Life Under Modern Neoliberal Capitalism

Bradan Bill

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“Life Under Modern Neoliberal Capitalism”

Bradan Bill

Abstract
The purpose of this research is to compare modern American socioeconomic mythos to the real concrete situation in a fully neoliberalized society and economy. In particular this article examines the largely unquestioned presumptions that have become internalized and repeated by economists, politicians, journalists, and the average American. This is done through a survey of income, taxation, and social data, obtained through several large government and public databases, and one anecdotal example which consumes American socioeconomic nostalgic thought. Additionally, this article seeks to step outside the normal bounds of the overly sanitized language which has dominated academia since the 1970’s, by using rhetorical moral and ethical questions to increase the vast chasm between reality and myth. This article uncovers and elaborates upon several points which have become ‘common-sense’ but have led to counter-intuitive limit-situations, given the internalized logic of American mythos.

Keywords: Economics, Politics, Exploitation, Dehumanization, Socioeconomics, Nostalgia, Mythos, Neoliberalism, Capitalism, Human Rights

Introduction: Welcome to the Dystopia
Throughout this article, the author seeks to displace several cultural myths held in the American subconscious; in particular, that the millennial generation is to blame for their economic situation, choices, and status. To do so, the author will examine the current economic situation, compare historical trends, and repeat questions intended to point out the glaring problems with the findings, that otherwise neutralized, sanitized academic writing would leave out. And so, consider a few pieces of this article “gonzo-academic” for the author’s intent to bring ethical arguments into an otherwise analytical piece. The primary point this article makes was best and first said by John Rawls on page three in his 1979 A Theory of Justice:

Justice is the virtue of social institutions, as truth is of systems of thought. A theory however elegant and economical must be rejected or revised if it is untrue; likewise laws and institutions no matter how efficient and well-arranged must be reformed or abolished if they are unjust.

Aristotle is one of the earliest thinkers to believe that if technology were to advance to a high enough state that human labor would be no longer needed as he wrote in Book One of Politics. Automation, unemployment, and decreased wages were precisely some of the reasons the Luddites destroyed the machines that made their jobs unnecessary. John Maynard Keynes in 1930, wrote Economic Possibilities for our Grandchildren, wherein he suggests that as productivity increased, wages would increase and hours would reduce. Perhaps a bit optimistically, he expected that ethically we would share our excess and leisure, leaving us in a world without work. The idea of a universal basic income has been championed by the Marquis de Condorcet, Martin Luther King, Jr., Richard...
Nixon, and Charles Murray but enacting it would require we change several notions including decoupling income from work.

Despite all of the historical and academic talk of how things could be, now that we are past the timeline of what 18th and 19th century thinkers have imagined, we see instead: a complete stagnation of wages for the 99%, the rise of the ‘gig’ economy, reduced job security, and a massive increase in prices (housing, transport, healthcare, and education). This article argues that we are currently living in a dystopia; not one with zombies, societal collapse, or plagues, but rather, one without enough real jobs (gigs, underemployment, and part-time do not count) capable of providing these basic socioeconomic securities.

To support the claims of this article, the author created a database with over 400 million points of data from the World Wealth and Income Dataset, IPUMS data-set and tool, the Bureau of Labor Statistics and the US Census Office. The author also has downloaded federal tax rates from the 19th century up to 2016, and has compiled a complete list of federal minimum wage since its implementation. The author has adjusted previous years USD to Jan 2017 levels, rather than using several different base years, or standard dollars, as this author views it at best as an attempt to obfuscate economic discussions. To make economic comparisons across time more relevant to the reader this article has begun to use “time-cost” as a measurement tool. Time-cost being the amount of time it would take to accrue enough funds to purchase a good or service.

Section I: Why What Worked Before Won’t Work Now

The short answer is that the stubbornly held mythos is not in line with the current social and institutional constraints, costs, and employment realities. The tax scheme, housing to rent or purchase price, education costs, and employment options were entirely different. Currently, about 123 million Americans make less than $32,000 per year, while the median cost of living for one adult is about $28,500. If an overwhelming majority of the bottom 50% of earners were to require emergency care at an ER, they would be immediately impoverished if they had not afforded full coverage medical insurance. The choice between health, work-life balance, quality food, sleep, self-enrichment and fulfillment, and life expectancy are made by a vast majority of Americans on a daily basis. Dehumanization, exploitation, and inequity are types of slow violence where Americans have opted to capitulate in their own degradation and dehumanization without even realizing they had made a choice. The narratives in media, news, and popular culture about work, jobs, income, self-worth, and societal worth are based upon a Malthusian-Social Darwinist methodology.

To make the current socioeconomic scheme all work we, dehumanize the weak, the poor, and those who work at a coffee shop or wait tables. We degrade their self-esteem by demanding they work for free as interns or volunteer to ‘get the experience’ now needed to break into their “real” job. Since the end of the ‘great recession,’ the majority of “jobs” added to the economy are gigs, low paying, part-time, temporary, and increasingly labeled as independent contractors. Desperation is the reality.

