

Neoliberalism and its Discontents: The Ideal of Liberation in the Context of Dialectical Tensions and Planetary Extremification

Claudio Colaguori¹

ABSTRACT: This paper offers a critical analysis of the conceptual origins of neoliberal society and its attendant social problems by outlining how traditional concepts founded in Western philosophical liberalism have become intensified in the neoliberal present in a manner that perpetuates domination against the original intention of liberal ideals of emancipation. In particular the paper examines five sites of conceptual distortion that perpetuate domination as follows: From the sovereign individual to possessive individualism; The economic conception of freedom and corporate capitalist empire; The liberal rule of law or the neoliberal unruliness of law; Liberal democracy and its competing identities; The incomplete liberal promise of female emancipation and the neoliberal perpetuation of the patriarchal order of domination.

KEYWORDS: Liberalism; Neoliberalism; Extremification; Competition

Introduction

Liberalism, the body of political thought that gave rise to the prevailing social order in the West, has always held out the promise of transcendence and liberty. Freedom from bondage and movement away from the injustices of the past have been among the progressive aims of the liberal tradition. Against dire prognoses of the human condition by critical theorists, mainstream theorists such as Pinker argue that “more than ever, the ideals of reason, science, humanism, and progress need a wholehearted defense” (2018, 4). Yet, Enlightenment liberalism has never existed as a coherent, unified discourse, although its general themes can be identified. Freedman writes, “classical liberalism evolved around individual liberty, human independence, and the rule of law, and it importantly restricted what states and governments were entitled to do to individuals” (2015, 2). Freedman further outlines various *layers of liberalism* I shall paraphrase as follows: the protection of individual rights and restraint over government powers; a belief in the economic necessity of free exchange of goods and services; a concept of individualism founded on the maximization of human potential; a certain degree of state-regulated welfare to temper the sharp edges of social inequality, as well as the promotion of pluralism, diversity and tolerance (2015, 13).

Since its inception a few hundred years ago liberal society has had a complex history with various incarnations and points of emphasis, and now we are firmly rooted in the *neoliberal* era. “Neoliberalism,” the term used to describe the current global human condition, especially the economic and political concentrations of power and concomitant social suffering, is not a flattering one. It fails to invoke a reinvigorated sense of the ideal of freedom inherent in classical liberalism and thus neoliberalism is generally used in academic circles as a term of derision. Harvey (2011) writes,

¹ Claudio Colaguori is an Associate Professor in the Department of Equity Studies at York University. He is the editor of *Crime, Deviance and Social Control in the 21st Century: A Justice and Rights Perspective*, and author of *Agon Culture: Competition, Conflict and the Problem of Domination*. The author would like to thank anonymous reviewers for helpful comments on an earlier draft.

“Neoliberalism is in the first instance of theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade... It must also set up those military, defence, police, and legal structures and functions required to secure private property rights and to guarantee, by force if need be, the proper functioning of markets.” (2011, 2-3).

This tendency that Harvey identifies within neoliberalism, to attain economic imperatives *by force*, is reflected in the preferential attention and concomitant distortion given to some classical liberal concepts in the age of neoliberalism, including: the ideal of the *sovereign individual* transmuted into the legal fiction of “corporate personhood” and “possessive individualism” (Macpherson, 1962); the expansion of *free-market liberalization* into imperialist consumerism, global economic domination, a growing gap between rich and poor, unsustainable natural resource exploitation, and the transformation of the ideal of *state sovereignty* into an intensified type of militarized nationalism that generates perpetual conflict, interstate rivalry, war, and necropolitical suffering.

The point regarding neoliberalism as a *type of force* is also emphasized by Biebricher (2019) who argues that neoliberalism is not a haphazard formation, but rather it developed as a response to the crisis of economic instability and financial sluggishness of the early 20th century. The express concern of neoliberalist policies was to create/enforce the proper preconditions for the functioning and indeed thriving of domestic and international markets.

The questions then follows: Are the neoliberal developments that define the present era a logical continuation of the authentic values and ideals of political liberalism, or are they of a different order altogether? Such are the sorts of pressing concerns that critical analysis faces when confronted with the problems of the present geopolitical landscape and the ideological discourses that justify its continuation. Just as liberalism is a type of thought associated with a corresponding political life-world, neoliberalism has had its philosophical proponents in the twentieth century that have thrown up reconstructed conceptual ideals of liberal freedom. In this context Ayn Rand (1905-1982) and Milton Friedman (1912-2006) are often mentioned as ideologues of the neoliberal order. As recent crises such as the 2008 mortgage and housing fraud have illustrated, the ideas that circulate among the political ruling classes are not without their material effects. The *ideal* and the *material* exist in a dynamic interrelation with one another, so then the problems of neoliberalism must be confronted *also* at the level of political thought and philosophical questioning.

Critical questions remain: Why has liberal policy been so successful at liberating corporate-economic power but not fully extended its liberating principles to other social realms and historically marginalized groups in equal measure? Why has liberalism swung back and forth from humanism to authoritarianism and tyranny in the modern era?

