

Fuck Neoliberalism

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Abstract: Yep, fuck it. Neoliberalism sucks. We don't need it.

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Fuck neoliberalism. That's my blunt message. I could probably end my discussion at this point and it wouldn't really matter. My position is clear and you likely already get the gist of what I want to say. I have nothing positive to add to the discussion about neoliberalism, and to be perfectly honest, I'm quite sick of having to think about it. I've simply had enough. For a time I had considered calling this paper 'Forget Neoliberalism' instead, as in some ways that's exactly what I wanted to do. I've been writing on the subject for many years (Springer 2008, 2009, 2015; Springer et al. 2016) and I came to a point where I just didn't want to commit any more energy to this endeavor for fear that continuing to work around this idea was functioning to perpetuate its hold. On further reflection I also recognize that as a political maneuver it is potentially quite dangerous to simply stick our heads in the sand and collectively ignore a phenomenon that has had such devastating and debilitating effects on our shared world. There is an ongoing power to neoliberalism that is difficult to deny and I'm not convinced that a strategy of ignorance is actually the right approach (Springer 2016). So my exact thoughts were, 'well fuck it then', and while a quieter and gentler name for this paper could tone down the potential offence that might come with the title I've chosen, I subsequently reconsidered. Why should we be more worried about using profanity than we are about the actual vile discourse of neoliberalism itself? I decided that I wanted to transgress, to upset, and to offend, precisely because we *ought* to be offended by

neoliberalism, it *is* entirely upsetting, and therefore we *should* ultimately be seeking to transgress it. Wouldn't softening the title be making yet another concession to the power of neoliberalism? I initially worried what such a title might mean in terms of my reputation. Would it hinder future promotion or job offers should I want to maintain my mobility as an academic, either upwardly or to a new location? This felt like conceding personal defeat to neoliberal disciplining. Fuck that.

It also felt as though I was making an admission that there is no colloquial response that could appropriately be offered to counter the discourse of neoliberalism. As though we can only respond in an academic format using complex geographical theories of variegation, hybridity, and mutation to weaken its edifice. This seemed disempowering, and although I have myself contributed to the articulation of some of these theories (Springer 2010), I often feel that this sort of framing works against the type of argument I actually want to make. It is precisely in the everyday, the ordinary, the unremarkable, and the mundane that I think a politics of refusal must be located. And so I settled on *Fuck Neoliberalism* because I think it conveys most of what I actually want to say. The argument I want to make is slightly more nuanced than that, which had me thinking more about the term 'fuck' than I probably have at any other time in my life. What a fantastically colorful word! It works as a noun or a verb, and as an adjective it is perhaps the most used point of exclamation in the English language. It can be employed to express anger, contempt, annoyance, indifference, surprise, impatience, or even as a meaningless emphasis because it just rolls off of the tongue. You can 'fuck something up', 'fuck someone over', 'fuck around', 'not give a fuck', and there is a decidedly geographical point of reference to the word insofar as you can be instructed to 'go fuck yourself'. At this point you might even be thinking 'ok, but who gives a fuck?' Well, I do, and if you're interested in ending neoliberalism so should you. The powerful capacities

that come with the word offer a potential challenge to neoliberalism. To dig down and unpack these abilities we need to appreciate the nuances of what could be meant by the phrase ‘fuck neoliberalism’. Yet at the same time, fuck nuance. As Kieran Healy (2016: 1) has recently argued, it “typically obstructs the development of theory that is intellectually interesting, empirically generative, or practically successful”. So without fetishizing nuance let’s quickly work through what I think we should be prioritizing in fucking up neoliberalism.