1www.wid.world
3www.bls.gov
4www.census.gov
52016 statistics from bls.gov and census.gov.
6See society.
7I always air-quote this because it would have been termed a depression had the goal-posts and definitions not been changed in the midst of it.
for most millennials and yet the media, political commentators, and economists come up with new ways to degrade and belittle an entire generation.\(^8\)

Now imagine a similar scenario where you are applying for a job, but the job requires a college degree, but you can’t pay for a college degree without a job so you end up taking out massive loans. Then when you graduate, you still can’t get a job without experience. So you end up in a minimum wage job (or three), making ends meet and barely making your loan payments. You say something like, “the minimum wage needs to be raised, people can’t live like this,” only to receive a barrage of old, crotchety white people yelling at you about how gosh-darn ENTITLED you are, and how THEY got a college education working part time and how it’s your fault for taking out the loans in the first place. Generations before us completely drove the bus into a lake and somehow it’s our fault everybody’s drowning.\(^9\)

Dehumanization coupled with the precariousness of most workers has led to a situation Jean Comaroff and John Comaroff have notably dubbed “millennial capitalism.” Unlike the baby boomers or generation x, millennial “workers are forced to operate in ‘survivalist mode,’ constantly overshadowed by the dominant societal efficacies of the corporate motive of ‘profit at all costs.’”\(^10\) Gig-jobs and contractor positions are the cap-stones to the economical options under modern neoliberal capitalism, plagued by “psychological doubt and uncertainty, a subject fraught with acute anxiety, and nagging hypervigilance.”\(^11\) Underscoring the near totalizing risk motoring neoliberal capitalist exploitation’s expansion by creating a “legacy of irregular piece-work, of menial ‘workfare,’ of relatively insecure, transient, and gainless occupation.”\(^12\)

Lacking income, wealth, leisure, access to healthcare, and positive emotions such as accomplishment or fulfillment, evokes within the underemployed “flexible workers” a psychological condition of docility.\(^13\) Docility and a weak social position expose the least well-off into acceptable slow and immediate violence; much like Herman and Chomsky’s deserving victims. Every unemployed, underemployed, poor, or homeless person thus becomes disposable, expelled from the realm of societal obligation. “Within this regime of neoliberal violence, the politics of disposability is shored up by the assumption that some lives and social relationships are not worthy of a meaningful social existence, empathy, and social protections.”\(^14\) The greatest generation created and laid the very protections that provided the success of the boomers and gen-xers. However, these protections were ignored at the time and have since been largely dismantled. The international humanitarian intent of our institutions entirely broken down and pushed aside for further financialization, the profit motive, and extracting resources out of people and poorer countries at absurdly underpriced rates, making Western companies richer.

The fact is that they are no longer citizens; people are goods—they are objects. We live in a working society; if you lose work, or when work becomes precarious, then we enter into a precarious society of uncertainty and insecurity. There is no longer global

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\(^8\)The negative opinions directed at millennials are a perfect example, on an enormous scale, of cultural gaslighting.” bornagainstminimalist.com/2016
\(^9\)Bornagainstminimalist.com/2016
\(^10\)Auer, 2014.
\(^12\)Jean and John Comaroff 2001:5.
\(^14\)Giroux, 2012.
citizenship. You are alone, you are autonomous. […] Depriving me of work means depriving me of citizenship.\textsuperscript{15}

Neoliberal capitalism has created an age where social costs, long-term goals, and environment play no role in systemic discussions and decisions. People are unable under this regime to connect causes with effects because the mundane routine at work removes thoughts of the future victims from their mind. This way, the dehumanization of the poor hides rampant exploitation behind newly preferred financial terms ‘sharing economy,’ ‘gigs,’ contractor, and burdens of ownership. Doubling down on society’s refusal to acknowledge their victim status, further devaluing them when they choose to stand up, speak out, or complain. Rather than addressing the systemic problems now enshrined in American institutions and modern norms, society has chosen to label swaths of people are worthless untouchables, a new American caste system of disposable and undeserving victims.

And the disposable are not merely those populations caught in extreme poverty. Increasingly, they are individuals and groups now ravaged by bad mortgages, poor credit and huge debt. They are the growing army of the underemployed forced to abandon their houses, credit cards and ability to consume – a liability that pushes them to the margins of a market society. These are the groups whose homes will not be covered by insurance, who have no place to live, no resources to fall back on, no way to imagine that the problems they will be facing are not just personal, but deeply structural, built into a system that views the social contract and the welfare state as a lethal disease.”\textsuperscript{16}

The death of social and class consciousness in America “stems, in part, from neoliberal policy demands that workers bear risk in exchange for labor-market entrance.”\textsuperscript{17} Our modern system then emerges from conditions of late-capitalist labor regimes where workers “are dependent on contract work,” coupled with the emergence of immaterial labor, where production is affective and service oriented\textsuperscript{18}. Most people “perform wage labor for survival—work that has little value to them and is useful primarily for securing only the means of survival.”\textsuperscript{19} In such a severely unequal power dynamic the unemployed or underemployed can not help but collaborate in their dehumanization or face the threat of starvation, homelessness, or death due to preventable and curable diseases. Dehumanization occurs in part through a denial of, or completely ignoring the emotionality of the powerless and amplified due to the lack of consequences.