This analysis follows the philosophical method of immanent critique whereby contradictions, aporias, and potential for misreadings inherent in a foundational social text get expressed in the material manifestations of a society upon which the text is based. Thus, it will examine how some central ideas of liberalism have transmuted in the neoliberal era into various types of power through the instrument of law, to produce a new manifestation of domination, that has been referred to differentially as domination (Adorno), human rights violations (Callaway and Stephens, 2007), and more recently as a system of biopower (Foucault, 1980), and necropolitics (Mbembe, 2003), where certain people are

allowed to live while others, (along with other planetary forms of life), are rendered terminable. The analysis offered here adds to this critique by contextualizing the crisis of liberalism as a system characterized by polarizations and extremes.

Liberalism: The Dynamism of an Unfinished Project and The Ideal of Freedom

The ideal of liberalism has always been about pursuing and maximizing human liberty. Liberal concepts have stood the test of time and to this day remain alluring since no reasonable alternative for a better civil order has yet been devised in the context of market capitalism. Classical liberalism promoted increased freedoms over and against the restrictive forms of social regulations and human bondage that characterized much of social life in the *ancien régime* and in the *gemeinschaft* societies that prevailed for quite some time after. And yet as is often the case with programs for improving society, those with the power to do so take advantage of the loopholes and weaknesses in the master plan to advance their own agendas. This tendency for corrupting otherwise virtuous ideals is not only the fault of those with nefarious ambitions, as critical theory reminds us such problems also arise because they are inherent in the tangled discourse, loopholes and aporias of a given doctrine.

Whether one can speak of “liberalism” as a doctrine, an ideology, or a program is a matter for debate, one that shall not be pursued here beyond asserting that philosophical and political liberalism has furnished the fundamental ideals upon which the current global order is founded, *with social contradictions intact*. Thus, it is worthwhile to take note of shortcomings inherent in a political vision that contains programmatic problems that remain unresolved and continue to produce social suffering. Seigel reminds us of the importance of the legacy of liberalism for figuring out the political challenges of the present when he writes that “the political frustrations of our own day still derive from the powerful dilemmas created when our progenitors took up this liberal stance three or four centuries ago (Seigel in Manent, 1995, viii).

The concept of freedom, arguably the grandest theme of liberal philosophy, was conceived in several different configurations by its early proponents. The viewpoint of Francis Bacon (1561-1626) clarified the relation between liberalism and enlightenment freedom as one based on a relation of domination as the means towards liberation. He proffered that, “the sovereignty of man lieth hid in knowledge... now we govern nature in opinions, but we are thrall unto her in necessity: but if we would be led by her in invention, we should command her by action” (quoted in Adorno and Horkheimer, 1969). While Bacon addressed the instrumental relationship to nature, John Stuart Mill’s account of liberty recognized the interdependent nature of social relations and the obligations each person has to the other. He wrote, “a person may cause evil to others not only by his actions but by his inaction, and in either case he is justly accountable to them for the injury” (1996, 14). These typically liberal accounts of how to enact freedom seem to bear no relation to one another, and like the many other differing conceptions within the canon of liberal thought, ideas about how to conceive of freedom vary in significant ways. The differences in liberal conceptions of freedom have created the occasion for contradictions in the material realm of lived human experience.

It is not as if there was ever any consensus about the prospects of liberal society. Liberalism has had significant critics in thinkers such as Nietzsche, and Marx through to those who followed in their mode of critique such as Adorno and Horkheimer who saw in

the unfolding of enlightened liberalism an immanent human crisis, most specifically the Holocaust. I would direct the reader to Adorno and Horkheimer's proclamation regarding the presumably monumental humanistic shift from mediaeval barbarism to scientific and philosophical Enlightenment, where despite liberal progresses made, "*the fully enlightened earth radiates disaster triumphant*" (italics mine 1969, 3). The Enlightenment, as the apogee of liberal rationality – with the knowledge it provided towards the dismantling of the feudal, aristocratic bonds of servitude and the replacement of superstition with rationality; to the reconstitution of social interaction to the monolithic organizing principle of economic exchange; to the rise of "sovereign individualism" and sovereign border states has fundamentally transformed the experience of being human in the modern capitalist world order. After centuries of liberal policy and promises of modernist development in impoverished, colonized nations, and in the poverty-stricken places throughout the world, including rising homelessness in the advanced industrial nations, the globalized society remains immersed in mounting human misery and thus all societies share the plight of social suffering and planetary, ecological decay. This dialectical pressure I shall name *extremification* shall be explored further in the concluding sections of this paper.

From the Sovereign Individual to Possessive Individualism

Liberalism, as it was originally conceived and as it remains today, is inseparable from the modern concepts of individual rights, and *sovereign individualism*. As Abercrombie, Hill and Turner write, "individualism, properly so called, was in origin mainly a political and subsidiarily an economic doctrine relating to the rights and obligations of persons that was associated with the English political theory of the seventeenth century, which later heavily influenced British and American culture" (1986, 2).

The concept of the sovereign individual has materialized in many forms that are simultaneously founded on the original conceptions but vary substantially in character and type. If we can identify an essence or motive behind the desire to liberate the individual it would be freedom of the individual from the naturalized social hierarchies (characteristic of feudal society) and be free to act in their own self-interest as self-preservative agents in the pursuit of their own economic destiny. Just how such concepts as "free agent," "self-interest" and "prosperity" get defined specifically has as much to do with liberalism as with political economy. Thus, although the liberal conception of individual freedom was possessive (realized through the category of private property), at its inception, contemporary consumer society conceptions of individualism have fully passed over onto what C. B. Macpherson (1962) called *possessive individualism*. Macpherson argues that English political thought from the seventeenth to the nineteenth centuries shared a persistent, underlying and unifying assumption that connected the conception of the self to a new reality based on two fundamentally modern sociological realities: 1) the economic marketplace, and 2) the principle of exchange.

