The Handbook of Neoliberalism

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Our new arms

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This chapter is supposed to be about ‘protest and resistance to neoliberalism’, but I’m not going to write about any of those things. I think that the Left today, and particularly Left scholars who write for and read a book like this, are suffering from a serious illness. Our illness, which after Nietzsche I will call *ressentiment*, is our obsession with neoliberalism. *Ressentiment* has atrophied our imagination to the point where we are only able to think in terms of negating neoliberalism. As theorists we can only sing in the key of critique. We meticulously record and discuss the crimes and contradictions of neoliberalism. When we imagine the world we want instead, we can only speak in the terms of not-neoliberalism, of cancelling out the current political-economic regime. When we act, we can only act in the register of protest, resistance, contestation, and refusal – of struggle against neoliberalism. We turn our faces and our bodies towards neoliberalism, it occupies the entirety of our vision and our imagination, we bathe in its dark light, and we can think only of blocking it, disrupting it, and, one day, in our fondest dreams, causing it to collapse.

But we don’t have to be sick. There is another way to think, another way to be. We can become obsessed with ourselves instead. What do we want to create? What are we capable of producing? Who are we capable of becoming, together? What worlds, what ways of life have we already started to build, and how can we help them grow, spread, and flourish?

**We are sick**

It’s all Marx’s fault. He is obsessed with negating capitalism. Obviously, *Capital* is Exhibit A, and it is here that both his brilliance and his unhealthy obsession are most fully on display. Page after page, volume after volume of meticulous analysis of capitalism: its productive power, its contradictions, its pitiless domination. He is by turns admiring, outraged, and resentful. But he is always fully absorbed in the project that consumes everything: a critique of (capitalist) political economy.

The young Marx is much better, but he suffers too. The ‘Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts’ are mostly a critique of alienation and private property. Most of the text is taken up by a brilliant and utterly convincing analysis of why they are destructive, and why we must try to invent a world without them (1994: 58–68). The text offers much less discussion of what that other world would be like. He does give it a name – communism – and he devotes some pages
to it. But he conceives of communism entirely negatively. He defines it as the overcoming or cancellation (aufgehoben) of private property. Communism is not narrated as the positive mobilization of our productive capacities; it is, rather, the negation of capitalism’s central relation. Even when Marx does focus on the question of communism, he spends much of his time negating the versions of communism he does not want (e.g. crude communism where property rights are extended to everyone), and relatively less time describing the communism we do want. Only near the end of the section on ‘Private Property and Communism’ do we get a very brief (though tantalizing) glimpse of ourselves in communism, in which we are restored to ourselves as social beings, beings who are capable of producing freely and in common (1994: 71–9). This is Marx at his best, at his most useful. It is a Marx we rarely see.

Or consider ‘On the Jewish Question’. Here Marx entirely dismantles the insidious oppression of the liberal-democratic state, and he shows how its strict separation between public and private spheres actively guarantees that capital will be left free to accumulate profit and immiserate the working class. He develops at length and with great force his argument for why such ‘political emancipation’ is inadequate and even counterproductive. He says that we must aspire instead to ‘human emancipation’. But it is not until the final, dense, thrilling last paragraph of the first section that we get a glimpse of what this might mean:

Only when the actual, individual man has taken back into himself the abstract citizen and in his everyday life, his individual work, and his individual relationships has become a species-being, only when he has recognized and organized his own powers as social powers, so that social force is no longer separated from him as political power, only then is human emancipation complete.

(1994: 21, emphasis added)

So much is going on here, so much that needs to be unpacked. But Marx leaves it latent, unelaborated. He gives us a patient and detailed critique of what is wrong, and really just this single, final, tantalizing sentence to indicate what we should create instead.

Even in ‘The Civil War in France’ (1871) a series of addresses to workers about the most extraordinary attempt by workers, perhaps ever, to create a new society beyond capitalism, Marx says far more about the machinations of the powers that be than he does about the innovative new practices that workers in the Commune created. He goes on at length about the treachery of the Thiers government and the barbarism of the Prussians. He seems to have a real taste for the sourness of it all. But his descriptions of the Commune are fleeting, vague, and almost, at times, obfuscating, as though he is trying actively not to investigate the details too closely. Of course this was all composed in the moment, during and after the fall of the Commune, and so we should not expect a comprehensive historical account. But yet, still, he is gregarious and painstaking on the details of Thiers, and almost evasive when it comes to the Commune.

