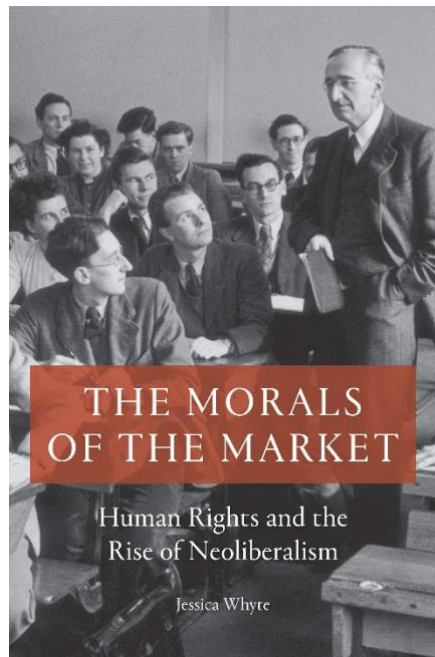


THE MORALS OF THE MARKET: HUMAN RIGHTS AND THE RISE OF NEOLIBERALISM

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Many readers of Policy and Practice: A Development Education Review will perhaps have construed neoliberalism as an essentially economic doctrine, brought into prominence by the actions and choices of United States' (US) President Ronald Reagan and United Kingdom (UK) Prime-Minister, Margaret Thatcher. Indeed, neoliberalism has been presented, perhaps especially by thinkers and activists on the left, as an economics manifesto, championing so-called 'free' markets, the privatisation of formerly state-owned assets, the deregulation of business procedures, and taxation policies



favouring the owners of capital, to the detriment of the owners of physical and intellectual labour. Jessica Whyte carefully deconstructs this presentation, in a gentle and understated manner, with no histrionics or soapbox denunciations. She examines the political genesis of the neoliberal agenda as we know it today, concentrating on two important time frames – the immediate post-war

period of the late 1940s, and the more generally accepted ‘coming out’ period of neoliberalism in the 1970s/1980s. In both periods, she seeks to examine the ways in which neoliberal thinkers sought to pre-empt collective action which might in any way impinge on the privileges of the wealthy.

After several centuries of European wars between monarchs, emperors, religions and various elite factions, the early Twentieth Century saw increasing efforts to bring peace, security and prosperity to populations across the continent and in the wider world. The setting up of the League of Nations after the First World War led to the creation of structures such as the International Labour Organisation (ILO) in 1919, as a tripartite decision-making structure bringing together governments, business communities and working peoples’ organisations, to improve the conditions, pay and security of workers across the world. Such collectivist sentiments appealed to ordinary working-class people but alarmed the holders of capital, who began to examine how the protection of private assets, wealth and property could be guaranteed throughout a century seemingly bent on promoting the interests of working people rather than those of the affluent and comfortable.

Whyte’s introduction is a short chapter outlining her overall thesis – that the fashioners and pioneers of neoliberalism were meticulous in understanding that the emerging consensus on the benefits of social welfare must not be allowed to impinge on the rights and privileges of capital. Just as the United Nations (UN) was being structured after the Second World War to offer humanity the benefits of peace, security, development and prosperity, so the defenders of capitalism were busy constructing a game plan that would counter that huge global movement for social solidarity, welfare and collectivism which threatened to promote the rights of the majority at the cost of the rights of the privileged minority that was the capitalist class.

Whyte carefully examines the work of the more ‘classical’ liberal and neoliberal thinkers – from Adam Smith, Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill to Friedrich Hayek, Milton Friedman, Ludwig von Mises and the creators of the Mont Pèlerin Society, the alma mater of neoliberalism. She builds on, and

expands, the sharply critical work of Wendy Brown (2015) who had drawn our attention to the falsity of an undue insistence on the ‘economisation’ of neoliberalism. In a scintillating chapter entitled ‘Neoliberalism, Human Rights and the “Shabby Remnants of Colonial Imperialism”’, she also calls on the work of a number of well-known thinkers and politicians from poorer countries to strengthen the view that decolonisation and international development were challenged and thwarted by the neoliberals precisely because they were supportive of collective welfare and threatening to private capital.

Colonial empires were being challenged and the demands of peoples everywhere for peace, democracy and what our generation have come to call the basic human rights (of education, health, freedom and opportunity) were recognised and built into the UN’s founding documents. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), for example – ratified in 1948 – challenged many of the racist and gendered assumptions that underlay colonial empires, and the aspirations of everyone, in all communities and territories, to a better life constituted a serious challenge to the then holders of power, privilege and profit (UN, 1948). The neoliberals worked hard to counter these democratic trends and they did this by generating and widely publishing an alternative vision of rights that installed the right to property as an absolutely central tenet of the new liberal orthodoxy. In Whyte’s own formulation: ‘... the drafters of the UDHR developed an account of social and economic rights that was ultimately compatible with a privatised, neoliberal approach to the management of poverty’ (Whyte, 2019: 32).

Just as Eleanor Roosevelt worked hard to influence the drafting of the UDHR, so – fifteen years earlier – did President Franklin Roosevelt seek to impose a New Deal that much of the world has seen as essentially economic, but which Whyte convincingly argues was highly political. She builds the case that the New Deal ‘took over central planks of Henry Ford’s model by combining welfare provision with racial segmentation and discrimination, a gendered division of labour, state paternalism and social pacification’ (Ibid: 86). She shows how Hayek had argued that Roosevelt’s initial leanings were towards more democratically empowering policies but then convinced him and

others to adopt more modest and less empowering strategies. According to Hayek, Roosevelt ‘had transformed an older tradition of human rights, entailing limits to the power wielded over individuals, into positive claims for benefits’ (Ibid: 85) and this had to be changed in order to support private capital.