Macpherson writes of liberal individualism as follows:

"Its possessive quality is found in its conception of the individual as essentially the proprietor of his [sic] own person or capacities, owing nothing to society for them. The individual was seen neither as a moral whole, nor as part of larger social whole, but as an owner of himself... The human essence is freedom from dependence on the wills of others, and freedom is a function of possession. Society becomes a lot of free equal individuals related to each other as proprietors of their own capacities and of what they have acquired by their exercise. Society consists of exchange between proprietors" (Macpherson, 1986, 3).

The liberal trope of “individualism” in its various manifestations is now such a normal part of modern consciousness that even the unschooled call its substance by name when they invoke phrases such as “my individual rights,” “my property” and “my personal self expression.”

Sovereign individualism transmuted into possessive individualism to bolster capitalist consumerism, especially after the First World War, demonstrated the dynamic flexibility of the cornerstone categories of liberal thought and the multiple modalities of its forms of expression. As Seigel states, “thus do we live still with consequences of the original choice that established individuals as the only basis of social and political life” (Seigel in Manent, 1995, ix). As such individuals under advanced capitalism become transformed into consumers and political freedom somehow becomes freedom of consumer choice and personal agency become skilfulness at bargain hunting for corporately produced commodities in the retail spaces that have almost completely reconfigured urban spaces and the public realm of desire.

With the possessive drive to accumulate consumer products the traditional conception of liberal individualism is now transmuted into the neoliberal conception of the individual as an active subject where self-preservation becomes open *selfishness* – an interpretation that was notoriously popularized in Rand’s (1964) conception of individualism as *concern with one’s own interests*. Whether or not this is an accurate reading of the original meaning of individual self-preservation in liberalism or even a correct reading of Rand’s interpretation of self preservation is irrelevant since the economic agents who have realized neoliberalism and its economic hegemonies have proceeded on this reading of it: enlightened self-interest means “lets all go get rich!” It is no secret for example that Alan Greenspan, former Federal Reserve Chairman in the US was an avid Ayn Rand disciple and applied her libertarian principles to his own economic policy decisions. The concept of possessive individualism is directly related to the economic conception of freedom espoused by another icon of neoliberalism, Milton Friedman, to whose ideas we shall now turn.

The Economic Conception of Freedom and Corporate Capitalist Empire

In his book *Capitalism and Freedom* (1962) Milton Friedman writes, “It is extremely convenient to have a label for the political and economic viewpoint elaborated in this book. The rightful and proper label is liberalism” (1982, 5). One might be surprised at such a bold act of self-labelling, yet it seems Friedman felt the need to correct his detractors who dismissed him as excessively conservative despite his insistence that his theories were rooted firmly in the tradition of classical liberal thought. Friedman’s writings have been lambasted as ideological justification for the decline in welfarism and middle-class social stability. He is unapologetic when he writes that, “The scope of government must be limited. Its major function must be to protect our freedom from both the enemies outside our gates and from our fellow citizens: to preserve law and order, to enforce private contracts, to foster competitive markets” (1982, 2). In these words, we can begin to see the outlines of features of the contemporary neoliberalism, and we may take issue with them, especially because “protection” gets transmuted into perpetual war, and “fostering competitive markets” has been a dismal failure considering the increasing corporate and financial monopolization of the capitalist business arena and the injustices this has created for workers and for less-than-sovereign consumers.

Yet Friedman lures us with a kernel of political truth when he writes, “economic freedom [is] a necessary condition for political freedom” and “economic freedom is [also] an inseparable means toward the achievement of political freedom” (1982, 4, 8). Who can deny that people should be free to engage in the economic exchange of goods and services in a manner that is suited to sustainable living? And yet this self-evident principle of free exchange has become, in the context of neoliberalism open justification for multinational corporations to engage in global pillage in a manner more intensified than during the colonial and classical imperialist eras of capitalism. The political manipulation of legal categories such as “individual rights” has been used to invent legal fictions such as “corporate personhood” as the latest incarnation of the limited liability provisions that were initially granted to business enterprises to give them special status under the law and has been the main legal force legitimating the neoliberal advance of corporate imperialism under the naturalizing ideology of globalization (Bakan, 2004, Jameson and Miyoshi, 1998, Gordon, 2010).²

The Liberal Rule of Law *or* the Neoliberal Unruliness of Law?

Another fundamental feature of liberalism is the ideal that the law of the sovereign should act as the equalizing instrument in the conduct of civil matters. The idea of governance through law goes back at least to the time of Aristotle (384BC-322BC) but was revived in specifically modern ways in the liberal writings of John Locke (1632-1704) and Montesquieu (1689-1755) among others. Even when not specifically invoked the concept of establishing a legal order as the basis for a stable society is among the fundamental tenets that underpin liberalism. The idea that law can serve as an ordering mechanism to furnish justice and address civil wrongs is also commonly associated with the philosophy of Thomas Hobbes, (especially in *Leviathan*, 1651): that humans are untrustworthy at best and dangerous to each other at worst, and that the domination of the weak by the powerful is a repeating pattern of history that is best managed by a regulating instrument to which all must submit in the attempt to achieve civil order. That instrument is law.