In the sphere of management, meanwhile, management uses non-recognition, for example, in the form of not recognizing human beings as human beings (Kant’s ends-in-themselves) but instead human resources management sees human beings only as human resources (Kant’s means) and as a capacity to contribute to the bottom line. This sort of dehumanizing and, above all, deliberate non-recognition of humans as humans is shown in HRM’s focus on performance management that is not directed towards human beings –perhaps not even human resources-- but towards organizational outcomes, the code-word for profits.\textsuperscript{20}

\textsuperscript{15}See Mole, 2010.
\textsuperscript{16}Giroux, 2012.
\textsuperscript{17}Beck, 2000; Gledhill, 1995, 2005.
\textsuperscript{19}Frase, 2016.
\textsuperscript{20}Carton, 2009.
Precariousness and dehumanization are also visible in the tendency to label employees as ‘independent contractors’ and giving them a 1099 rather than a w-2, or paying in cash to save the employers payroll costs. Contractor labeling removes labor protections for the employee including the minimum wage, overtime, workers’ compensation, the right to unionize, safe and healthy workplaces, and discrimination prevention. In receiving a 1099 form the ‘independent contractor’ to pay two times as much in taxes (15% versus 7.65%\(^21\)), which is a savings to payroll costs of the company. In such a position, even the thought of a ‘work-life balance’ becomes an unthinkable utopia and falls by the wayside as irrelevant.

It is ever more common for corporations to demand extra unpaid work from employees, called time theft, and though some types are illegal, it is rarely disciplined. The demands of employers upon labor have only become worse with modern surveillance technology, thus dehumanizing them further while increasing the unequal power dynamic. The powerful within this dynamic have access to meaningful work, security, and access to the things of life that make it worth living, like time off, not having to live hand-to-mouth, or the ability to partake in society’s higher arts and culture.

The dehumanized worker receives for their trouble shorter life spans, less leisure time, lower wages, higher rates of depression and anxiety, an inability to access healthcare, and higher mortality from both preventable and treatable illness or disease. The institutions, norms, and realities of today are unrecognizable compared to those of the 1940’s through the 1960’s. In short, never tell a millennial “I worked a part-time job and paid rent and tuition”, because it is akin to telling someone dying of cancer how your home-remedy got rid of your cancer, and asking for a cure is laziness.

Section II: From Then to Now

In 1950 the median price for a new home was roughly 2.2 times the median annual earnings, but in 2015 it was up to 9.63 times (this statistic in 2015 was only relevant if you were making at least $16 per hour). Forbes, Fortune Magazine, The New York and Los Angeles Times have all decried the reduction in home ownership and added to the confusion of the current realities faced by most workers; by talking about ‘sharing economy’ or ‘burdens of ownership’ as though these changes were merely cultural shifts. Since ‘your day’ (*ahem* baby boomers, or their children) the value of the minimum wage has dropped by 24% [1968 to 2017], despite more than doubling productivity and an increased education level for all workers.\(^{22}\) One traditional economic measure for how much workers are paid was tied to productivity, more productive workers should be paid more right?


\(^{22}\)Economic Polity Institute Fact Sheet, 2015.

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101, boulevard Raspail, 75006 Paris – France Tel: +33(0)1 47 20 00 94 – Fax: +33 (0)1 47 20 81 89 Website: www.ags.edu (Please cite this paper as the following: Brandan Bill (2017), “Life Under Modern Neoliberal Capitalism”. The Journal of International Relations, Peace and Development Studies. Volume 3. Available from: Link TBD)
The above chart measures US productivity and wages, and thereby not counting salaried workers, and C-suite executives. Those charts demonstrate that the idea that wages and productivity are linked was true at one time. However, that time was during the years in which the socioeconomic arrangements were set up in the wake of the Great Depression and still functional. Wages and income became decoupled following the beginning of “Stagflation” and the advent of the Powell-memo, a letter urging business leaders and corporations to influence democracy in ways it had avoided doing yet. It should be noted that many, if not all of our modern ideas about the economy, and ‘work’ can be tied to Malthusian Social Darwinism, the Powell-memo, and-or the Calvinist-Protestant Work-Ethic. As such, the changes the Powell-memo had in altering what news is, or facts, or corporations versus individuals (when they were considered distinct units) cannot be understated. Though there is not room in this article to continue elaboration upon it or its influence on the modern American consciousness.


These two charts speak volumes about why it seems no one can get ahead any more through the traditional routes the Baby Boomers and their children used, took for granted, and unquestioningly accepted as universal truth. Since the decoupling of wages and productivity more than 15% of US National Income has shifted from the lower 90% to the top 10% of income-earners. During the first 31 years after this shift the top 1% alone absorbed more than 60% of aggregate US income. At the same time, real income of the top 1% grew 7 times faster than every other income bracket added together. For context, in 2016 and 2017 an individual would need an annual income of at least $288,000. The end result of the wealth transfers and inequity since 1970 amounts to the top 1% controlling over 43% of wealth in the US and have a net worth 70 times greater than the everyone else in the US combined. To be clear this is not merely some market force and wages for specialized and difficult work… the top 1% largely do no work, of any sort, as they rely largely on capital ownership in the form of capitalized rents for their wealth and income.

