

## **ON INDIVIDUALISM IN THE NEOLIBERAL PERIOD**

Dr Matthew Eagleton-Pierce  
Lecturer in International Political Economy  
SOAS University of London  
Email: [m.eagleton-pierce@soas.ac.uk](mailto:m.eagleton-pierce@soas.ac.uk)

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Neoliberalism is often read as the latest revision or revival of the liberal tradition. Yet plotting what is new within neoliberalism, however precisely defined, is riven with analytical problems. Inspired by Boltanski and Chiapello (2007) and derived from new research into the vocabulary of neoliberalism (Eagleton-Pierce 2016), this short paper offers a particular framing of the neoliberal period as the latest ideological ‘spirit’ in the history of capitalism. This spirit encompasses relatively stable schemas of justification which help to reflect and constitute capitalist relations, extending from the world of technical experts to many organisational cultures and consumer practices. The paper aims to contribute to our understanding of how neoliberal processes will always be hybridized (rather than ‘pure’) creations and how, paradoxically, despite failures, doubts, and cynicism, the methods of justification associated with neoliberalism acquire a degree of resilience. It charts and clarifies this terrain through a particular focus on the history of individualism, pursued in three

stages. First, the paper briefly discusses how the theme of individualism grew out of industrial society in the nineteenth century and became a major object of struggle between supporters and critics of capitalism. Second, with this deeper context in mind, the discussion explores some major explanations for why the appeal to individualism, and the related popular notion of ‘choice’, has become dominant in the neoliberal period. These reasons pivot around the spread of principles tied to neoclassical economics, product marketing, the erosion of collective socialist-inspired organisations, and the oblique incorporation of values associated with postwar social movements into new strategies of capital accumulation. The third stage of the argument aims to open space for further problematising the relationship between individualism and collectivism.

## I. EARLY CONCEPTIONS OF THE INDIVIDUAL

In the Monty Python satirical film, *Life of Brian* (1979), a famous scene captures something of the tension between the promotion of individuality and the often-simultaneous desire of humans to be part of larger collectives. Brian, a rather jaundiced and unwilling Christ figure, finds his every movement and utterance studied by a growing number of disciples. At one point, Brian confronts the crowd to declare, ‘Look, you’ve got it all wrong! You don’t *need* to follow me. You don’t need to follow *anybody*! You’ve got to think for yourselves! *You’re all individuals!*’. To Brian’s claim, the crowd responds: ‘Yes! We’re all individuals!’. Without sounding too philosophical we might agree that this scene has a hint of truth. Prior to the eighteenth century, the notion of seeing oneself as ‘an individual’, a person with a unique set of properties and aspirations, was perhaps not common. The individual, as the word in-dividual implies, was that which could not be divided into parts. Allegiance to family, clan, religion, empire, lord, or king often superseded any claims to individual identity. In the thought of the Middle Ages, there was attention to ‘the soul’ (*anima*) or an ‘inner core’, but conceiving of ‘the individual’ as a *particular* self, unlike other selves or selves, was less current than it is today (Bloch 2014[1940]; Bynum 1980). The transition to our modern sense of individuality has many origins and they are not easy to summarise, but in general we can notice that in Europe, the movement against feudalism and towards capitalism provided the larger backdrop to such changes. Through the erosion of traditional social, economic, and religious

orders, the possibility of moving beyond an inherited position in society began to acquire greater legitimacy (Williams 1983[1976]).

From the eighteenth century, intellectual debates were a major catalyst in popularising the notion of the individual. Across a range of fields, including logic, biology, and political economy, the concept steadily acquired its contemporary appearance: that is, the atomistic sense of a substantial entity (Williams 1983[1976]; Taylor 1989). Within the liberal tradition, from classical writers through to the neoliberal voices of today, the moral primacy of the individual has been consistently defended (Gray 1995). At root this line of reasoning does not necessarily deny the significance of collectives (such as the state, society, community etc.) but, rather, seeks to promote the abstract individual as normative, as *the* ontological starting point for analysis. Thus, Adam Smith argued that commercial society was the aggregate of individual decisions. But Smith was no defender of the radical vision of *laissez-faire*: the individual, in his view, needed forms of government for the wider good, such as for security. Smith's reading of *homo economicus* was complex. He suggested that individuals, particularly when wealthy, could become slothful and indulgent but that human psychology also went beyond self-interest to embrace empathy for others (Smith 1993[1776]). From the late nineteenth century, in a departure from this latter appeal to subjective emotions, neoclassical economists began to redefine the concept. Their thinking continues to be very influential and, at the same time, a source of controversy in the social sciences. In essence, as is widely known, the neoclassical conceptualisation of the individual is a figure driven by private tastes (or preferences) who, significantly, acts as a 'rational' decision-maker in formulating choices. The ideal individual surfaces as a calculating agent that is or, perhaps more precisely, a figure who *should be*, attentive to his or her material efficiency (Robbins 1935; also see Jevons 1879; for a critique, see Davis 2003).

