Jelena B. Ćulibrk

Editor's Introduction: Neoliberalism's Perpetual Return

Scholars and political commentators were quick to declare the end of neoliberalism.[1] "The neoliberal era in the United States ended with a neofascist bang," wrote Cornel West in November 2016, days after the election of Donald Trump.[2] The global rise of authoritarian governments, from Narendra Modi's India to Viktor Orban's Hungary, seems to affirm West's argument, not least by these right-wing governments' disruption of central neoliberal tenets—freedom of movement, information, and capital. However, questioning the validity of neoliberal institutions, policies, and "the liberal spirit" is part of a broader political zeitgeist. Simultaneous to the rise of right-wing populism, leftist critiques of neoliberalism became increasingly popular in the 2010s. As Gary Gerstle recently wrote, Bernie Sanders' two presidential campaigns (2016 and 2020) managed to offer a leftist alternative to the neoliberal hegemony.[3]

And yet, the election of Javier Milei in December 2023 spoiled these predictions.[4] Only two days after assuming office, Milei kept his campaign promise and "chain-sawed" Argentina's government. The world's first anarcho-capitalist president scrapped five ministries—health, education, employment and social security, social development, and culture—by creating an umbrella Ministry of Human Capital.[5] As a nod to Gary Becker, the leading neoliberal economist whose theory of human capital remains central to neoliberalism, Milei's government boldly ushered in a new era of free market economics in Latin America. In earnest, the continent was the place where many neoliberal economic theories were first implemented; they were part of what journalist Naomi Klein called "the shock doctrine," or a set of disruptive economic measures enacted under Augusto Pinochet's military dictatorship in Chile.[6]

The extent to which Milei's election astonished scholars can be best illustrated by a recently published book, *The Chile Project: The Story of the Chicago Boys and the Downfall of Neoliberalism* (2023). The book, written by Sebastian Edwards, a former World Bank economist, unpacks the history of neoliberal economic policies in Chile. As an offspring of the Edwards family—central to modernizing the country in the nineteenth century and establishing Chile's longest-running newspaper, *El Mercurio*—he is unsurprisingly apologetic. Edwards is eager to disentangle neoliberal thinkers from Pinochet's devastating dictatorship, which resulted in the torture and murder of thousands of Chileans.[7] Neoliberal thinkers should not be blamed for the Pinochet government's crimes, Edwards argues, since neoliberal economic policies helped turn Chile into the continent's most prosperous economy.[8] And yet, in the book's conclusion, Edwards laments the dismal position of neoliberalism in contemporary Chile and, indeed, the world. He contributes this negative image to neoliberal thinkers' lack of public participation: "Instead of staying engaged in the never-ending confrontation and wars of ideas, and instead of preaching about the merits of markets, they chose the comfort of home and the lure of high-paying jobs as board members of Chile's major corporations…"[9] Although the future remains uncertain, for Edwards, neoliberalism was defeated on a level that, perhaps, mattered most.

Cultural questions, particularly those concerned with adopting and spreading neoliberalism, have been at the heart of the neoliberal movement. Historians of neoliberalism have underscored the importance of neoliberal institutions such as the Mont Pelerin Society in defining and, through its global network of think tanks, popularizing neoliberal policies as an alternative to post-World War Two economic downturn.[10] Having been fortunate to attend two Mont Pelerin Society meetings in Palo Alto, CA (2020) and Oslo, Norway (2022), I witnessed how contemporary neoliberal thinkers conceptualize the cultural sphere. For instance, Samuel Gregg, the director of the Acton Institute, urged audiences at the 2020

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meeting to appreciate the relevance of culture for the future of neoliberalism. As Gregg projected the image of Antonio Gramsci, he argued that "the Left has been spectacularly successful" in understanding the importance of culture.[11] To prove his point, Gregg invoked the example of Chile, a country that "benefited tremendously" from neoliberal economic policies but whose population continues to abhor free-market economics.[12] Much has changed since the COVID-19 pandemic and this particular MPS meeting; Bernie Sanders lost his presidential bid, the global economy went through its worst slump since the Global Financial Crisis, and a wave of protests (against racism, COVID-19 lockdowns, agricultural taxes, etc.) disrupted many countries. But despite the rise of movements that have contested neoliberalism, it reemerged in Argentina precisely in response to the post-COVID economic downturn, rising inflation rates, and a sense of cultural decline.