Allow me to de-economics-class this for a moment. The 1% did not do anything new or different in the past (now) 40+ years except to charge more, to nickel and dime their employees, cheap-out on pensions, health plans, and benefits for employees, demand more internships, and pushing down the general rate of pay for everyone else while altering the sphere of public debate through ownership of news outlets, pro-corporate-interest lobbying and ‘non-profits’, altering school textbooks, union busting, and in short dehumanizing multiple generations on the altar of profit at all costs, damn the peoples’ well-being.

A generation of corporate-financed public relations efforts has given these terms and ideas a near sacred aura. As a result, the claims they make rarely require a defense, and are invoked to rationalize anything from lowering taxes on the wealthy and scrapping environmental regulations to dismantling public education and social welfare programs.

Currently (as of January 2017) over 70% of income-earners have an annual income of less than $50,000. That statistic is not markets or invisible hands creating such a rift; it is the active and short-sighted decisions of an increasingly small group of powerful people and their acolytes. American “economic inequality is directly associated with decreased well-being and health.” Such inequity, inequality, changes in norms, and laws have caused roughly 890,000 deaths in America per year from lack of access to healthcare, leisure, social connection, and work-life balance. Which does not account for the suicides, reduced general US IQ, inefficiencies of such a system, shortened lifespans, people who didn’t go to the doctor because they couldn’t afford to take a day off or the bill, or the medicine, and people turned away from hospitals, or insurance plans that did not cover a treatment or test which ended up (perhaps much later) killing them.

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25 www.wid.world
26 Piketty and Saez, 2012.
27 Piketty and Saez, 2012; Bakija, Cole and Heim 2010.
32 Such as a genius who never goes on to work in the field of their ability or at the proper level, or was born to poor parents, or was unable to achieve their potential from some other institutional constraint or factor.
Millions among us are affected by mass unemployment or social cuts, and these millions among us suffer under the destructive effects of the globalized neoliberal economy and policy. They are not only unsupported in serious distress; they are threatened and injured in the depths of their personality and identity.  

Allow me a gonzo-academic moment here before moving on. What was just said is that we know and can tie directly to this system is 35,600,000 deaths in America since the 1970’s. If one were to pile them up, one on top of the other, assuming no one was overweight or busty, these bodies would be 5,303 miles tall... nearly 966 Mount Everests in height. Is that kind of death toll excused by the outcome of this system, series of choices, the undermining of truth, fact, and the obfuscation of words or policy options; or is it merely unconscionable?

Every year the cost of production in human life is growing larger; the returns to the masses who help create the wealth are ever getting smaller.

All of the pain, suffering, death, dehumanization, coercion, and exploitation simply to allow a minuscule portion of the population unlimited wealth, income, power, access to lawmakers, and world leaders. OK, time to walk away from the mental idea of forming a new mountain range of corpses and back to dry, overly sanitized academic norms. That is the trade-off America has made, taking one chip at a time from social awareness, recognition of self-interest, and social protections.

Inequality and social disparity are not simply about the concentration of wealth and income into fewer hands, they are also the unequal use of power, the shaping of policies and the privileging of a conservative wealth minority who have accumulated vast amounts of wealth.

For a further dissection of the policy-end of this discussion, please see Benjamin I. Page, Larry Bartels, and Jason Seawright 2013 work titled Democracy and the Policy Preferences of Wealthy Americans. Their findings were, in short, that only the wealthy have any real influence on policy, legislation, and effectively over society at large. As alluded to earlier, these wealthy few are not wealthy due to hard work, being creative, or personally doing anything, but in fact, the “households in the top one percent of the USA largely rely on capital income,” meaning the adage that the wealthy have earned it is false. Over 92% of these wealthy few were born into wealth and stay that way, regardless of their actions, abilities, or lack thereof. “Nowadays these numbers show that the American dream is a myth. There is less equality of opportunity in the United States today than there is in Europe – or, indeed, any advanced industrial country for which there is data.” Despite what is commonly believed, or seems like common sense, those little social myths and constructions that are almost universally accepted uncritically and internalized as truth; the American people “have erroneous beliefs about the actual level of wealth inequality, they also hold overly optimistic beliefs about opportunities for social mobility in the United States, beliefs which in turn drive support for unequal distributions of wealth.”

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35Golman, Ibid.
Where is the harm in letting the wealthy use their money, power, and influence to propagandize, alter and obfuscate what words or policies or facts mean; one may ask. It has created 50 full years of policy, allowed wealth transfers from the poor and middle class to those few wealthy people, and increased rates of death, anxiety, sickness, shortened lifespans and a reduced IQ for those not in the exclusive 1%. Such trends can be measured for example in what kinds of policies and legislation have been passed. In the past 30 years federal tax policy, for example, had been largely concerned with reducing the tax burden on the top 1%, which obviously benefits only one group of people. Americans have a complete disconnect between their own self-interest and what policies they support, leading them to favor policies which not only favor the wealthy, but actively hurt everyone else through fewer social protections, labor laws, and wealth transfers.