Accordingly, many of the structures, processes and assumptions of the UN family of organisations were subverted from their original collectivist perspectives into a more conciliatory world view which tolerated the unequal distribution of wealth, and allowed and even encouraged, paradigms of economic growth as a panacea for all social ills. The freedom for businesses to pursue profit strategies was to become increasingly seen as the sine qua non of Twentieth Century capitalism. Just one example among many was the original draft of the charter of the ILO which had been prepared by the Canadian socialist John Humphrey and prescribed rights to ‘good food and housing and to live in surroundings that are pleasant and healthy’ (Ibid: 96). The US submission, in contrast, outlined a ‘right to enjoy minimum standards of economic, social and cultural well-being’ (Ibid: 96. [Whyte’s emphasis]).

The book is very careful in its delineation of the hurdles faced by democrats in reconstructing the world in the first half of the Twentieth Century. Many of the would-be drafters of UN ideals were themselves the product of imperial heritage – especially civil servants from France and the UK – and their views on the ‘backwardness’ of colonial peoples propelled them into discourses about ‘civilisation’ that were not just time-bound but utterly anti-democratic. Whyte dissects the work of the Permanent Mandates Commission of the League of Nations (1919-39) to show how norms of Western behaviours, practices and prejudices were built into the interwar global architecture of decision-making. The needs of US manufacturing to have working-class white males in their factories presupposed a gendered structure in which women were closeted at home for childcare and other domestic duties. Hayek considered redistribution of assets and wealth to be a throwback to tribal collective identities – something he clearly saw as inimical to capitalist modes of production and reproduction. Von Mises had bluntly

stated that ‘Nothing is as “ill-founded as the assertion of the alleged equality of all members of the human race... Men are altogether unequal”’ (Ibid: 24). Consequently, throughout the Twentieth Century, the defenders of capital worked hard – and successfully – to counter the idea that ‘human rights’ should include any economic and social rights. Instead, they urged the adoption of what they defined as human rights to emphasise only legal and constitutional rights: ‘attempts to enshrine rights to housing, food, education and medical care were supplanted by a narrow focus on civil and political rights’ (Ibid: 6).

Whyte doesn’t shy away from calling out some egregious errors committed by non-governmental organisations (NGOs) that exist to support and defend human rights. Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International, in particular, are excoriated for readily turning away from people’s economic and social rights and concentrating instead on issues of torture, imprisonment and the loss of ‘freedoms to’ - in contrast to the important ‘freedoms from’ which have long characterised socialist and community struggles. Her dissection of the well-known role of the Chicago School of economists in supporting the ideological decision-making of President Pinochet in Chile is particularly impressive, as she lays bare the need for neoliberals to impose their views by force, since no democratic majority will ever vote for austerity, social cutbacks and the promotion of privatisation over public services. She also examines the role of Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF), which shamefully threw in its lot with neoliberal ideology and agreed to work in conflict situations without ever taking a stance on the political character of the regimes whose victims it sought to help. Indeed, MSF founded an organisation called Liberté Sans Frontières which was specifically designed to promote the new and emerging emphasis of the human rights movement on political choices that deliberately excluded economic and social rights, prioritising civil and political rights, which allowed those with wealth to avoid any redistribution and those without assets to continue their road to immiseration.

Whilst many of us may see the growth and increasing power of neoliberalism as the principal problem, Whyte is gently insistent that we need to consider other perspectives. Some of us may prefer to see ourselves as the

quiet heroes who work for NGOs in a dispassionate and altruistic way for human betterment, but Whyte refuses to let us off lightly: ‘Rather, in conceptualising the problem as politics and the solution as law, the human rights NGOs have bolstered the liberal dichotomy between violent politics and peaceful markets, secured by constitutional restrictions.’ (Ibid: 32-3). Indeed, as development education practitioners and activists, we should see Whyte’s book, and much of her earlier work (e.g. in Whyte, 2007, 2014, and 2018), as a persuasive reminder that our own path has not been blameless, and we have perhaps been remiss in accepting too many of the benefits of neoliberalism in a hideously unequal world, whilst displaying pusillanimity in the face of neoliberalism’s clever, careful, persistent and (so far) successful challenges to the world we claim to wish to see.

The *Morals of the Market* is an exercise in intellectual history, examining with care and diligence the evolution of the concept of human rights over the last one hundred years or so. It neatly and convincingly unpacks the myth that neoliberalism was simply the evolution of economic forces during the Twentieth Century and, instead, shows how hard the neoliberals worked to subvert the global movement towards economic rights for citizens into a much less threatening movement for certain - carefully defined – freedoms to speak, to write, to express political dissent and so on. Any feel good factor experienced by DE practitioners and activists when they reflect that they are working for human rights globally should be quickly corrected when reading this excellent book, since we have been, as Whyte argues in one of her chapter headings, more ‘fellow travellers’ than ‘powerless companions’.

The book’s reading list is an impressive source for readers to inform themselves more on the issues of the rise and seeming inevitability of neoliberalism. The book overall is radical and challenging to the contemporary metanarrative that capitalism is here to stay. It portrays the current hegemony of capitalism as a carefully constructed, and forcefully imposed, ideological straightjacket that can be understood and deconstructed by dedicated radicals committed to understanding the situations of working-class communities across the globe: change is possible.

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Neil Aldred spent 23 years up to 1999 in numerous would-be development initiatives in sub-Saharan Africa, where he realised that many problems of the global South originate in behaviours and structures created in the global North. In the 23 years since then, he has worked in Ireland in teaching, research, campaigning and networking, to seek system change in areas such as the climate crisis, politics and economics.