This special issue of *Spectator* entitled "Neoliberalism and/in/as Media" uncovers the entanglements between neoliberalism and cinema, television, and digital media. Although most discussions of neoliberalism tend to happen along partisan lines, this issue includes a variety of voices—both neoliberal and dissenting—to pierce through ideological preconceptions.[13] As such, *Spectator* provides a pioneering examination of neoliberalism through both primary sources and critical readings. The issue opens with an essay by Nils Karlson, Swedish Ratio Institute's CEO and the Mont Pelerin Society's Board Member. Karlson's essay "The Classical Liberal Ideas, Predicaments, and Potentials" is part of a larger book project, *Reviving Classical Liberalism Against Populism* (2024), presented at the Society's most recent meeting in Oslo (October 2022).[14] There are several benefits to reading Karlson's essay. First, he urges us to understand neoliberalism as a foremost intellectual project concerned with reviving nineteenth-century "classical" liberalism. Indeed, the essay situates neoliberalism within the broader history of liberal thought, which included Cold War thinkers such as Isaiah Berlin, Judith Shklar, and Karl Popper alongside Adam Smith, Adam Ferguson, John Stuart Mill, and other classical liberal thinkers. Karlson reminds us that there are multiple neoliberalisms, and by situating neoliberalism in its ever-changing historical, political, and social context, we can appreciate its multifaceted nature. Finally, it is particularly relevant to note that the essay's impulse partly stems from a concern with how some members of the neoliberal thought collective have become uncritical, if not supportive, of right-wing populism.[15] By including Karlson's essay, I hope to demonstrate the importance of engaging with original neoliberal writings while staying attuned to its historical and political heterogeneity.

Whereas media scholars would greatly benefit from reading primary neoliberal sources, historians and sociologists should consider researching how popular culture influenced the international neoliberal movement. Although the second part of this journal issue will present neoliberal thinkers' direct engagement with mass media, the following essays show how cinema, television, and digital media contemplate the shifting political, social, and economic landscape under neoliberalism. Johanna Bockman's essay "*Being There* in Neoliberalism" takes us back to those crucial years between the 1978 Meeting of the Mont Pelerin Society in Hong Kong and the election of Ronald Reagan in 1980. Bockman returns to the pre-history of neoliberalism to illustrate how *Being There* thought about politics under neoliberal ascendency. New Hollywood Cinema productions such as *Network* (1976), *All the President's Men* (1976), and *Being There* (1979) portrayed the collapse of the post-World War Two welfare state and anticipated the neo-liberalization of politics and culture. In *Being There*, politics retreats from the public sphere and becomes dominated by large corporate interests, thus constraining mass movements so crucial to the origin of neoliberalism in the 1920s universal suffrage era. However, as Bockman argues, much of the film's critique revolves around the insidious role of television in modern consciousness. Bockman reads Chancey Gardiner (Peter Sellers) as an ironic neoliberal (anti)hero who becomes the country's most eligible presidential candidate despite his inability to hold any independent thought other than the one provided through multiple TV screens. There are many similarities between Ronald Reagan's film stardom, Donald Trump's reality TV persona, and *Being There*'s protagonist. Although Bockman is a historian of neoliberalism, perhaps best known for her pioneering work on economic theory under twentieth-century socialism, her reading of *Being*

There strongly reflects the desire of this journal issue to "bridge the gap" between media scholars and historians of neoliberalism; Bockman's essay is a compelling interdisciplinary examination of popular culture vis-à-vis neoliberal history.[16]