Perhaps the text most obsessed with negation is The Communist Manifesto. It isn’t really about communism at all. It is mostly a screed against the exploitation and domination of capitalism, and, secondarily, against all the false socialisms threatening the anti-capitalist movement. The communists in the Manifesto are not members of an association producing freely, rather they are a Communist Party vanguard that sees more clearly than the proletariat and has the resolve to take the necessary action (1994: 169ff). The action that is necessary, of course, is negation. Negate private property, negate class, negate the pillars of the capitalist political economy. Marx and Engels are so absorbed in their will to negate that they seem to have neglected to think seriously about how this negation should be carried out, or who should do it. And so, in the
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Manifesto, we get the disastrous plan: the proletariat will form into a class and organize itself into a party, which will seize the state, use the state to abolish private property and therefore capitalist class relations, and then allow the state to wither, at which point we will all witness the emergence of another world, a communist world. Today, of course, it is easy to look back on that program and see the folly.

But, even at the time, Bakunin saw the folly quite clearly. He insisted, loudly, that we are fools if we think we can use coercive state power and dictatorship to free ourselves. He said such a dictatorship, once in power, would not wither away but grow ever stronger. He said we would have a new ruling class of workers-party officials who would dominate society no less disastrously than our current capitalist masters (1972: 330ff). He said that we need to create another way of life not by negating the present one, but by directly creating the new one. And he reminded us that we already possess, within ourselves, the capacity to organize our lives in common, in a functioning society without capitalism and without the state (1973a: 148–9; 1973b: 128–30). Bakunin’s wisdom was available to us then, and it is available to us now. We need to heed it.

And, in fact, this wisdom is there in Marx too. To be fair, we can see him struggling, here and there, against his own will to negate. It’s probably more Hegel’s fault than it is Marx’s. Despite Marx’s energetic and explicit attempts to critique and move beyond Hegel (e.g. the second half of the ‘Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts’, 1994: 79–97), the latter’s habits of thought were deeply imprinted. Marx often seems trapped, despite himself, in the assumption that negation is productive, that creation can only proceed by way of destruction. And perhaps that is the right way to look at Marx: there are many Marxes, some of whom accept the gospel of negation, and others searching for another way to think and act in the world.¹

So, to be fair, the ‘Marx’ I have been complaining about is really those Marxes who think in terms of negation. It is entirely possible, and indeed I think we should, re-discover and learn from those other Marxes, those minor Marxes who are able to think beyond or without negation.²

The problem is that the Marxes of negation have become the major Marxes, the ones who dominate our contemporary imagination. We think only (or overwhelmingly) with those Marxes, and we ignore the others. As a result, we have become enthralled by neoliberalism.³ We are utterly fascinated by it, tracking its every move, cataloging its many sins, grudgingly admiring its power to maintain its domination. We write brief histories (Harvey 2005) and primers (Chomsky 1999), we map its geographies (Brenner and Theodore 2003), we dissect its logics (Peck 2010), we chart its spread to other parts of the world (Park et al. 2012), we document the way it destroys the environment (Heynen et al. 2007), we show how it lurks behind natural disasters (Johnson 2011), how it persists even after the crisis of 2008 (Mirowski 2013), and we examine it up close with every method in our arsenal, both quantitative (Dumenil and Levy 2013) and qualitative (Greenhouse 2012). We are relentless. We are obsessed. And, like Marx in the wake of the Commune, we have developed a taste for this sour discourse. Lewis Hyde once complained about irony that it:

> has only emergency use. Carried over time, it is the voice of the trapped who have come to enjoy their cage. That is why it is so tiresome. People who have found a route to power based on their misery – who don’t want to give it up though it would free them – they become ironic.