As this theoretical framing of individual was being shaped, another significant conceptual extension emerged, one which continues to have major relevance in debates over neoliberalism: the idea of individualism. Like socialism and communism, this term is a creation of the nineteenth century. One will search in vain for the term in Samuel Johnson's eighteenth-century *Dictionary* (1755). As carefully traced by Steven Lukes (1973), individualism has a rich semantic history, with a

range of meanings informed by national contexts. In the US, for instance, it became ‘a symbolic catchword of immense ideological significance, expressing all that has at various times been implied in the philosophy of natural rights, the belief in free enterprise, and the American Dream’ (Lukes 1973: 26). By contrast, in France in particular but also elsewhere, individualism has carried a pejorative tone, with the implication that to become too focused on the individual jeopardises the presumed higher interests of society. This latter connotation has, therefore, made individualism a useful concept for critics of capitalism, as illustrated by Karl Marx’s famous argument that individuals are not born free and rational, but struggle to make their own history ‘under circumstances existing already, given and transmitted from the past’ (Marx 1852[2000]: 329). Thus, since the notion of individualism is mobilised in both the defence and the critique of capitalism, it is not surprising that strong users of the term believe that opponents have distorted or confused its meaning. For instance, Friedrich von Hayek (1948), often considered an early neoliberal thinker, argued for a ‘true’ theory of individualism, one which was against socialist approaches to society, but at the same time did not treat individuals as either isolated or infallible beings removed from larger forces.

## **II. THE RECASTING OF INDIVIDUALISM IN THE NEOLIBERAL PERIOD**

In the historical analysis of ideas, one reoccurring risk involves converting history into a kind of conveyor belt, broadly moving in a single, coherent direction, except for some occasional tinkering of bells and switches by various handymen. One has to be analytically flexible to account for non-linearity and randomness, while also exploring how social traditions, for sure, display patterned resemblances. What I want to sketch out here are a set of potential reasons for explaining how individualism has been refreshed in the neoliberal period. This analysis is also underpinned by a particular reading of ideology, one which departs from the often reductionist Marxist sense of the ‘dominant ideology’, a presumed coherent ‘system’ engineered by Machiavellian elites in order to conceal material interests. Instead, the ideology of individualism is theorised here as a practical set of relatively stable schemas, grounded in lived experiences, and cultivated by many players including, but also beyond, a privileged elite population. When effectively sedimented and reproduced within institutions and mental structures, these beliefs offer agents stimuli to action, depending upon how the

actual justification for action corresponds with the internal dispositions acquired through history. In short, the neoliberal spirit of capitalism, like other ideological spirits before it, has a sponge-like quality and seeks to continually test out ideas it could use to refresh the ideology, while still drawing upon the pre-existing legitimacy of older norms, values, and modes of conduct that it still considers to be useful (Boltanski and Chiapello 2007).

How has the concept of the individual and, in particular, the related term of choice, been recast in the neoliberal period? Four sets of reasons can be outlined here. First, as noted, in the discipline of economics the concept of choice plays a central analytical role, to the extent that the entire field has been defined by some as a ‘science of choice’ (Robbins 1935). According to most economists, individuals make choices in a calculating, rational manner or, perhaps more precisely in many contexts, are defined as acting *as if* they were fully rational. But choices are not made in a vacuum. Rather, the choice of an individual is a product of their personal tastes or preferences under conditions of resource scarcity, such as with respect to income or time. Within this conceptualisation of human action, ‘explanations of individual choices also often *justify* those choices. The factors that *cause* choices also function as *reasons* for choices’ (Hausman and McPherson 2008: 235, italics in original). The most important generalisation that economists offer is that people are materially motivated and will tend to seek out more commodities rather than fewer. Wealth generation is not the only way to satisfy preferences and not all forms of behaviour are strictly rational or self-interested, but economists argue that such conditions tend to prevail and can be used as a basis for explaining market phenomena in a capitalist system. At the same time, the preferences that structure choices always have constraints attached, beyond which a certain option may not be possible. Thus, ‘freedom’ to choose operates within boundaries and the extent to which constraints can shift represents a core question of political economy.