Heidi Ka-sin Lee's essay "Resisting Neoliberal Biopolitics: Queer Desire in Yorgos Lanthimos' *The Favourite* (2018)" brings our attention to contemporary Greek "Weird Wave" Cinema, which emerged in response to the Global Financial Crisis and the ensuing austerity measures. By closely reading Yorgos Lanthimos' film *The Favourite* (2018), Lee argues that the film self-consciously adopts biopolitical logic to expose contemporary Hollywood cinema's saccharine representations of LGBTQ+ identities and sexual desires. Stripped of its original radical currency, Hollywood cinema trivializes queer politics by translating heteronormative roles and gender stereotypes into on-screen representations, or what Lee terms "homonormative desire." In contrast to films such as *The Kids Are Alright* (2010), Lanthimos' film adopts "queer desire" in its portrayal of power struggles between Lady Churchill (Rachel Weisz) and Abigail Moss (Emma Stone) competing for a permanent economic and political position at Queen Anne's court. As Lee reminds us, biopolitics centers on re-fashioning individual bodies, perpetually entrapped within external forces of power (economic, political, judicial, etc.); *The Favourite* depicts these struggles only to unravel their deleterious effects. As such, Lee's reading of Lanthimos' film explains the resiliency and durability of neoliberalism. Since neoliberalism resolves systemic crises by shifting responsibility to self-regulating individuals, as Greek post-2008 austerity programs made painfully apparent, its hegemonic status is safeguarded through self-absorbed action—political life and meaningful political action abdicate before never-ending struggles on a personalized level. Even if, as Lee shows, Lady Churchill and Abigail Moss competed for the highest position in eighteenth-century England, their struggles were reduced to the sexual plane. Lanthimos' most recent film, *Poor Things* (2023), further distorts celebratory Hollywood narratives of female emancipation (i.e., Greta Gerwig's *Barbie*) by exposing how their disciplinary structures always already constitute and regulate female subjectivities.

Sonny Walbrou's essay "New Media/Old Matters: Documentaries, Capitalism, and Virtual Spaces" analyzes recent digital documentaries by employing Henri Lefebvre's philosophy of space. Although Lefebvre was not particularly invested in the cinematic image—his writings were sometimes even iconophobic—Walbrou makes a strong case for reconsidering the utility of Lefebvre's understanding of spatiality under our digital predicament. His paper traces the digital image's radical potential by examining filmmakers' and visual artists' experiments with virtual spatiality. Through many well-chosen examples, Walbrou offers a compelling argument on why digital documentaries offer a possible perceptual and critical flight from virtual spaces. As we "traverse" ubiquitous digital realms of the internet, social media, and video games, we can experience these spaces' liminality and their inherent contradictions and even "pierce" through their codes. Walbrou's essay is particularly interested in these moments of disruption in the digital world's spatial logic. Even though the digital realm might seem intimidating to media scholars versed in older theories of culture, Walbrou compellingly argues that we should not easily dispense with these prior concepts.

The history of documentary cinema is intertwined with the origins of neoliberalism. Scholars have recently argued that we should focus less on the 1970s and 1980s, or the period when Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher adopted many of the economic and political policy proposals espoused by neoliberal thinkers. Instead, we should shift our attention to the instability of the post-World War One environment when the nineteenth-century liberal world system collapsed after the destruction of four European empires.[17] In this post-imperial context, (neo)liberal thinkers such as Ludwig von Mises, Michael Polanyi, and Friedrich Hayek sought to re-think "classical liberalism" in the new era of mass politics. It is no coincidence that the first neoliberal ideas emerged in "Red Vienna," within the ruins of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, caught in the fervor of revolutionary interwar projects. Media scholars would undoubtedly find similarities between Mises' desire to re-invigorate liberalism and the British Empire Marketing Board's (EMB) campaign to modernize imperial Britain. Simultaneous to the rise of neoliberalism in Vienna, the British Empire was undergoing a reform, a process that heavily relied on developing new means