Section III: So shall it be in the National

Neoliberalism is the defining political economic paradigm of our time—it refers to the policies and processes whereby a relative handful of private interests are permitted to control as much as possible of social life in order to maximize their personal profit.

Everyone raised within a certain sociocultural framework will internalize the norms which surround them. These invisible boundaries crisscross everyone’s psyche and are taken as universal or natural truth, without ever realizing it. On the international realm, people erroneously believe that rich countries are rich because they are more efficient, productive, or have more naturally occurring resources than poor countries. However, a cursory glance at history shows that rich developed countries are that way because of historical and recent uses of military-backed combinations of protectionism, subsidies, and other policies which the now poorer and less developed countries were never allowed to adopt. These rich countries primarily use the IMF, World Bank, military, and secret operations to enforce the neoliberal capitalist regime on a global scale. It is an international case of ‘do as I say, not as I do, or did for several hundred years to enrich myself at the expense of the weak or poor.’ These organizations demand that the less developed countries export huge portions of their natural resources and import over-priced unnecessary goods. Additionally, they prevent the nationalization of national resources and threaten sanctions, embargoes, and military intervention to support the continued ability of rich foreign shareholders to reap profit from the natural resources, cheap labor, and lax health and environmental codes that the IMF and World Bank require them to maintain; reminiscent of indentured servants.

As in the international so shall it be in the national. In much the same way that rich and developed countries treat poor and less developed countries, so too do corporations and the wealthy treat employees and their lives. A central theme in the literature reflects these socioeconomic realities that neoliberal capitalism gives workers heightened uncertainty, while simultaneously promoting the idea that workers, society, and the environment should bear the moral responsibility for the risks of enterprise.

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This is one of the reasons that America has the highest levels of inequality of any of the advanced countries—and its gap has been widening. In the ‘recovery’ of 2009-2010, the top 1% of US income earners captured 93% of the income growth. Other inequality indicators—like wealth, health, and life expectancy—are as bad or even worse. The clear trend is one of concentration of income and wealth at the top, the hollowing out of the middle, and increasing poverty at the bottom. It would be one thing if the high incomes at the top were the result of contributions to society, but the Great Recession showed otherwise; even bankers who had led the global economy, as well as their own firms, to the brink of ruin, received outsized bonuses.\(^\text{46}\)

The American system has dehumanized the less wealthy and reified the wealthy ‘entrepreneurs’ and shareholders for their benevolence. The risk an entrepreneur holds in creating jobs is far smaller than that of those who work there, who toil in the name of that shareholder’s profit line. Shareholders can sell their shares, their businesses, and are thereby the most mobile of all the stakeholders. Executives can horizontally transfer, or go into government, regulatory agencies, and get a pension or bonus (if not both) when they do. The workers with specialized skills, who \textit{actually do the tasks} which produce the profit, cannot do the same as the shareholders and executives. Iniquity of employment maneuvering is a twofold issue, first mobility and transfer-ability of skills, funds, or pensions; and second the legal liability protection that the wealthy have access to which a mom-and-pop shop would not. So there is a complete lack of liability on the part of shareholders, to the environment, society, their employees, and the customers. Without liability for the consequences, these mobile stakeholders cut long-term goals to increase short-term gains in stock prices.

The economic consequences of these policies have been the same just about everywhere, and exactly what one would expect: a massive increase in social and economic inequality, a marked increase in severe deprivation for the poorest nations and peoples of the world, a disastrous global environment, an unstable global economy and an unprecedented bonanza for the wealthy.\(^\text{47}\)

These boosted profits take the wealth created by the employees (over 50% of whom make less than $30,000 per year) and transfer it directly to the top 1% in the form of dividends and stock options. The company then has less money saved to invest in employees, future capital investments, and this reduces long-run growth and profit. The invention and growth of the limited corporation has disconnected shareholders from the fall out of any excessively risky choices, or environmental harm caused to fill their pocket books. Counter-intuitively it is, in fact, their ease of exiting that makes these shareholders the most unreliable guardians of a company’s long term future.\(^\text{48}\)

\(^{46}\text{Stiglitz, 2012.}\)


\(^{48}\text{Chang 2010; Kotz, 2000.}\)
The above graph shows the expected returns on capital investment over time, which considering that productivity during this time continued to rise, it would make sense if it also went up. However, as neoliberalism took over the American system, it has eroded long-term capitalist performance in addition to the various social and environmental damages. The modern economy has an increased pool of workers, higher productivity, and more advanced education—resulting in a natural reduction in work-hours per capita required to make our ends meet (as a species). However, due to a combination of anti-intellectualism and stubborn, yet false, ideologies; the modern world would appear a complete dystopia to Adam Smith, or other early thinkers.

The neoliberal model creates instability on the macroeconomic level by renouncing state counter-cyclical spending and progressive taxation policies by reducing the effectiveness of “automatic stabilizers” through shrinking social welfare programs, and by loosening public regulation of the financial sector. The common myth that there is a conflict between social equity and economic efficiency is patently false. Still, it continues to be heralded by the people of every class as a universal truth to maintain the status quo. Because the devil you know is less scary than something new, even if that something would be beneficial.