Politics derived from law founded in the authority of the sovereign state is not only a liberal principle of modern social organization and human regulation it extends back to ancient civilizations as well. What distinguishes the modern liberal orientation of the sovereign political rule perspective is that power is no longer concentrated primarily within the state bureaucracy and its hegemonic structures or on the privilege of a particular noble class, but that legal protection is the right of every individual, with the notable exception of women and children. Furthermore, the classical liberal concept of state sovereignty was restricted to domestic politics. Strong writes, “Hobbes made no attempt to extend the notion of sovereignty beyond state borders” (in Schmitt 1996, xxiii). This limited conception is far from the case in the neoliberal present where dominant nation-states claim legal authority to extend their own will to foreign lands by means of military and market forces

² It is important to mention that Friedman’s economic views can be seen as an extension of F. A. Hayek’s (1938-1992) view of human nature which embraced a *homo economicus* conception where people are driven primarily by individual self-interest. A view that conflicts with classical sociological accounts of humans as primarily intersocial beings who function properly in collective groups and cooperative interactions.

and thus neoliberal capitalism serves to create a new type of asymmetrical empire with global ambitions (Hardt and Negri, 2000).

In neoliberalism the “rule of law” concept has been distorted to serve the interests of state power (Bingham, 2011). Post 9/11 anti-terror legislation has been criticized as ushering violations such as the extra-legal rendition and detainment of presumed terrorist suspects, widespread restrictions on freedom of expression and assembly and has been used notoriously to criminalize political opposition in backwards nations (Chang 2002). Agamben (2005) has explored the political-legal device of martial law employed by states in times of crisis which normalizes authoritarian rule known as the “state of exception.” The state of exception, a political condition initially explored by Schmitt (1996) is yet another manifestation of the transformation of classical liberal state into the neoliberal state. The former celebrates the reduction of state power and interference in civic life while the latter has expanded the power of the state as an instrument of force. In the post 9/11 neoliberal state the widespread use of revived categories including “enemy of the state” to prosecute individual citizens who have no terrorist ties whatsoever along with the criminalization of dissent, the lack of protection for whistle-blowers and those interested in protecting freedom of information against the secrecy aims of the security state apparatus are among those targeted in the use and abuse of anti-terror laws.

What has become especially apparent in neoliberal global order is that the concept of the rule of law has become inverted. Originally designed to ward off against abuses of power, it is now evident that law does not restrain power – instead power makes law in its own interests. This is a significant reversal of the liberal intention to produce a global order based on the Kantian ideal of “perpetual peace” (1795) and just system of law that has been the aim of so much effort after the catastrophic wars and atrocities of the twentieth century.

A second troubling case of the perversion of the principle of rule of law has to do with the growing menace of political corruption and underground criminality that is creeping into the gaps of economic exclusion left by neoliberalism. In some countries corruption is so completely normalized that political and economic systems are based upon it (Cockcroft, 2014). The increase in corruption is correlated with the expansion of neoliberalism, and in this manner criminal economies merge with legitimate economies to convolute the entire program of the rule of law. Derrida (1994) refers to this proliferation of organized criminal corruption that is intertwined with and “not clearly dissociated from the process of democratization” as “super-efficient and properly capitalist phantom states” that have successfully evaded criminal legal prosecution (Derrida, 1994, 83).

Neoliberal Democracy and its Competing Identities

The concept of liberalism often evokes another master concept with which it is intricately related, that of *democracy* – an idea from classical antiquity and yet one that has been continuously reconstructed and repurposed by nation-states. Democracy has become the basis for arguably the grandest political mythology of advanced liberalism and remains virtually uncontested as the proper and best way to conduct manage government in the attempt to deter a despotic state apparatus. What is minimized also is democracy’s essential connection with capitalism. For what is important to the dominant economically powerful states in relation to other states on the globe is not the extent of their democracy but their willingness to *do business*. Thus, the fiefdoms of Africa and the East where presidents often aim to *rule for life*, the capitalist component of their being seems to far outweigh their

lack of a democratic component. Yet the concept of democracy persists, even to the point of justifying wars of aggression (the American led invasion of Iraq in 2003) which was justified with the express purpose of exporting democracy *by force*.

The operating logic of capitalist democracy is competition: the political agon. Liberal democratic power is therefore founded on the competitive mechanism of selection (Colaguori, 2012). However, the ideal of free and fair competition in democratic elections is often far from the actuality. The competitive mechanism gets tampered with by both domestic and foreign powers, vote tampering, media disinformation, and other political “dirty tricks,” which influence electoral outcomes. The degradation of democracy into a camouflage for bourgeois hegemonic control was evident early in the twentieth century when politicians developed a type of statecraft based on the open and deliberate manipulation of the consciousness of voters – what Walter Lippman (1922) in *Public Opinion* called the *manufacture of consent*.

The popularity of democracy has also to do with the appeal of the concepts of freedom and human rights with which it is discursively bound. Yet, in the context of claiming rights a type of competitive neo-tribalism prevails as cultural, racial, sexual, national, and other identitarian groups are pitted against one another in claiming of rights against the same attempts made by others. The idea of rights as *political commodities* that liberalism has furnished has become the new ground upon which primitive social conflicts are renewed that can produce resentment creating adversarial identities fuel civil wars, genocides and “inter-ethnic wars [which] are proliferating” (Derrida, 1994, 82).