of communication.[18] One of the originators of documentary cinema, John Grierson, established the British Documentary Film Movement as a filmmaking collective while working for the EMB. Much of their films were invested in uncovering invisible structures of British liberal institutions at a moment when liberalism was being seriously undermined by Nazi Germany and Soviet Russia. The world of neoliberal thinkers and British documentary practitioners obviously collided in Michael Polanyi's animated documentary film *Unemployment and Money* (1938/1940), which premiered at the Walter Lippmann Colloquium in Paris, the first international neoliberal conference and, for some scholars, neoliberalism's "birthplace."[19]

My conversation with Bob Chitester, the producer of the *Free to Choose* (PBS, 1980) documentary series, further underscores the relationship between state-sponsored documentary media and neoliberalism. Although the series' broadcast coincided with the election of Ronald Reagan, its relevance to the history of neoliberalism *and* media transcends commonplace arguments; the series was not only a propaganda piece.[20] As my conversation with Chitester suggests, *Free to Choose* was influenced by the British Broadcasting Corporation's (BBC) famous documentary series established in the mid-1960s. When, in January 1977, Chitester approached Milton Friedman with the prospect of televising neoliberal arguments, the docu-history form was already a well-respected, if not the most prestigious, example of cable television. Indeed, Kenneth Clark's TV series *Civilisation* (BBC, 1969) inaugurated this documentary format and, as Chitester argues, directly inspired *Free to Choose*. These historical connections and shared impulses between documentary media and neoliberalism attest to state-sponsored media institutions' role in spreading neoliberal ideas. Perhaps most relevantly, the example of *Free to Choose* suggests that neoliberalism is not anti-statist, nor is it only a philosophy based on a set of economic measures.

The final essay is part of a larger chapter from my upcoming book project, *Screening the Invisible Hand: State-sponsored Documentary Media, (Neo) Liberalism, and the Riddle of Politics, 1918-1980*; it should be read as a continuation of my conversation with Chitester. In the essay, I juxtapose the historical and political origins of the BBC-2 docu-series to the development of *Free to Choose*; I argue that visual storytelling helped explicate abstract economic ideas and lend credibility to "the power of the market" through exotic out-of-studio locations, montage, and archival footage. But most of all, *Free to Choose* illustrated the flow of market economy—the global circulation of capital, information, and labor—through its extensive use of fast-paced editing that connected disparate temporal and spatial settings under a single market order. Indeed, the program's fans often praised the docu-history "format" as "classically liberal."[21] Episode one, for instance, took audiences from mid-eighteenth-century Scotland to modern-day Hong Kong.[22] Such sweeping televisual voyages across human history and culture were the docu-histories' primary charm. And yet, what the series' accomplished exceeded any ideological impetus. To support this argument, I include a discussion of John K. Galbraith's series *The Age of Uncertainty* (BBC, 1976), directly rebutted by *Free to Choose*'s anti-Keynesianism, to suggest that these series' ideological differences should be less relevant to our understandings of neoliberalism and television. Instead, both series contributed to television's fragmentation of vision and perception, which continues to be part of our digital experience.

Contemporary Hollywood cinema has been inspirational to members of the Mont Pelerin Society. In October 2023, I interviewed Mark Littlewood, the Institute of Economic Affairs director (the oldest if not the most relevant neoliberal think tank), about his upcoming book project on the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU). As a self-proclaimed comic book "geek" and "a classical liberal," Littlewood sees Marvel superheroes—primarily Iron Man/Tony Stark and Captain America/Steve Rogers—as vessels for (neo)liberal ideology. Not only do these MCU heroes represent individual action, often against repressive governmental acts, but for Littlewood, these films also carry persuasive on-screen discussions on freedom, prosperity, and the role of individual citizens. Perhaps most surprisingly, Littlewood argues that MCU managed to reanimate "the limits to growth" debate through the character of Thanos; Littlewood reads the MCU's leading villain as an archetypal figure representing contemporary political activists. Ironically, the MCU emerged around the time of the Global Financial Crisis when large-scale government bailouts seriously undermined many free-market ideas and policy proposals. Although