The valorisation of individualised behaviour in economics is also significant for how such a conception has informed many other fields, particularly those related to the growth of management. As capitalist values have spread across many societies, the meaning of choice has become conditioned by consumerism. This trend has deep roots and manifests itself in a different ways (Trentmann 2004, 2012; Fine 2002).

While the neoclassical economic theory of consumer choice dates back to the late nineteenth century, the seeds of the contemporary neoliberal sense of the expression can be found in the design of product marketing in the twentieth century, particularly during the postwar period (Kassarjian and Goodstein 2010). With the rise of mass production and mass distribution, notably via the international spread of the department store and the supermarket, the problem of understanding consumer behavior became paramount (Crossick and Jaumain 1999). What do consumers like and dislike? How do they use products? What new desires could be cultivated? When product markets became increasingly competitive, with items that were broadly similar in terms of quality and price, the development of branded goods offered a way in which choice could be more clearly defined. In this sense, as marketing professionals have closely studied, a successful brand, such as Colgate toothpaste, did not advertise itself as only performing a single function identical to other toothpastes. Rather, Colgate advertisers connected the brand to a cluster of pervasive, commonly held meanings, including subjective desires of beauty and hygiene, in order both to socially construct and, importantly, *simplify* the choice for the customer (Jones 2010; more generally, on motivational techniques used in postwar advertising, see Packard 1957, and for contemporary developments in ‘neuromarketing’, see Lindstrom 2008).

The neoliberal period has experienced extensions and elaborations of these historical trends. In one sense, the category of ‘the consumer’ has now travelled into other fields that were relatively insulated from capitalist forces, such as politics, education, and health. While consumer has always carried an unfavourable tone, initially meaning to destroy and to waste, one could speculate that the mainstreaming of the term beyond purely commercial settings is helping to neutralise this criticism. At the same time, the increasing deployment of the related term ‘user’, notably in respect to public services, also points to the same underlying concern, namely the social sensitivities implied by labeling humans as consumers. In addition, the appeal to ‘personalisation’ and ‘customisation’ is a phenomenon with a particular neoliberal twist. From the late 1980s, these latter expressions became concerns for many businesses, with marketing theory helping to craft and implement such agendas. The rise of ‘mass customisation’ systems was made financially viable by new flexible manufacturing processes, such as seen in the automotive industry (Davis 1989; Kotler 1989; Alford, Sackett, and Nelder 2000). But the digital revolution – if hypothetically abstracted from privacy

concerns – offers marketing nirvana: an endless cycle of direct, tailored advertising and, in turn, feedback on the desires of each consumer. It is this potential of the internet to offer superior levels of efficiency that helps to explain why leading firms, such as Facebook and Google, receive considerable attention in financial markets.

Third, debates on the relationship between individualism and neoliberalism are particularly sharp when compared to structures and ideals that are commonly viewed as ‘collectivist’. From the 1970s, led by conservative governments, business lobbies, and some media figures, many values and rights associated with collective forms of socio-economic organisation came under renewed attack. For instance, the drop in trade union participation rates in the US and Western Europe tended to weaken union bargaining positions with management and eroded socialist-inspired goals (Rigby, Smith, and Lawlor 2005; Gall, Wilkinson, and Hurd 2011; Gumbrell-McCormick and Hyman 2013). Although unions remain powerful and often popular in many countries, such as in Germany, it can be suggested that the attractiveness of socialism, particularly ‘actually existing socialism’, was fading long before the collapse of the Berlin Wall (Lebowitz 2012). For instance, from the 1960s in East Germany there was a rising demand for Westernised consumer goods (Major 2009; Rosenberg 2010). With the collapse of the Soviet Union, this tendency to assume that capitalism was the presumed answer for all of humanity acquired a new cultural and political potency.