The old liberal Left was informed by Weber’s (1864-1920) concept of *verstehen*, which can mean empathetic understanding of the position of the other, which compelled those who were targets of discrimination to identify with and support the struggles of other discriminated peoples. Neoliberal *identitarian individualism* dispenses with this empathetic ethic to make a competition of suffering. In such a context there is a competition for rights in a manner that reproduces the ancient agonistic practice whereby one’s own transcendence depends on the negation of the other.

The Incomplete Liberal Promise of Female Emancipation and The Neoliberal Perpetuation of the Patriarchal Order of Domination

How much of humanity continues to remain under the yoke of the patriarchal values and its forms of subservience? How has liberalism managed its official opposition to the patriarchal order in the West, and how has the neoliberal world order failed to address the persistence of patriarchal systems of domination in many other parts of the world where repressive mediaeval codes of honour, shame, blatant misogyny and femicide continue to prevail? – the honor killings, bride burnings, acid attacks, female infanticide, child sexual enslavement, and so on. If we contemplate answers to these questions, we find some disturbing realities which indicate patriarchal forms of domination from female subjection to hypermasculine violence and war continue under neoliberalism.

Some concrete examples shall serve to illustrate the gravity of the suffering: the ongoing practice of child brides being forcibly wed to often much older males against their will; the growing trade in the sex trafficking, sex-tourism, and enslavement of vulnerable and captured women and girls throughout the world; the systematic exclusion of women in the economic and political spheres of power and decision making and the denial of education for girls in orthodox patriarchates; the ongoing cultural practice of female genital

mutilation that is based on denying women sexual pleasure and instead offers a lifetime of physical and emotional pain (Hirschi Ali, 2006); the practice of honour killing and shaming of females, including in-the-face acid attacks; female infanticide - the wilful murder of female babies, and the deliberate abortion of female foetuses amounting to nothing less than femicide (Hvistendahl, 2011); the ongoing violence and sexual assault against women, including the violence against women and girls as rape victims in times of war (see Oliver, 2007); and further, patriarchy is not always beneficial for males who are the primary victims of workplace deaths, homicide, suicide, and it is predominantly male soldiers who are sacrificed for military ends (Dyer, 2004).

As J. S. Mill wrote in the classic liberal text *The Subjection of Women* (1869), “the sufferings, immoralities, evils of all sorts, produced in innumerable cases by the subjection of individual women to individual men, are far too terrible to be overlooked” (1996, 95). And yet the liberal revolution to date has failed to curtail the innumerable patriarchal practices of oppression. J. S. Mill is unequivocal in his declaration that, “...the principle which regulates the existing social relations between the two sexes – the legal subordination of one sex to the other – is wrong in itself, and one of the chief hindrances to human improvement, and that it ought to be replaced by a principle of perfect equality, admitting no power or privilege on the one side, nor disability on the other” (Mill, [1869] 1996, 117). Despite the expansion of neoliberal capitalism and democracy – hailed by proponents of progress as forces of justice and equality – the patriarchal order has proven incredibly resilient in remaining intact as the largest, most ancient, all-encompassing social order that merges itself indelibly into the fabric of other spheres of social organization and systems of power.

In many non-Western nations the situation is dire, and females are at risk of attack by strangers as soon as they leave the protective confines of their home. In India, ironically touted as “the world’s largest democracy” women walk in fear for their lives everyday to the point where men are often seen as predators for women alone and un-chaperoned in public (Bannerji, 2016). Even in the presumably economically emancipated nations privileged to be included in the exclusive club of the European Union such as Romania, the patriarchal codes of moral and social regulation remain in full force. Consider the prevailing attitudes favouring the patriarchal system that are held by a great number of men, and unfortunately by the many women who lend their support to patriarchy (Lerner, 1986) – Mill’s observation that arguments in favour of female subjection fail the test of “a preponderating weight of argument against it... the more persuaded its adherents are that their feeling must have some deeper ground, which the arguments do not reach” (1996, 117).

Conclusion: The Sky is Falling, The Sun is Rising

The sky is falling. David Harvey explains, “the main substantive achievement of neoliberalization, however, has been to redistribute, rather than to generate wealth and income” (2005, 159). Wealth redistribution across society is uneven and disproportionately apportioned to the economic elites who ‘own and control the means of production’. This “accumulation by dispossession” (2005, 160) has four main components: Privatisation and commodification: The privatization of hitherto public assets; Financialization: The ever-increasing scale and power of financial institutions; The management and manipulation of crises: The state intervention in bailing out failing businesses etc. thus preventing

dialectical change; State redistribution: The state's attempt at reversing the flow of capital wealth from upper to lower classes (2005, 161-163). Beyond the technical aspects of neoliberalism listed above, what other features of social life – the realm of lived experience – are shaped by neoliberalism, its mounting tensions and violent oppositions?