we haven't discussed Javier Milei, Milei's official Instagram profile frequently animates his political and economic philosophy through heroic imagery; his superhero persona consists of a lion adorned with the Argentinian flag. In one Instagram post, the Milei-Lion is smashing a socialist flag with a hammer; in the other post, he is freeing a mass of Argentines from the government's "prison" of high taxation and excessive regulation. Members of the Mont Pelerin Society, such as Axel Kaiser and Steve Forbes, hold high hopes for Milei's presidency.[23] "It would be absolutely absurd to suggest that our free market side of the ledger is winning," Littlewood concluded. And yet, for him, ideology is cyclical: "I think compelling stories is the way to go."

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Notes

1 Manuel Castells, *Rupture: The Crisis of Liberal Democracy* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2019); Francis Fukuyama, *Liberalism and Its Discontents*; Gary Gerstle, *The Rise and Fall of the Neoliberal Order: America and the World in the Free Market Era* (Oxford University Press, 2022).; Martin Jacques, "The death of neoliberalism and the crisis in western politics," *The Guardian*, August 21, 2016. https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2016/aug/21/death-of-neoliberalism-crisis-in-western-politics

2 Cornel West, "Goodbye, American Neoliberalism. A New Era Is Here," *The Guardian*, November 17, 2016.

3 Consider, for example, the book cover of Gary Gerstle's latest history of neoliberalism that features on the top the Fall of the Berlin Wall, and the photograph of Trump overlooking the construction of the wall on the U.S.-Mexico border. In Gerstle's view, the neoliberal political order was a supreme system from 1989 to 2016 when it was challenged by the rise of right- and left-wing populism after the unraveling of the most recent Financial Crisis (2008). Gary Gerstle, *The Rise and Fall of the Neoliberal Order: America and the World in the Free Market Era* (Oxford University Press, 2022).

4 This eccentric and controversial economist has been compared to Donald Trump, perhaps mostly through his masterful understanding of modern politics' entanglement with popular television. Milei's electoral victory was a blow to many on the left since, in the last decade, Latin American countries represented a strong opposition to neoliberalism. Consider, for example, Gabriel Boric's election in Chile, which came after years of protests against Sebastian Piñera's neoliberal government in Chile.

5 As I write this introduction in mid-February 2024, Argentina's Minister of Human Capital, Sandra Pettovello, is under bitter attack from the Argentinian public for disrupting the protests that emerged in response to slashing thousands of social security benefits.

6 Pinochet came to power following the 1973 coup d'état of Chile's democratically elected president Salvador Allende. Naomi Klein, *The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2007).

7 *El Mercurio* was backed by the CIA to help createe an unfavorable public opinion of Allende's government. As such, the newspaper paved the way for the 1973 coup: "Declassified US intelligence documents reveal that during the CIA destabilization campaign conducted against the Allende government, *El Mercurio*'s owner (Agustin Edwards) worked directly in cooperation with top officials of the Nixon Administration. From 9 September 1971 to 11 April 1972, the CIA funneled at least US$1.5m to *El Mercurio*, with additional funding that both preceded and followed this period." Richard A. Dello Buono, "Latin America and the Collapsing Ideological Supports of Neoliberalism," *Critical Sociology* 37, no. 1 (2011): 14.

8 Sebastian Edwards, *The Chile Project: The Story of the Chicago Boys and the Downfall of Neoliberalism* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2023), 2-4.

9 Ibid., 277.

10 Philip Mirowski and Dieter Plehwe, *The Road from Mont Pèlerin: The Making of the Neoliberal Thought Collective* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2009).