Section IV: Anecdotal Evidence From 1979

The data from this next section comes from the IPUMS Dataset, Census.gov, and bls.gov. It, however, is using the average tips, working hours, and prices that the author’s mother experienced when she first moved out of her parents’ home in 1979 Southern California. Originally this paper was...
written only for her consumption, and as such, here is one anecdotal example of how things have changed in terms of living and earning money since 1979.

Working as a part-time waitress during the day shift (28 hours per week, 12-4pm 5 days a week, and one 8 hour shift) in 1979, the minimum wage was $2.65 per hour, and her tips averaged ~$112; bringing in $186.20. Working this same schedule for the entire year would yield $9,682.40 annually. Which when adjusted to the 2017 USD (3.345 times) is equivalent to $32,387.63. To put this in context less than 50% of income-earners make this much as of late 2016. Also to note this was a part-time server, during the day shift, without prior experience, nor any degrees. Still, more than 50% cannot attain even this level of income in 2017. The rent for her shared house was about $150 per person (5 people shared a house); which when adjusted is just a hair over $500. In the same area as that house today are single bedroom apartments which cost more than three times that, and even splitting a multi-bedroom apartment costs more than 2.5 times the now nominal seeming $500. Let’s try going back from now then. The minimum wage just increased so this section will be raised from $9 to $10 for accuracy. Assuming one worked the same schedule and received the same nominal value in tips (which would be lower according to bls.org and census.org) would amount to $392 weekly or $20,384 annually.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>1979 Income</th>
<th>2017 Income</th>
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<tr>
<td>Adjusted to 1979 USD:</td>
<td>1979: $186.20 weekly</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adjusted to 2017 USD:</td>
<td>1979: $622.84 weekly</td>
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</tbody>
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Some words may be coming to your mind right now, the author would like to propose ‘inequity;’ because rents, travel, and housing have more than doubled, and in some cases tripled. Pay though has not kept up. Prices become entirely decoupled from social utility and instead are tied to the most that people can pay, yet somehow keeps breathing. Despite the nominal increase in how much money one makes, its actual purchasing power has decreased 38% during this period. All of this is perhaps a lot of numbers, ones that are hard to keep track of, what year is it adjusted to, wait is this with inflation. So this article will propose and use a new metric of Time-Cost. Adam Smith in Wealth of Nations suggested that labor-time is the best method for measuring the value of anything, particularly over larger time-frames; while it was not a new idea at the time, it does seem a revolutionary change from how we look at measurements in the modern economy. He believed, as this author does, that the value of a thing is part-and-parcel with the difficulty and time it took to fashion it, and that this cost was the most static over time. This method means that there is no need to adjust for inflation, or commodity prices, because everything is done at the price of the time, and then the time-cost can be compared on the same level. Using a simple idea to simplify future evaluations of income and purchase-power: “How long must one work at a certain pay level to afford a certain item, service, or commodity”? Using the data from above the author’s mother’s time-cost for rent would be total weekly income $186.20 divided by total hours worked (giving $6.65 per hour) giving a simple base to work with. Then divide gross rent by gross hourly income.

\[
[50 / 6.65 = 22.56 \text{ hours}] \quad \text{So it would take 22 ½ hours to make rent in a month. Whereas working now on the same schedule and nominal tips:}
\]

\[
[10 \times 28 = 280 + 112 \text{ (tips) = 392} / 28 = 14: \text{rent 1250} / 14 = 89.29] \quad \text{So it would take 89 ¼ hours to pay rent in the same area with the same job and hours and tips, or a little over 2 weeks to pay rent. To buy a house, it would take more than four times longer, as the average mortgage in the area costs about}
\]
$2,542 a month, or 6 ½ weeks of pay a month. Compared to buying a new house in 1979 was about $449 or about 2 ¼ weeks of work a month. So, in short, you could have worked as a part-time server, and afforded to buy a new house, and have excess left, where someone in the same position now would not be able to afford rent without 4 roommates. How about a car? The average cost of a new car in 1979 was $5,770 or 867 hours and 41 minutes of work, less than one year working part-time. Whereas now the average cost of a new car is $33,560 or 2,397 hours of work or more than a year’s income. To pay off a car in the same amount of time as it took in 1979 working as a part-time server one would need to make over $38 per hour in 2017. Look back at the wages vs. productivity chart quickly, and then re-read this section. So the myth of hard work and being productive and raise yourself up is not true, and has been definitively disproven as high inequality directly correlates to low social mobility, reducing the likelihood that poor people can ‘work their way up.’53

In 1979 there were about 25 ½ million living in poverty; by 2010 that number had increased to 46.2 million. Considering that 37.08% of income-earners now make less than the federal poverty level in 2016, the trend is worsening. In short, the number of Americans who are living in poverty has grown by over 50% since 1970; which is a good period to measure from because between 1950 and 1980 the 3 lowest income quintiles saw income growth and an increase of associated health metric improvements. Since 1980 every income quintiles except the highest income bracket has seen losses amounting to 8.5% of total earned income, which was entirely re-directed and distributed to the richest. Between 1950 and 2015 the richest gained while everyone else lost, specifically by quintile: lowest 31.12% loss; 2nd lowest 31.67% loss; middle 17.82% loss; upper middle 0.855% loss; and the highest quintile has seen a 19.9% gain.