(1986: 16)

We have carried our irony over time, and we have come to enjoy our cage.
It turns out that Nietzsche diagnosed our problem before the fact, in his work on morality. What we have been enmeshed in, under the sway of Hegel’s negative Marxes, is what Nietzsche called ressentiment. Ressentiment, he says, is a bad humour, a bitter resentment that has plagued Judeo-Christian civilization throughout its long history. Ressentiment arises when those in a society who are oppressed become consumed by thoughts of their oppressors. The oppressed cannot change the conditions of their oppression, and so they console themselves by stoking and stewing in their hatred for their oppressors. They make sense of their world by developing what Nietzsche calls a ‘slave morality’, a morality that defines the actions and values of the oppressors to be ‘evil’. Good is then defined, negatively, as whatever is not evil. So the oppressed are defined as good, but not because of some positive goodness they possess. They are only good because they are not the oppressors. The entire logic of this morality revolves around the oppressors. The oppressed are consumed by bitter thoughts of their oppressors, and they rarely consider themselves.

Clearly, ressentiment is a destructive rather than a creative energy. The only action it can think to propose is to resist evil. It urges the oppressed to destroy their oppressors, or, at the very least, to cancel their power. In most circumstances this action remains merely a fantasy for the oppressed. But, even in the unlikely event they are able to revolt and seize power from their oppressors, they will have nothing to offer in place of the old society. They lack any positive idea of the good. The only real resource they possess is their meticulous catalogue of the strategies their now-former oppressors used to subordinate them. All they could be expected to do is to systematically negate everything in the catalogue, hoping that this will give rise to the good. Obviously, this story maps right onto the experience of actually existing socialism: seize state power and cancel out the bourgeoisie’s primary strategy of oppression (private property) so that the good (communism, which is nothing more than ‘private property overcome’) can emerge. The acute dangers of ressentiment’s destructive energy, and its inability to create anything new, should be abundantly clear.

But Nietzsche suggests there is a related and equally important problem with ressentiment, which is that it orients the oppressed in the wrong direction. It focuses their attention on the wrong subject. All of their energy is spent thinking about their oppressors. They understand very well their oppressors’ excellence, power, and intelligence. But they fail to examine themselves. They never attend to their own excellence, power, and intelligence. They have no idea what they are capable of. They do not know what worlds, what other ways of life, they might already have the power to create together.

We can get well

And so we are working away, sourly, in this rotten groundwork: a stubbornly persistent Hegelian phantasy of creation-through-negation sitting on top of a deeper civilizational predilection for ressentiment. It is a dank basement full of foul air. We need a new groundwork, an entirely different way to think about and be in the world. We need to train ourselves to think not in terms of negating what exists, but in terms of producing what we desire. We need to be attentive to and discover our excellence, our power, our ability to imagine and create new objects, new relations, and new forms of life. To steal a line from Henry Miller (1965: 429–30), we need to:

cease pouring it out like a sewer, however melodious it may sound to our ears, and rise up on our own two legs and sing with our own God-given voice. To confess, to whine, to complain, to commiserate, always demands a toll. To sing it doesn’t cost us a penny.
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Deleuze and Guattari, just to take one example

The good news is that the new groundwork we need isn’t new at all. We have already invented it. It has existed as a minor current in our thought throughout our long march in the wilderness of Hegelian negation. In the modern era, particularly intense manifestations of this current are to be found in the work of writers like Machiavelli, Spinoza, Nietzsche, Bergson, and Deleuze and Guattari. In this section I will focus on Deleuze and Guattari’s collaborative work, but that work should be understood as part of this larger flow that is not obsessed with negation but is focused on our power to produce, to create, and to affect the world around us.

Right from the beginning (1977[1972]), Deleuze and Guattari train their attention on what they call ‘desiring-production’, which they say is the only force in the world that is capable of creating new things. Most of the powers that be – capital, the state, the family, Oedipus – are secondary, derivative; the only thing they can do is to capture or channel the originary power of desiring-production. These ‘apparatuses of capture’, as Deleuze and Guattari (1987[1980]) call them, cannot themselves produce anything new. They are wholly dependent on the creative power of desiring-production. Capital, for example, cannot create value. It is a system for organizing the value that is created by living labour.