We have recourse to the postmodern idea of *catastrophic intensification* (Connor, 1997) which relates directly to what I am naming as the process of *extremification* as: life conditions for the dispossessed and those who do not fit into neoliberal society are being pushed to the limit of survival globally through wealth disparities, homelessness and psychological trauma; polarizations of power between class and status groups are forming into diametrical oppositions in a manner that is incompatible with liberal conceptions of unity and equality; the polarization of humans versus nature is evident in the realm of the ecological with mass species extinctions, deforestation, and unforeseen levels of pollution globally. The dialectical shifts that would normally arise from such polarizations are not being allowed to unfold into something new due to the efforts of crisis managers who maintain order through coordinated disaster management. There is also what we might term the phenomenological dimension of neoliberalism wherein its extremes are reflected in psychic subjectivity and quotidian experience – this includes the effects of the digital imperialism conducted through mediated image and message culture that includes social media, contributing to the reification of consciousness – themes which shall be considered below.

Extremification is putting planetary life *on the brink* (Bender and Druckrey, 1995). Extremification is reflected also in neoliberal terminology, especially in popular discourse so that everyday language reflects the rise of the new reality of conflict and increasing existential tension. The word “impact” has virtually replaced the word “effect” – “middle class” replaces “working class” to eliminate the idea that the vast majority of people are actually and still remain global proletarians. Other examples of linguistic forms of the extremification prevail, Gen Z says “unalived” instead of killed or dead. Bombs are referred to as “weapons of mass destruction” and people are compelled to accept that they live within a “military definition of reality” (Mills, 1956). The militarization of reality is evident in the *sovereignty of force*. The greater force prevails over the weaker and the champion is decided based on the supremacy of the capacity to wield violence. Extremification flourishes in the global agon where violence, militarization and the *militainment* are continually celebrated in the media spectacles that constitute such a large part of entertainment culture and furnish the ideological justification for the excesses of neoliberal capitalism (Stahl, 2010).

Some French theorists tell us that the entire social order of diametrical extremes, the “empire of disorder” (Joxe, 2002), is driven by the seductive authority of the visual image and its spectacle of hegemonic illusions, today intensified, and personalized by the ubiquity of instantaneously accessible social media handheld communications technology, where “public space is profoundly upset by techno-tele-media apparatuses and by new rhythms of information and communication” (Derrida, 1994, 79). John Berger (1972) reminded that the visual image itself is arguably the primary icon of modernity. It began with the ideologies of class embedded in classical European oil paintings and moved into advertising images and then onto the visual culture of consumerism at large. Now virtually everyone participates in populating the world with consumer images: Images of themselves consuming, images of commodities, images of power, violence, wealth, excess, grimacing

tough male faces, pouty duck-lipped female faces posing for the camera eye. Consumer glamour and branded luxury images remain the dominant themes of the cosmopolitan urban scene and when taken as a whole, this collage of images mystifies one's ability to understand how the production of wealth and the production of poverty are part of the same extremes of possession and systematic impoverishment (Berger, 1972).

Glamorized images of power and status are highly publicized. What remains mostly unseen are visions of the nihilism of neoliberal decadence: images of the homeless and the poor, of oceanic dead zones and toxic algal blooms, images of the massive garbage waste dumps that are the literal excremental concentrations produced by the cities of excess, of people actually eating garbage to survive – all of which are hidden from the eye of the possessive individual. Educators of children should reconsider taking their students to science centres and museums – every elementary school student should be taken on a field trip to a garbage processing site, and to a prison so that the extremes of life close to home are rendered brutally visible.

The dialectic of production and destruction that underpins the tension of the neoliberal order benefits nothing from revealing its dark underbelly, just like books on the topic of war are not wont to display images of mangled and dismembered corpses, of dead children and bloodied aid workers and murdered journalists, but instead celebrate the clever tactics of battle. The system of extremification in the neoliberal West promotes itself by showing the glitz and glamor of celebrity, and deliberately avoids attention towards negative underbelly of ongoing carnage.

The proliferation of consumer images which once was limited to tarnishing urban landscapes with its “empire of signs” (Barthes, 1970) now extends its dominion directly onto people's bodies in the form of extreme body tattoos, self-harming body piercings as fashionable deformations, and conspicuous-consumption-logo-branded clothing items. Visual bondage is the neocolonialism of neoliberalism. In this manner the personal hand-held communications device is both the key to cultural inclusion as well as the prime hegemonopolistic object of the neoliberal cultural landscape. It provides the public with techno-connected social relations in an age of the “death of the social” (Baudrillard, 1983) just as it parasitizes the very essence of that which is nourishing and affirming in human social relations – friendship is killed off in the name of virtual friendship. The role of the visual image in modernist capitalism was a powerful one but it remained in the background of social life. It pales in comparison to the “empire of the spectacle” (Rancière, 2009, 32) in neoliberalism. The image-world, the simulacrum matrix, is now virtually inescapable. To participate in neoliberal society is to be complicit in image consumption.

Baudrillard (2010) reminds us in *The Agony of Power* that hegemony has replaced domination as the primary modality of power in social life. Mass public consent to technological immersion, giving in to the ecstasy of the machine, joining life in the circuit of images and consumer objects, clichéd thoughts, memes, and gadgets have become normal and fun and the source of escapist delirium: “Human beings... spend their life in full-time alienated performances” (Marcuse, 1978).

Virtually every form of domination identified by early 1900s critical theory is still present today in more extreme forms: slavery, patriarchal sexism and exploitation, racism and discrimination, popular fascism, the exploitation of labour and the reification of consciousness, global warfare and the domination of nature. Weather extremes worldwide and global climate disruption effects from droughts to floods, to wildfires, to sinkholes to

nuclear plant meltdowns producing displaced and “disposable populations” (Holmer Nadesan, 2013) – phenomena which are at once both natural(ized) and generated by human action are yet another aspect of neoliberal disorder.