First, our data show that the bottom half of the income distribution in the United States has been completely shut off from economic growth since the 1970s. From 1980 to 2014, average national income per adult grew by 61 percent in the United States, yet the average pre-tax income of the bottom 50 percent of individual income earners stagnated at about $16,000 per adult after adjusting for inflation.54 In contrast, income skyrocketed at the top of the income distribution, rising 121 percent for the top 10 percent, 205 percent for the top 1 percent, and 636 percent for the top 0.001 percent. 55

Other things have changed in addition to higher poverty and homelessness, and loss of income. For example the rise of consumerism as socially acceptable national duty to ‘support the nation’ during the cold war; which was created through changes in marketing, ideology, representation in legislation, academia, and general social sentiments. This is reflected in the works on public relations, marketing, and advertising by Walter Lippman and Edward Bernays. Materialism and consumerism then swept America as a method of self-expression in the 1980’s and 1990’s; finally shifting in the late 90’s and early 2000’s where spending, consuming, and materialism altered into identity-expression and life-style ideation. Along with the increasing acceptability of materialism and consumerism have been a host of other changes, social and business norms, political considerations, marketing, PR, media, all over a background of slow violence, inequity, inequality, mass atrocities, HR norms, environmental destruction, war, and the degradation of human dignity in the 21st century.

54Expressed in constant 2014 dollars, using the national income deflator.

101, boulevard Raspail, 75006 Paris – France Tel: +33(0)1 47 20 00 94 – Fax: +33 (0)1 47 20 81 89 Website: www.ags.edu (Please cite this paper as the following: Brandan Bill (2017), “Life Under Modern Neoliberal Capitalism”, The Journal of International Relations, Peace and Development Studies. Volume 3. Available from: Link TBD)
The only demand that property recognizes is its own gluttonous appetite for greater wealth, because wealth means power; the power to crush, to exploit, to subdue.  

The most disturbing part of these changes is that they required no evil masterminds or a consortium of international conspirators seeking to own or destroy everything good. Rather it was achieved through the reification of the idea bureaucrat personified as the neutrally objective professional; able to perform the compartmentalized tasks required by their job without ever even recognizing the societal, human, or environmental ramifications of their dull, routinized, and seemingly inconsequential tasks. The credit cards and banks that charge people of color higher interest rates, the accountant at the recycling company that dumps plastic in international waters, the Wall Street investor who only cared about making money by financializing quinoa, the 50-year-old man who invested in private prisons to build his retirement fund. The short and narrow-minded vision of selfish generations created a world of dehumanization, financialization, social and economic inequity and the worst inequality in the modern age.

Section V: Money Talk

As of May 2016, there were 18,714,500 people employed in sales, marketing, advertising, public relations and related industries; which amounts to 12.22% of all American employment. In other words, more than 1-in-10 people’s line of work is getting other people to want, buy, and purchase things. Add in that roughly 45% of workers are underemployed to the 12.22%, and over ½ of America’s working people are gone to waste. Additionally, more than 1.5 million American families live on less than $2 per day per person. As such it is easy to show that neoliberalism by definition has eschewed ideas such as human rights, equity, fairness, and socioeconomic justice; in favor of unrestrained wealth, income, and the ability to exploit others for one’s own gain.

Allow me to indulge in a thought-experiment, separate all work into three overly broad sectors:

1) Advancing (research, arts, advanced computing, writing – people who further human thought, science, and knowledge)

2) Producing (medical, housing, sanitation, producing food or clothes – making the stuff we need to continue living)

3) Leeching (the financial sector, real estate, insurance, paper pushers of all breeds, bureaucrats, politicians, advertisers – jobs which make and further nothing, yet continue to waste human potential)

What then, is the purpose of the 3rd category? I don’t mean why the individuals employed in those professions perform those tasks, but rather why as a society we waste human thought, talent, creativity, and time in allowing those professions to exist? Much like the burger-flipping-machine question but backward, the job is pointless in the span of human history, will contribute nothing to the progress or maintenance of human life and yet, those jobs exist. Obviously, it is to make someone money, but as we discussed earlier that money rarely goes into the hands of those who actually do the paper-pushing and deal making.

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Let me propose a radical idea, what if we banned those jobs, instituted a universal basic income, flipped our tax codes back to the 1950’s, reinstated the separation between investment institutions and banks, reduced the number of newspapers, radio stations, and types of media one company may own back to 1950’s numbers (of course we would have to add digital and new media etc), made the workday a maximum of 7 hours (with a paid 1½ hour lunch and two ½ hour breaks), instituted single-payer healthcare and ditched private insurance, set profit caps on medicine, food, housing, and clothing? Suddenly those jobs would not even be missed, and we would have more songs, music, plays, books, and leisure. Mind you, this is no utopia that this article proposes, but rather a less myopic perspective, one that takes into account the shortness and tenuous hold on life we receive, and the ultimate goal of furthering our species, protecting other species, and preserving our planet’s resources.