Given this ontological starting point, Deleuze and Guattari don’t see any reason to focus our attention on capital, the state, or any of the apparatuses that confine us. Our imperative must be to understand desiring-production, to know how it works, and what it can do. There is a scene in Anti-Oedipus (1977[1972]: 45) that crystallizes the problem. The psychoanalyst fails because he insists that the patient accept the Oedipal diagnosis, accept that his troubles (and the solution to them) are contained in the triangle of daddy–mommy–me. The analyst, therefore, never gets at what matters, he never ‘says to the patient: “Tell me a little bit about your desiring-machines, won’t you?”’ For Deleuze and Guattari, it is our desiring-machines that hold the key. They are what is capable of generating new forms of life, new ways of being together. They have not been the focus of our enquiry, but they should be.

I am, perhaps, being a bit too stark. Deleuze and Guattari do not call for us to entirely re-orient our attention towards desiring-production, to pay no attention at all to the apparatuses. Rather we need to pay some attention to them because they currently imprison desiring-production and prevent it from producing on its own terms. To escape this confinement, desiring-production must invent what Deleuze and Guattari call ‘lines of flight’, fugitive acts whereby desiring-production frees itself from the apparatuses and begins to create according to its own volition. To launch these escapes, Deleuze and Guattari admit, it is helpful to be attentive to the structure of the apparatuses (which they call ‘strata’ here).

This is how it should be done: Lodge yourself on a stratum, experiment with the opportunities it offers, find an advantageous place on it, find potential movements of deterritorialization, possible lines of flight, experience them, produce flow conjunctions here and there… have a small plot of new land at all times. It is through a meticulous relation with the strata that one succeeds in freeing lines of flight.

(1987[1980]: 161)

So we need to have relations with the strata, with the apparatuses of capture. And these relations should be thoughtful; we should take care in learning the contours of the apparatuses. But, at the same time, our concern with them is contingent and fleeting. They are only of interest for now, because they are currently capturing our desire. We must pay attention to them only for
as long as it takes to escape. The goal is not to destroy the apparatuses, they are none of our concern. Our concern is with ourselves, with our desiring-machines. Our goal is to flee so that they will be able to create as they will.

If we were to mobilize Deleuze and Guattari's more general imagination here in the context of the concrete political economy, we would have no desire to resent capitalist social relations and no taste for their destruction. We would be concerned, instead, to leave, to flee those relations. And we would do so only as part of the main project, which is to discover our own capacities for economic production, and learn more about how we might use those capacities effectively in common. Similarly, we would have no interest in smashing the state. The state is not important. Instead, we would be interested in our desire to govern ourselves, to learn our capacity for democracy, and practise using it together wisely.6

There is little point in resisting neoliberalism or protesting austerity. It is not necessary to negate them in order to create something new. We need only to flee and set about producing the world we want instead. And so: enough about neoliberalism. We need to stop talking about it now. We have droned on far too long. We need to let go of our obsession with it, turn our face away from it, and move purposefully in another direction. We need to become obsessed with ourselves instead, with the myriad other forms of life we are already capable of creating. We don’t need a Handbook of Neoliberalism. We don’t need any more books about exploitation, injustice, alienation, domination, privatization, enclosure, marketization, or financialization. Instead, we need books (upon books) about the other lives people are already creating instead. We need a Handbook of Care, a Handbook of Democracy, a Handbook of the Common. We don’t need to think in terms of struggle, resistance, refusal, protest, and contestation. We need to think in terms of creation, production, innovation, desire, invention, and we need to eagerly begin the project of building another life together.

¡Democracia real YA!