As the universal order of life works its way into the particular, individuals assume, absorb and internalize the tensions of the extremified world, and many break down in stress, anxiety and psychological trauma while others revel in it by embracing extreme activities thinking that joining the violent frenzy is somehow a defense against it. The magnitude of psychological stress and human neuroses today is more than a measure of the fragmented consciousness of existential being itself – it reflects a wholesale shift in being itself, far more extreme than the concept of reification indicates.

The “horror of the world” (Adorno, 1974) is perhaps nowhere more evident than in the stultifying reality that millions of children go missing and are abducted each year, many of whom are likely sold into slavery and sexual servitude to feed the hunger of human depravity. How can one fathom the horror of delivering a child into such a state of trauma? What are we to make of the everyday horrors that humans have created in their “societies”? Are we to be left in a state of shock and depression by the awareness of this? No. On the contrary we are to live our lives tempered by the fact that social reality is painful, traumatic and difficult on so many levels. Despite capitalist marketplace euphoria Derrida cautioned us to the “macroscopic fact” of the age as follows:

“the inequality of techno-scientific military, and economic development maintain an effective inequality as monstrous as that which prevails today, to a greater extent than ever before in the history of humanity. For it must be cried out, at a time when some have the audacity to neo-evangelize in the name of the ideal of a liberal democracy that has finally realized itself as the ideal of human history: never have violence, inequality, exclusion, famine, and thus economic oppression affected as many human beings in the history of the earth and of humanity... let us never neglect this obvious macroscopic fact, made up of innumerable singular sites of suffering: no degree of progress allows one to ignore that never before, in absolute figures, never have so many men, women, and children been subjugated, starved, or exterminated on the earth” (Derrida, 1994, 85).

Everyday horrors increasingly include the victimization suffered by the unrelenting commission of criminal acts of all varieties that go unpunished, and that the forces of law and order are simply impotent to prevent and are sometimes complicit.

The ongoing daily and random tragedy of vicious acts of criminality where dangerous humans prey upon the vulnerable and the off-guard in the regularized evil that men (mostly) do only increases in times of scarcity and want. The normalcy of global crime is so broad that it produces an underground economy that feeds the agents of corruption with wealth and serves to bridge the legal and illegal economies in such a monstrous way that liberal economic philosophers never even imagined possible, even though slavery and colonialism were rampant throughout the genesis of liberal capitalism. Ian Taylor, offering a perspective on criminality in liberal-market societies, analyses how the intensified conditions of job scarcity and increased competition for work creates the social conditions where people engage in a heightened form of “in-your-face incivility.” He states that, “the logic of market competition insinuates new systems of social classification and evaluation into just about every workplace as well as into the biographies of just about every working citizen... as “winners” and “losers” [and is] at the core of the defensive/aggressive individualism which many young people exhibit in a “winner-loser culture”” (Taylor, 1999, 5).

The sun is rising. All freedom begins with freedom of thought. People have not given up hope for a better life as they continue to rethink the norms that maintain the status quo and begin to resist the expansion of domination, political corruption and economic hegemony. New forms of consciousness have emerged such as the public awareness of how the one-percent power-elite control the majority of global wealth. What is now common knowledge was a short decade ago something confined to sociology textbooks. Multiple forms of backlash against domination include new types of social affirmation in the forms of social praxis and self actualization: Newly invigorated social movements reflecting revolutionary self-assertion, food security movements, human rights movements, environmental movements, anti-violence movements, and more. There are material changes occurring including the rise of non-petroleum-based energy sources and the growing shift away from gasoline and diesel-powered vehicles that may mark the beginning of a shift away from a petroleum industry global hegemony.

Extreme conditions have their limits. Domination is never a complete process. Society is in a constant state of flux and change and unforeseen contingencies can influence the course of history in significant ways that can ameliorate or amplify social suffering. The covid pandemic shook up the world of global capitalism, and capitalism struck back with massive layoffs, food and energy price inflation, high interest rates, and record profits for the rich. Is there actually a procedural plan to build a political, economic and cultural alternative to capitalism through coordinated planning, or as Rancière (2009) suggests change can come from unplanned dissensus:

“... there is no hidden secret of the machine that keeps [people] trapped in their place. It would be assumed that there is no fatal mechanism transforming reality into image; no monstrous beast absorbing all desires and energies into its belly; no lost community to be restored. What there is are simply scenes of dissensus, capable of surfacing in any place and at any time... Collective understanding of emancipation is not the comprehension of a total process of subjection. It is the collectivization of capacities invested in scenes of dissensus. It is the employment of the capacity of anyone whatsoever... today there is more to be sought and found in the investigation of this power than in the endless task of unmasking fetishes or the endless demonstration of the omnipotence of the beast” (2009, 48-49).