11 Samuel Gregg, "Culture and the Free Society," Paper presented at the Mont Pelerin Society Meeting, Hoover Institution, January 17, 2020.
12 Much can be disputed in this "economistic" view of society, not least because quantifiable economic measures do not automatically assume that economic benefits will "trickle down" to broader populations.
13 And yet, I am not suggesting that this journal issue and my editing process exist "outside" ideology. To think otherwise would be a naïve misunderstanding of ideology.
14 Nils Karlson, *Reviving Classical Liberalism Against Populism* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2024).
15 Certainly, the Mont Pelerin Society's meeting at the Hoover Institution featured politicians and policymakers working under Donald Trump's Administration. For example, Trump's economic advisor, Tyler Goodspeed, was part of a panel, and the event ended with a special conversation with Peter Thiel, one of Trump's largest financiers. Only by attending my second MPS meeting in Oslo was I able to appreciate the full diversity of neoliberal thought.
16 Johanna Bockman, *Markets in the Name of Socialism: The Left-Wing Origins of Neoliberalism* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2011).
17 Quinn Slobodian, *Globalists: The End of Empire and the Birth of Neoliberalism* (Cambridge, Mass. and London, England: Harvard University Press, 2018); Jessica Whyte, *The Morals of the Market: Human Rights and the Rise of Neoliberalism* (London and New York: Verso, 2019).
18 "…film was privileged in this significant transformation of global economic strategies because of its purported semiotic power, which political elites on both sides of the Atlantic began to read as either a supplement or impediment to the fostering of economic growth taken as integral to the remit of the liberal state." Lee Grieveson, *Cinema and the Wealth of Nations: Media, Capital, and the Liberal World System* (University of California Press, 2017), 7.
19 Polanyi took from Grierson and the British Documentary Film Movement the conviction that cinematic vision can illuminate and educate laymen on the benefits of liberalism. This was because, Grierson and Polanyi argued, the camera's eye surpassed the inherent human cognitive limitations by uncovering a variety of invisible economic, political, and social processes that liberal states depended on. Gabor Biro, "Michael Polanyi's Neutral Keynesianism and the First Economics Film, 1933 to 1945," *Journal of the History of Economic Thought* 42, no. 3 (September 2020): 335-356.; For more information on the Walter Lippmann Colloquium, please consult: Jurgen Reinhoudt and Serge Audier, *The Walter Lippmann Colloquium: The Birth of Neo-Liberalism* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017).
20 Such readings of *Free to Choose* are dominant across both popular publications and academic research. Undoubtedly, these books and papers continue to muddle our understanding of both neoliberalism and public broadcasting. For a popular reading of Ronald Reagan's ascendency see Rick Perlstein, *Reaganland: America's Right Turn, 1976-1980* (New York and London: Simon & Schuster, 2020), 725-729.
21 Letter from Sally L. Pruit (Dallas, TX) to Milton Friedman, February 8, 1980, 1, Box 225, Papers of Milton Friedman, Hoover Institution Archives, Stanford University, CA.
22 President of the Heritage Foundation, a leading neoliberal think tank, Edwin Feulner underlined this special international appeal of the series: "…it will come as no surprise to find Uncle Miltie popping up in Hong Kong, where economic freedom is practiced in its purest form, and at the Treasury Department's Bureau of Engraving and Printing, where the machinery of inflation—the printing presses—crank out legal tender around the clock." Edwin Feulner, "TV's New Miltie," *The Intelligencer*, January 4, 1980.
23 Axel Kaiser's recent blog posts "The Last Latin American Revolution" (February 12, 2024), and "The Roar of the Argentinian Lion" (November 21, 2023): https://substack.com/@axelkaiser. The Forbes YouTube channel recently posted Steve Forbes' plea to Milei. "An Open Letter of Warning to Argentina's Javier Milei from Steve Forbes" (February 8, 2024): https://youtu.be/ONHHFJPtlnU?si=Ddnlln4z2an-SBij.