “victories” of capitalism.

As I argued in *New Politics* in 2017, when those on the left focus on resisting specific manifestations, periods, or trends of capitalism, the system as a whole, even with all its diversity and “non-capitalistic” elements, is no longer thought of as the enemy.<sup>33</sup> This is not to suggest that radical reforms or transitional demands (positions that push capitalism to and beyond its limits of adaptability while also improving the lives of people in the short-term) aren’t important. Radical politics should never make the perfect the enemy of the good, but it is vital to avoid excessively reformist and vapid opportunistic impulses. It is through the struggle for more expansive revolutionary achievements that builds the subjectivities and consciousness necessary to produce emancipatory political movement(s) suited to overthrowing capitalism and building an egalitarian, democratic postcapitalist (i.e., socialist) alternative. It is not “making the perfect the enemy of the good” to suggest that what many well-meaning people consider “good” isn’t really good at all. To paraphrase Malcolm X, stabbing someone and pulling the knife out part of the way isn’t “good.” It’s not only not good *enough*, it isn’t relevant progress at all.

To the left of the center-left, the focus on neoliberalism is not as analytically problematic as Goldfarb suggests, but on the other hand, it is far more politically problematic than merely being elitist. Even if the general public knew what neoliberalism was (conceptually—as they certainly know what it means materially in their everyday lives already), focusing on resisting that would be a far cry from resisting capitalism in its entirety. Goldfarb is right that “democratic intellectuals” need to be cognizant that people may misunderstand the term neoliberalism. We are talking about privatization. We are talking about a kind of extreme capitalism, of “market fundamentalism.” We should be clear about this, and this means exploring how policies like the ACA and even possibly Medicare-for-All, depending on the particular proposal one is looking at, still, in various ways reinforce neoliberalism and resist genuine democratic socialization of the fundamental spheres of life—the achievement of which is necessary for a just, egalitarian, and humane society. Neoliberalism is a perverse escalation of an already-perverse political-economic capitalist system, and that is what we should focus our energies convincing people of.

### **Conclusion: Rethinking Relevance through the Critique of (the Concept of) Neoliberalism**

Throughout, I have attempted to show that neoliberalism, as a concept, is useful in some important ways. As a concept it can help scholars and activists develop a better understanding of specificities of the contemporary moment and its recent past, which a simplistic treatment of capitalism would not as easily accomplish. Particularly when neoliberalism is understood as a multifaceted process combining privatization, deregulation, and tax cuts, it can be easier to intellectually digest than the practical meaning of something like “the expansion or recession of

---

<sup>33</sup> Bryant William Sculos, “The Capitalistic Mentality and the Politics of Radical Reform: A (Mostly) Friendly Reply to Michael J. Thompson,” *New Politics* Vol. XVI No. 2, Whole Number 62 (Winter 2017). Available online at: [https://newpol.org/issue\\_post/capitalistic-mentality-and-politics-radical-reform/](https://newpol.org/issue_post/capitalistic-mentality-and-politics-radical-reform/).

capitalism” would be for those without graduate degrees or years of self-study on the subject of political economy. Beyond that, the deeply thoughtful and strenuously researched historical and analytical work that has been produced around the concept of neoliberalism is largely excellent, even, and perhaps especially, where the scholars and activists disagree with one another about various premises and conclusions. So then why dedicate an entire essay, with such a provocative and implicitly insulting title, to criticism of the concept of neoliberalism?

Part of the reason is to perform a provocation, to challenge those working on and utilizing the concept of neoliberalism to consider how theoretically informative and politically useful the concept actually is, especially compared to the broader, more politically-controversial (and perhaps still more salient) term “capitalism.” Scholars who are uninterested in the political value of their work will likely be unmoved by the arguments made here, especially regarding political usefulness as a standard. However, given the variable prominence of “relevance” in many fields and subfields of the academic disciplines of Political Science and International Relations/Global Politics, such as Security Studies and Foreign Policy, where relevance is often interpreted to mean “how can we develop better concepts and frameworks of analysis to defend or enhance the positions of governments, corporations, and the capitalist class more generally” (though they are rarely honest or aware enough to be so explicit about this meaning of “relevance”), left scholars, which most critics of “neoliberalism” are, should adopt a similar, but countervailing, conception of relevance—while refusing to apologize for meeting an equivalent standard of political engagement that is acceptable for more conventionally liberal, centrist, and conservative scholars. Avoiding overtly political work has been a way for those on the left to find something of a comfortable home in academia, but when one has to pretend to not be a leftist one can, over time, cease to be a leftist. This is the perversion of the “critic of neoliberalism.” As Vonnegut wrote in *Mother Night*, “we are what we pretend to be so we must be careful what we pretend to be.”<sup>34</sup>

While there is certainly possible political value in building a united front against neoliberal austerity (for the sake of argument, here understood as different from building a movement against capitalism or in favor of genuine socialism), the question that remains to be asked (and answered) is whether it is actually possible or efficient to merely resist neoliberalism. There is a real possibility that resisting neoliberalism is like resisting the gun or sword of an opponent. Does one attack the weapon or the person wielding the weapon? If they put the gun or sword away or drop it, does one stop fighting?

Lastly, critics of neoliberalism and neoliberal capitalism must be intimately aware of the question: what comes next? What is the alternative to neoliberalism? If it is possible—or perceived to be reasonable—to answer this question with some answer that would fail to meet the general parameters of a democratic, egalitarian postcapitalism (socialism), we have at least begun to see the consequences of the left “critique of neoliberalism” compared to the left critique of capitalism. This is not to exclude the possibility of a right nationalist critique of neoliberalism, which should also be a concern (as it allows people to see strong similarities between political leaders as different as Bernie Sanders and Donald Trump—whether or not the Trump presidency actually represents anything other than the continuation of the authoritarian tendencies of capitalism or neoliberalism

---

<sup>34</sup> Kurt Vonnegut, *Mother Night* (New York: Dial Press Trade, [1961] 2009).

is another question<sup>35</sup>, nor is this to exclude a more conventional conservative opposition to capitalism<sup>36</sup>, but given the role that capitalism plays in maintaining historical systems of oppression (white supremacy, cisheteropatriarchy, etc.) and the increased popularity of “capitalism” among conservatives, a critique of capitalism is less likely to be abused by conservatives and nationalists. After all, “neolibtard” seems like an easy jump to make. “Capitalist snowflake” just does not have the same ring to it.

When considering what comes after neoliberalism or neoliberal capitalism, without an emphasis on the capitalistic qualities of neoliberalism, it will be exceptionally difficult to build towards a genuine alternative that is not merely a superficially different form of capitalism. Additionally, because of the deep psycho-social infestation of the collective psyche of those in capitalist societies, this predominance of the capitalistic mentality, unless the specifically capitalistic dimensions of the “neoliberal” subject are resolved, capitalism will live on in the minds—and more importantly, in the material everyday practices—of the living, beyond whatever death neoliberalism can have that is not also the death of capitalism.

---

<sup>35</sup> Ronald W. Cox, “Trump’s Ponzi Scheme Victory,” *Class, Race and Corporate Power* Vol. 4 : Iss. 2 , Article 5. (Nov. 2016). Available online at:

<https://digitalcommons.fiu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1077&context=classracecorporatpower>.

<sup>36</sup> Peter Kolozi, *Conservatives Against Capitalism: From the Industrial Revolution to Globalization* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017).