That shift will not be easy because we are not in the habit. We are too steeped in rensentiment. And so, in this section, I am going to hold up the wave of movements in 2011, 2012, and 2013 as an example, as an inspiration that can spark our imagination. But I want to do so cautiously, because it is very hard to make generalizations about those events as a whole. It is not possible to reduce them to one desire, one guiding idea. There were many different movements, in many different places with different histories and systems of rule and cultural traditions. Tunis was not the same as Madrid, which was not the same as Tel Aviv, which was not the same as Oakland. To intensify the problem, each movement itself was also multiple, both in terms of the different desires of the different people who participated, and in terms of how each movement changed as it unfolded in time. It is misguided to try to reduce this multiplicity to a single logic, to make claims about what the ‘true soul’ of the movements was, to make an argument about the right way to understand the movements. In every movement, there were both clear desires to protest and negate the current system, and clear desires to flee and create a different way of being together. What I want to do is only to pick out a cluster of desires that were, in fact, present, to a greater or lesser degree, in every uprising, and give them pride of place in my narrative. I will focus mainly on Spain, not because it is representative of the whole, or because its participants exhibited a greater desire to flee, but simply because it is the case with which I am the most familiar. I am suggesting that we should look for these desires wherever they exist, be attentive to them, learn more about them, and discover how we can help them flourish.

Clearly, in all of these movements there was a sense that lots of things were wrong with the current state of affairs. In Spain and Greece, for example, there was an explicit animating emotion of ‘indignation’ at the way the political elites had fused with the banking elites to promote
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financialization and austerity (Oikonomakis and Roos 2015). This emotion was strong enough that participants took on the moniker *indignados* (Spain) and *Aganaktisménos-Polítón* (Greece). Certainly, there was the desire to march against this political-financial elite, and to *negate* their policy agenda. The slogan in Spain, *no nos representan* (‘they do not represent us’), refused the idea that the representatives in the Spanish government effectively represented the Spanish people. And the even stronger hope *que se vayan todos* (‘get rid of them all’) expressed a wish that the *whole* of the current regime – both parties of the Spanish state as well as the financial elites in the European Union, European Central Bank, and the International Monetary Fund – should exit the political stage. Even the call for *¡Democracia real YA!* (‘Real Democracy Now!’), is in part a rejection; it denies that the current political system, liberal democracy, is *real* democracy. It argues that liberal democracy is false democracy, a broken system that needs to be replaced.

But, despite this desire to negate, the *indignados* were never consumed by it. They did express these negative desires, but they did not spend all their time marching on parliament and demanding that the powers that be govern differently. Much of what they did, instead, was to turn away from parliament, away from the broken system, and turn towards each other instead. They set about the work of actually creating a different way to live together. Thus, the cry of *¡Democracia real YA!* was not only or even primarily an implicit critique of the existing liberal-democratic system, it was also an explicit declaration by the *indignados* that they intended to begin – now – the work of imagining and practising real democracy instead. And so they experimented, extensively, with ways of being together (Oikonomakis and Roos 2013). They established institutions (for food distribution, information/communication, education, first-aid, sanitation, etc.), shared information, discussed key issues, set meeting agendas and schedules, facilitated discussions, negotiated disagreement, and made decisions collectively. They drew on and revitalized methods like general assemblies, consensus processes, *acampadas* (encampments), and *encuentros* (encounters) in order to both discuss what kind of world they wanted instead, and begin the work of actually building that world, now. They decided they favoured a leaderless and horizontal community, and so they worked on how to prevent the emergence of hierarchy and centralization in their midst. They aspired to make decisions by consensus so that the majority did not outvote and alienate the minority, but they struggled with what to do when many diverse values made consensus difficult. None of what they created was ideal, and there were many mistakes made. But that is precisely what one should expect from people who have not practised. The important point is that these activities to produce another way of life were what preoccupied participants, and they were, in the main, less interested in protest, resistance, and opposition. Throughout the long hours of meetings, discussion, and deliberation, they were not turned towards the state or the European financial powers. They were turned towards each other, literally, and they struggled to learn together what they wanted, what they were capable of, and who they wanted to be.