Fourth, and drawing upon Boltanski and Chiapello’s argument in *New Spirit of Capitalism* (2007), neoliberal ideological forms have been particularly adept at selectively appropriating arguments associated with the politics and culture of the 1960s and 1970s, specifically social moments (feminism, labour, civil rights, etc.). These processes of direct and oblique incorporation are complex. As Boltanski and Chiapello (2007) suggest, the desire for emancipation and the cultivation of the self is one of the most durable justifications in the history of capitalism. This dichotomy between ‘a positive freedom’ and ‘a negative other’ reappears in many arguments, such as wage earning power versus serfdom; urban opportunities versus rural limitations; and the liberating workplace versus the restricted home. The social critique of capitalism in the 1960s and 1970s, often centred on the organisation of the family and employment rights, was essentially a critique of social justice. There was also a specific artistic critique focused on the lack of authenticity in capitalism. What

the neoliberal spirit did, to summarise, was to appeal to these desires for independence and freedom in different social spaces, but translate such desires into the so-called ‘flexible subject’ who explore and nurtures ‘networks’ and ‘projects’ for their own self-worth. In other words, the dimension of fairness was partly addressed by the neoliberal spirit (such as in terms of class, gender, and racial opportunities in the field of employment). Modes of rule that appear too hierarchical, through which orders are dictated by a single boss, are considered, at least on paper, to be *passé* and incompatible with modern management practices. This response to ‘liberating’ the individual worker is, in short, a partial reaction, and distorted echo of, the postwar movements of social critique.

### **III. INDIVIDUALISED COLLECTIVE ACTION IN THE NEOLIBERAL PERIOD**

Although the rhetoric associated with neoliberalism has notable appeals to individualised responsibility – the logic of self-governance and self-care in a market society – one should also observe the many ‘innovative forms of individualized collective action’ in contemporary capitalism (Barnett 2005: 11). This fluid distinction (or dichotomy) between individual and collective responsibility is, indeed, something that characterises many forms of ‘actually existing’ neoliberal practices.

One can return again to consumer culture to explore this particular idea through three themes, each of which carries its own ironies. First, many forms of advertising promote an ambiguous tension between, on the one hand, the aspiration to fulfill personal individuality and, on the other, the social comfort of fitting into larger collectives or fashions (peer groups, social classes, nations, environmentalism, fair trade, religions etc.). Again, these advertising strategies are not new, but have been tested and refined over decades (Trentmann 2005, 2012). For instance, in Pakistan, Ammara Maqsood (2014) has shown how modern desires for consumption – often predicated on an idealised West – have become fused with Islam in the sale of items such as headscarves. One can debate the extent to which such notions of ‘individualized collective action’ are ‘real’, ‘satisfying’, or how they may conflict with other identities of the self, but one cannot deny that neoliberal consumerism pulls many levers at the same time. Such effects are, indeed, reminiscent of the seemingly paradoxical argument proposed by Emile Durkheim (1973[1898]) that the

ideology of individualism produces a necessary form of group solidarity within industrial society (see also Lukes 1969).

Second, it is always worth recalling that behind all advertising rhetoric lies a marketing machine that does not see a world of individuals. Rather, marketers see categories and segments of populations. Consumers are organised into boxes, by virtue of their similarities, such as by nationality, gender, age, or income. The double irony here is how some consumers know this fact, yet still choose to treat the communication between the advertiser and themselves as ‘personal’, as if the *collective belief* in individualism has to be sustained. Third, forms of neoliberal consumerism are sometimes marked by the problem of too much choice, or ‘overchoice’ as Alvin Toffler (1970: 263) once put it, leading to anxiety and potential paralysis in decision-making. Many companies now treat this as major concern and, as a consequence, try to simplify their product lines and communications to make easier the act of choosing – and therefore paying (Chernev 2003; Schwartz 2004; Gourville and Soman 2005). In an echo of *Life of Brian*, it is almost as if crowds of consumers are crying out to be led towards a particular choice, even if each prefers to be known as ‘an individual’: we’re all together *and* ‘We’re all individuals’.

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