

Economics Over All:

How Neoliberalism Creates Exclusivist Moralities in an Age of Responsibilization

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Abstract

Not much is more heavily debated in the social sciences than the phenomenon of neoliberalism. Philosophers and academics alike, from Michel Foucault in the latter half of the 20th century to David Harvey and Wendy Brown today, have argued that neoliberalism is a complex and nuanced system of self-governmentality that prizes economic rationality above all else. This paper analyzes how neoliberalism necessitates the internalization of specifically neoliberal economic values at the expense of other values that might enable a more nuanced sense of what it means to be human. In particular, neoliberal *homo-economicus* disables consideration of the human ability to create values that sustain reciprocal moral obligations. I argue that neoliberal rationality exacerbates group distinctions and forestalls moral considerations through a cheapened version of human existence that takes form as neoliberal *homo-economicus*, and address potential solutions and further implications of more robust ideas of what it means to be human.

Thought Experiment

(Because of course we need a thought experiment, this is Philosophy)

- ◆ Zombie Apocalypse
- ◆ *The Walking Dead* (Kirkman 2010)
- ◆ Rick Grimes (Kirkman 2010)

- ◆ Your potential responses to intensely harsh material conditions?

Classical Liberalism vs Neoliberalism

◆ Classical Liberalism

- A Political and Philosophical Positioning that should not be conflated with contemporary usages relating to current political parties
- Free Market Economic Exchange
- The State is there to protect rights
- Understood Humans as *homo-economicus* focused on exchange

◆ Neoliberalism

- The 'new' liberalism, which has become a complex system of governmentality and rationality
- Free Market Economic Competition
- The State's New Role within the Economy
- Understood Humans as *homo-economicus* focused exclusively on Hyper Individualistic Competition

The *Homo-Economicus* of Classical Liberalism

- ◊ An 'Economic Man' with tendencies to barter and exchange
- ◊ Seek Goods and Services via the Marketplace
- ◊ Can make value judgments outside of Economic Thought

“It is less likely an ‘original principle’ of human nature than it is ‘the necessary consequence of the faculties of reason and speech’ and of our complex and singular species interdependence” (Brown 2015, 93).

The *Homo-Economicus* of Neoliberalism

- ◊ An 'Economic Man' in constant competition
- ◊ Seeks to acquire all things via the Marketplace
- ◊ Economic Paradigm: Human Capital and *Responsibilization* (Brown 2015)
- ◊ 'Cannot/Should Not' make ethical judgements counter to the maximization of self investment (Nelson 2012)

“[Neoliberal *homo-economicus* is a] being for itself its own capital, its own producer, the source of its earnings. Whether a Neoliberal Homo-Economicus is selling, making, or consuming, it is investing in itself and producing its own satisfaction...[it is] competition, not exchange, [that] structures the relation among capitals, and capital appreciation through investment structures the relation of any capital entity to itself” (Brown 2015, 80-81).

The Mechanical Nature of Capitalism

“Capitalism thrives not by destroying natures but by putting natures to work – as cheaply as possible” (Patel and Moore 2017, 19).

Three Cheapened *Natures*

- ◆ Work
 - Streamlined Labor Efficiency
- ◆ Care
 - Gender Roles in the Nuclear Family
- ◆ Lives
 - “[A] term we use to refer to how the order of other cheap things – labor and care in particular – is policed and maintained through force and ideology” (Patel and Moore 2017, 37)

Biological Moral Plasticity

“[I]t is misleading to say that human beings are ‘hard-wired’ for exclusivity; it is more accurate to say that humans have an adaptively plastic capacity to develop either exclusivist moralities or inclusivist moralities, depending upon certain crucial features of the environment in which moralities develop and evolve” (Buchanan and Powell 2018, 135).

“More precisely, exclusivist moral response is a conditionally expressed trait that develops only when cues that were in the past reliably correlated with out-group predation, exploitation, competition for resources, and disease transmission are detected. In the animal world, the adaptively plastic detection of a predation threat can involve not only the detection of pertinent chemical cues, as with the water flea, but also more cognitively sophisticated inspection of predatory types, motivations, and behaviors” (Buchanan and Powell 2018, 189).

“The key to this account is the hypothesis that human beings evolved an adaptively plastic capacity to develop either exclusivist or inclusivist moral responses and corresponding social practices and institutions, depending upon the environment and whether it mimics – or is thought by its inhabitants to approximate – the harsh conditions of the EEA” (Buchanan and Powell 2018, 209).

***The Environment of Evolutionary Adaptedness (EEA) is the ancestral environment to which a species is adapted. It is the set of selection pressures that shaped an adaptation.**

Exclusivist Morality in Neoliberalism

“Human capital’s constant and ubiquitous aim, whether studying, interning, working, planning retirement, or reinventing itself in a new life, is to entrepreneurialize its endeavors, appreciate its value, and increase its rating and ranking” (Brown 2015, 36).

Neoliberalism, therefore, does not just reconceptualize our identities into neoliberal *homo-economicus*, but in doing so forces all of us into a constant state of internalized anxiety and competition. To live in this state of existence, to grow and cognitively develop in this state of existence as most of us have, means we have been living under – or at least the internal assumption of – the harsh conditions that mimic the resource scarcity of the EEA that may trigger our biological plasticity for exclusivist morality.

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