This orientation was reinforced by the much-discussed tendency among most of the movements in 2011 not to make any demands. They tended to eschew the typical model whereby a movement draws enough people and makes enough noise to get the attention of the authorities, and then demands certain changes in how those authorities govern. In many places – Greece, Spain, New York – there was a palpable sense that the current order was a lost cause, that there is no point in trying to fix it, and so there is no reason to demand changes in the way it governs. The most spectacular example of this turning away from power was when the Mayor of Denver decided Occupy Denver had become significant enough that he should meet with their leaders and hear their demands. Occupy Denver agreed to the meeting, but they sent a border collie named Shelby to represent them.
The same kind of orientation could be seen in the much-discussed tactic of occupation. In almost every case in 2011, movements occupied and inhabited an important and central urban space, usually for a period of weeks or even months. But the occupations were not military. They were not done to confront the state or engage it in a test of strength. Occupation was done to acquire and hold a space in order to use it, in order that participants could set about the work of creating another society, the work of governing themselves. They were occupying the *agora* of the *polis,* and they did what citizens of the *polis* are supposed to do there: they governed themselves. In the state’s mind, of course, these occupations were military, territorial seizures that directly challenged the state’s sovereignty, and so they had to be cleared. In every case, the state sent police and/or military forces to clear the square, usually violently. But the response by the occupiers was typically not military; they did not engage in a violent struggle with the state. In Spain, confronted by lines of heavily armed police in riot gear, occupiers raised both hands in the air and chanted *estas son nuestras armas,* ‘these are our arms’. They blocked entry into the square, tried to hold the square as long as they could, but not really in order to confront or defeat the state. They occupied the square in order to have a space in which they could govern themselves. They did not hope the state would notice them so much as they hoped the state would leave them alone so they could get on with their work.

**Conclusion**

There is much more to say about the movements of 2011 and after, of course, but I hope the point is clear that they were strongly marked not only by a conviction that the current state of affairs is broken, but also by a strong desire to get started producing a different way of living together. And they not only expressed that desire, they actually began the work of creating that new way of life. The movements of 2011 are, therefore, one promising model of what we might be like if we were to get well, if we were to wean ourselves off of our *resentment* and move beyond our debilitating obsession with negating neoliberalism. We have developed so many tools of negation, and we are so practised at using them, that it would be natural to feel a fair amount of apprehension, and even fear, at giving them up. The good news is that we already also have considerable tools for producing another way of life, even if we are not as experienced at using them. We are skilled at negating, but we will need to practise before we feel confident in our ability to create instead. So we need to start practising, and we need to start now. We need to turn away from neoliberalism and towards ourselves, to begin the difficult – but also joyous – work of managing our affairs for ourselves. Negation, critique, protest, resistance, struggle – we have been using the wrong tools. They are making us sick. What we need instead are invention, desire, production, creation, delight, joy. *Estas son nuestras armas.*

**Notes**

1 These latter Marxes, for example, are attracted to Feuerbach’s critique of Hegel, and the former’s insistence that thought must begin from ‘the self-subsistent positive positively grounded on itself’ (Marx 1994: 80).
2 Good examples of how to do this really well, I think, are Miguel Abensour (2011) and Deleuze and Guattari (1977[1972]).
3 And its follow-on mutations, like austerity and precarity.
4 Marx draws on David Ricardo (1817) to make this point in *Capital* (1993[1867]: Chapter 10, Section 1).
5 This is absolutely clear in Hobbes, who writes *Leviathan* as a passionate attempt to convince us that we must *continue* to surrender our originary political power to the state, which will keep the peace by terrorizing us into obedience.
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6 Clearly, this project, which I have narrated in the language of Deleuze and Guattari, has much overlap with an anarchist idea of prefigurative politics, stemming from classical sources (e.g. Bakunin 1972; Kropotkin 1972[1902]; Proudhon 2005[1864]), modern ones (e.g. May 1994; Bey 2003; Day 2005; Graeber 2009; Newman 2010), and the ongoing project to take up that work in radical geography by authors like Springer (2012) and Ince (2012).

7 Literally: ‘would that they all go’. The Spanish is in the subjunctive, and so it is expressing a desire for a state of affairs that is not currently actual. The English rendering I have given is in the imperative mood, and it doesn’t quite capture that subjunctive longing.

8 Marianne Maeckelbergh (2012) offers an excellent account of the nuances of these practices, as well as how they were similar to and different from the practices of the alterglobalization movement.

9 Most of the practices in this paragraph were also present in the movement in Athens, the various Occupy movements in the USA and UK, and the movement in Turkey in 2013, to name only a few examples.

10 Quite literally, in the case of Syntagma Square in Athens.

References