The first sense is perhaps the most obvious. By saying ‘fuck neoliberalism’ we can express our rage against the neoliberal machine. It is an indication of our anger, our desire to shout our resentment, to spew venom back in the face of the noxious malice that has been shown to all of us. This can come in the form of mobilizing more protests against neoliberalism or in writing more papers and books critiquing its influence. The latter preaches to the converted, and the former hopes that the already perverted will be willing to change their ways. I don’t discount that these methods are important tactics in our resistance, but I’m also quite sure that they’ll never actually be enough to turn the tide against neoliberalism and in our favour. In making grand public gestures of defiance we attempt to draw powerful actors into a conversation, mistakenly believing that they might listen and begin to accommodate the popular voice of refusal (Graeber 2009). Shouldn’t we instead be done talking? Here is the second sense of ‘fuck neoliberalism’, which is found in the notion of rejection. This would be to advocate for the end of neoliberalism (as we knew it) in a fashion advanced by J.K. Gibson-Graham (1996) where we simply stop talking about it. Scholars in particular would discontinue prioritizing it as the focus of their studies. Maybe not completely forget about it or ignore neoliberalism altogether, which I’ve already identified as problematic, but to instead set about getting on with our writing about other things. Once again this is a crucially important point of contact for us as we work beyond

the neoliberal worldview, but here too I'm not entirely convinced that this is enough. As Mark Purcell (2016: 620) argues, "We need to turn away from neoliberalism and towards ourselves, to begin the difficult – but also joyous – work of managing our affairs for ourselves". While negation, protest and critique are necessary, we also need to think about actively fucking up neoliberalism by doing things outside of its reach.

Direct action beyond neoliberalism speaks to a prefigurative politics (Maeckelbergh 2011), which is the third and most important sense of what I think we should be focusing on when we invoke the idea 'fuck neoliberalism'. To prefigure is to reject the centrism, hierarchy, and authority that come with representative politics by emphasizing the embodied practice of enacting horizontal relationships and forms of organization that strive to reflect the future society being sought (Boggs 1977). Beyond being 'done talking', prefiguration and direct action contend that there was never a conversation to be had anyway, recognizing that whatever it is we want to do, we can just do it ourselves. Nonetheless, there has been significant attention to the ways in which neoliberalism is able to capture and appropriate all manner of political discourse and imperatives (Barnett 2005; Birch 2015; Lewis 2009; Ong 2007). For critics like David Harvey (2015) only another dose of the state can solve the neoliberal question, where in particular he is quick to dismiss non-hierarchical organization and horizontal politics as greasing the rails for an assured neoliberal future. Yet in his pessimism he entirely misunderstands prefigurative politics, which are a means not to an end, but only to future means (Springer 2012). In other words, there is a constant and continual vigilance already built into prefigurative politics so that the actual practice of prefiguration cannot be coopted. It is reflexive and attentive but always with a view towards production, invention, and creation as the satisfaction of the desire of community. In this way prefigurative politics are explicitly anti-neoliberal. They are a seizing of the means as *our*

means, a means without end. To prefigure is to embrace the conviviality and joy that comes with being together as radical equals, not as vanguards and proletariat on the path towards the transcendental empty promise of utopia or '*no place*', but as the grounded immanence of the *here* and *now* of actually making a new world 'in the shell of the old' and the perpetual hard work and reaffirmation that this requires (Ince 2012).

There is nothing about neoliberalism that is deserving of our respect, and so in concert with a prefigurative politics of creation, my message is quite simply 'fuck it'. Fuck the hold that it has on our political imaginations. Fuck the violence it engenders. Fuck the inequality it extols as a virtue. Fuck the way it has ravaged the environment. Fuck the endless cycle of accumulation and the cult of growth. Fuck the Mont Pelerin society and all the think tanks that continue to prop it up and promote it. Fuck Friedrich Hayek and Milton Friedman for saddling us with their ideas. Fuck the Thatchers, the Reagans, and all the cowardly, self-interested politicians who seek only to scratch the back of avarice. Fuck the fear-mongering exclusion that sees 'others' as worthy of cleaning our toilets and mopping our floors, but not as members of our communities. Fuck the ever-intensifying move towards metrics and the failure to appreciate that not everything that counts can be counted. Fuck the desire for profit over the needs of community. Fuck absolutely everything neoliberalism stands for, and fuck the Trojan horse that it rode in on! For far too long we've been told that 'there is no alternative', that 'a rising tide lifts all boats', that we live in a Darwinian nightmare world of all against all 'survival of the fittest'. We've swallowed the idea of the 'tragedy of the commons' hook, line and sinker; when in reality this is a ruse that actually reflects the 'tragedy of capitalism' and its endless wars of plunder (Le Billon 2012). Garrett Hardin's (1968) Achilles heel was that he never stopped to think about how grazing cattle were already privately owned. What might happen when we reconvene an actual