References:

- Abercrombie, Nicholas, Stephen Hill and Bryan S. Turner. (1986). *Sovereign Individuals of Capitalism*. London: Allen and Unwin.
- Adorno, Theodor. (1973 [1966]) *Negative Dialectics*. New York: Continuum
- Adorno, Theodor. (1974). *Minima Moralia: Reflections from the Damaged Life* London: Verso Editions
- Adorno, Theodore and Max Horkheimer. (1969). *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. New York: Continuum.
- Agamben, Giorgio (2005) *State of Exception*. The University of Chicago Press.
- Bakan, Joel. (2004). *The Corporation*. Penguin Canada.
- Bannerji, Himani. (2016). “Patriarchy in the Era of Neoliberalism: The Case of India.” *Social Scientist*; New Delhi 44.3/4 (Mar/Apr 2016): 3-27.
- Barthes, Roland. (1970). *Empire of Signs*. New York: Hill and Wang.
- Baudrillard, Jean. (2010). *The Agony of Power*. New York: Semiotext(e).
- Baudrillard, Jean. (1983). *Simulations*. New York: Semiotext(e).
- Bender, Gretchen and Timothy Druckrey. (1995). *Culture on the Brink: Ideologies*

- of Technology*. Seattle: Bay Press.
- Berger, John. (1972). *Ways of Seeing*. London: Penguin Books.
- Biebricher, T. (2019). *The Political Theory of Neoliberalism*. Stanford University Press.
- Bingham, Tom. (2011). *The Rule of Law*. Penguin Books.
- Callaway, Rhonda L. and Julie-Harrelson-Stephens. (2007). *Exploring International Human Rights*. London: Lynne Rienner Publishers
- Chang, Nancy. (2002). *Silencing Political Dissent*. New York: Seven Stories Press.
- Cockcroft, Laurence. (2014). *Global Corruption: Money, Power and Ethics in the Modern World*. University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Connor, Steven. (1997). *Postmodernist Culture*. Blackwell Publishers.
- Colaguori, Claudio. (2012). *Agon Culture: Competition, Conflict and the Problem of Domination*. Whitby: de Sitter Publications.
- Derrida, Jacques. (1994). *Spectres of Marx*. New York: Routledge.
- Dyer, Gwynne. (2004). *War*. Random House Canada
- Dyer, Gwynne. in Anne Henderson. (1994). *The Gods of Our Fathers*. National Film Board. Documentary Film.
- Foucault, Michel. (1980). *The History of Sexuality Volume 1: An Introduction*. Vintage Books
- Freeden, M. (2015). *Liberalism: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford University Press, Oxford.
- Friedman, Milton. (1982 [1962]). *Capitalism and Freedom*. The University of Chicago Press.
- Gordon, Todd. (2010). *Imperialist Canada*. Winnipeg: Arbeiter Ring Publishing.
- Hardt, Michael and Antonio Negri. (2000). *Empire*. Harvard University Press.
- Harvey, David. (2005). *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*. Oxford University Press.
- Hirschi Ali, Ayan. (2006). *Infidel*. Atria Paperback.
- Holmer Nadesan, Majia. (2013). "The Demise of Liberal Biopolitics: Wealth Accumulation and Disposable Populations." In Claudio Colaguori, ed. (2013). *Security, Life and Death: Governmentality and Biopower in the Post 9/11 Era*. Whitby: de Sitter Publications.
- Horkheimer, Max. (1972). *Critical Theory*. New York: Continuum.
- Hvistendahl, Mara. (2011). *Unnatural Selection: Choosing Boys over Girls and the Consequences of a World Full of Men*. Perseus Books Group.
- Jameson, Frederic and Masao Miyoshi, eds. (1998). *The Cultures of Globalization*. Duke University Press.
- Joxe, Alain. (2002). *Empire of Disorder*. New York: Semiotext(e).
- Kant, Emmanuel. (1795). "Perpetual Peace: A Philosophical Sketch" in *Political Writings*. Edited by H. S. Reiss. (1991). Cambridge University Press.
- Lippman, Walter. (1922). *Public Opinion*. New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company.
- Lerner, Gerda. (1986). *The Creation of Patriarchy*. London: Oxford University Press.
- Macpherson, C. B. (1962). *The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism: Hobbes to Locke*. Oxford Paperbacks.
- Manent, Pierre. (1995). *An Intellectual History of Liberalism*. Princeton University

- Press. Princeton, New Jersey.
- Marcuse, Herbert. in Bryan Magee, (1978). *Men of Ideas*. Oxford University Press
- Mbembe, A. (2003). Necropolitics. *Public Culture*, 15, 11-40.
<https://doi.org/10.1215/08992363-15-1-11>
- Mill, J. S. (1996 [1869]). *On Liberty and The Subjection of Women*. Wordsworth Classics.
- Mills, C. W. (1956). *The Power Elite*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Oliver, Kelly. (2007). *Women as Weapons of War*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Pinker, Steven. (2018). *Enlightenment Now: The case for reason, science, humanism and progress*. Penguin Books.
- Rancière, Jacques. (2009). *The Emancipated Spectator*. Verso.
- Rand, Ayn. (1964). *The Virtue of Selfishness*. New American Library.
- Seigel, Jerrold, in Pierre Manent. (1995). *An Intellectual History of Liberalism*. Princeton University Press.
- Schmitt, Carl. (1996). *The Concept of the Political*. The University of Chicago Press.
- Stahl, Roger. (2010). *Militainment, Inc: War, Media, popular Culture*. Routledge.
- Strong, Tracy B. (1996). "Foreword" in Schmitt. 1996. *The Concept of the Political*. The University of Chicago Press.
- Taylor, Ian. (1994). *Crime in Context: A Critical Criminology of Market Societies*. Westview Press
- Walter Lippman. (2004 [1922]). *Public Opinion*. Dover Publications Inc.