commons as a *commons* without presuppositions of private ownership (Jeppesen et al. 2014)? What might happen when we start to pay closer attention to the prefiguration of alternatives that are already happening and privileging these experiences as the most important forms of organization (White and Williams 2012)? What might happen when instead of swallowing the bitter pills of competition and merit we instead focus our energies not on medicating ourselves with neoliberal prescriptions, but on the deeper healing that comes with cooperation and mutual aid (Heckert 2010)?

Jamie Peck (2004: 403) once called neoliberalism a ‘radical political slogan’, but it is no longer enough to dwell within the realm of critique. Many years have passed since we first identified the enemy and from that time we have come to know it well through our writing and protests. But even when we are certain of its defeat, as in the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis and the subsequent Occupy Movement, it continues to gasp for air and reanimate itself in a more powerful zombified form (Crouch 2011; Peck 2010). Japhy Wilson (2016) calls this ongoing power the ‘neoliberal gothic’, and I’m convinced that in order to overcome this horror show we must move our politics into the realm of the enactive (Rollo 2016). What if ‘fuck neoliberalism’ were to become a mantra for a new kind of politics? An enabling phrase that spoke not only to action, but to the reclamation of our lives in the spaces and moments in which we actively live them? What if every time we used this phrase we recognized that it meant a call for enactive agency that went beyond mere words, combining theory and practice into the beautiful praxis of prefiguration? We must take a multipronged approach in our rejection of neoliberalism. While we can’t entirely ignore or forget it, we can actively work against it in ways that extend beyond the performance of rhetoric and the rhetoric of performance. By all means let’s advance a new radical political slogan. Use a hashtag (#fuckneoliberalism) and make our contempt go viral! But we have to

do more than express our indignation. We have to enact our resolve and realize our hope as the immanence of our embodied experiences in the *here* and *now*. We need to remake the world ourselves, a process that cannot be postponed.

We've willfully deluded and disempowered ourselves by continuing to appeal to the existing political arrangement of representation. Our blind faith has us waiting endlessly for a savior to drop from the sky. The system has proven itself to be thoroughly corrupt, where time and time again our next great political candidate proves to be a failure. In this neoliberal moment it's not a case of mere problematic individuals being in power. Instead, it is our very belief in the system itself that epitomizes the core of the problem. We produce and enable the institutional conditions for 'the Lucifer effect' to play itself out (Zimbardo 2007). 'The banality of evil' is such that these politicians are just doing their jobs in a system that rewards perversions of power because it is all designed to serve the laws of capitalism (Arendt 1971). But we don't have to obey. We're not beholden to this order. Through our direct action and the organization of alternatives we can indict the entire structure and break this vicious cycle of abuse. When the political system is defined, conditioned, enmeshed, and derived from capitalism, it can never represent our ways of knowing and being in the world, and so we need to take charge of these lifeways and reclaim our collective agency. We must start to become enactive in our politics and begin embracing a more relational sense of solidarity that recognizes that the subjugation and suffering of one is in fact indicative of the oppression of all (Shannon and Rouge 2009; Springer 2014). We can start living into other possible worlds through a renewed commitment to the practices of mutual aid, fellowship, reciprocity, and non-hierarchical forms of organization that reconvene democracy in its etymological sense of *power* to the *people*. Ultimately neoliberalism is a particularly foul idea that comes with a whole host of vulgar outcomes and crass assumptions. In response, it

deserves to be met with equally offensive language and action. Our community, our cooperation, and our care for one another are all loathsome to neoliberalism. It hates that which we celebrate. So when we say ‘fuck neoliberalism’ let it mean more than just words, let it be an enactment of our commitment to each other. Say it loud, say it with me, and say it to anyone who will listen, but most of all mean it as a clarion call to action and as the embodiment of our prefigurative power to change the fucking world. *Fuck Neoliberalism!*

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