This paper will make one last ethical argument, to create a mindset which achieves a reduction in suffering of all forms of life, the betterment of each individual life, and allowing true freedom to pursue what matters for each person—humanity needs to rethink its priorities. America used to be a forward-thinking nation, though always at war on behalf of corporate profit (seriously find a single year the US military or CIA was killing, bombing, or invading somewhere), and it is possible to become so once more. First, this author proposes a decoupling of work and income, freedom and freedom to exploit the desperate, and that American society drops the myopic lens currently used for every social and economic consideration in favor of a 100 or 500-year span. While it would not undo the damage that has already passed, preventing more from occurring in the future does and should have value. Every time we act without thought, push for good sounding legislation without considering its ramifications or real intent, or participate in this system of suffering and death, we stain our hands with the pain and blood of the desperate. It is not only unethical to participate in this system, but the moral culpability for such collaboration is upon every individual, even if the thought of resistance or other systems never even occurred to them.

Section VI: A Series of Moral Inquiries

I surrendered my moral conscience to the fact that I was a soldier, and therefore a cog in a relatively low position of a great machine.58

Our society promotes organizational rationality to the exclusion of alternative criteria or motives of action and in particular subordinates the use of violence to rational calculus. Organizational discipline requires the suppression and obliteration of personal views, social utility, individual preferences and thoughts outside of the functions of a particular role. Obeying commands and demands of authority, both implicit and explicit is considered a prime value of ‘work ethic.’ There is a natural invisibility of causal connections within complex systems of interaction, meaning that there is also a distancing of unsightly or morally repelling outcomes from those organizations, rendering them invisible, or nearly so to any actor. The “honor of the civil servant” is personified in the ability to execute the order of superior authorities conscientiously, exactly as is the order agreed with their convictions. In other words a reification of discipline and self-denial created through the replacing of an individual’s preferences or morality with what is demanded of them by authorities within the hierarchy. Also, to substitute the personal morals, this is the option of choice and supplanted it with the rules and regulations of an impersonal and dehumanized position.

The primary cause for the changes that this article has been addressing is this impassionate ‘professional’ norm which is the pinnacle of post-modern organizational methods. Which is given life in the form of the corporation, where vertical hierarchy, ethical or moral considerations come second to the bottom lines of shareholders dividends and stock prices. The short-term morally-blind decision making that has led to these immoral socioeconomic outcomes has only been possible due to the post-industrial norms of our primary organizational mode.

Rather than starting economic considerations from the ever-more-common adage of “I should be able to make as much money as I can, and it is wrong not to let me.” Perhaps a better base would be “at what point is human suffering, death, anxiety, and shortened lifespans not worth letting a small group of people accumulate unlimited sums of wealth, influence, and power?” What is the marginal utility in allowing an infinitesimal minority the ability to reap alone all the resources and benefits from the planet and toil of those upon it? How does this aid in the advancement and continuance of the human species, or society? Neoliberal capitalism, and by extension those who champion it has dehumanized the majority human kind. A common threat is that if workers ask for better shares of the social pie that they will be replaced by machines and automation. We have machines that can flip and serve burgers, take orders, and payments.

The problem of automated hamburger machines raises the issue of why people work at a hamburger joint in the first place. Most would, I think, agree that it is primarily to earn money, not due to a passionate life of burger flipping. The problem thus becomes not how to ‘save jobs’ but how we can redistribute income to realign our socioeconomic expectations in the face of reality.\(^9\)

What is the point of having people work menial jobs that could be automated? Humiliation and dehumanization are what give reason to allowing a human being a smaller share of the resources of our planet and our technology. These unfulfilling and largely pointless jobs will never provide humanity anything, nor give geniuses the opportunity to reveal their abilities, nor artists the space and time to create. We lose a classic of song, literature, art, and music for every hour wasted on menial work.

If we are getting richer as a society, then we can share the work that is needed by having everyone work less without taking a cut in pay… in a rich society, everyone has a right to a basic standard of living, completely independent of work.\(^6\)

Mind you, dear reader, the author does not propose a utopia or vision of work-free life, and leisure at all times. However, as an example, if all income in the US were split evenly among every person at least 15 years old, then each American would receive $59,000 annually. In so doing it would allow America to be the first society to end poverty, hunger, death from preventable illness, free geniuses working as janitors, immediately reduce despair and suicides. If a country is rich, and that country has any moral or ethics, how can they explain away or close their eyes to such rampant injustice?

Prior to capitalism, productive labor was expended by producers not socially as fully separated from the conditions of production. Production was mostly for use; and even
when some products become commodities, a general regulation of production by socially necessary labor time (in the form of exchange value) did not take place. Social-labor allocation occurred through relations of direct personal interdependence and/or hierarchical dependence mutually constituted with the producers’ social (including spiritual) ties to natural and other conditions of production.61

Neoliberal capitalism thus has commoditized every aspect of modern life. Be it water, food, medicine, entertainment, invention, thoughts, or leisure, but in every way, modern life has become a matter of dragging profits out of it. These profits are exclusively directed towards an increasingly small minority who already are and historically have been wealthy. All of us we born on this planet, how is it that we have allowed some to keep such a large share of its natural resources—our birthright—and that of future generations as well.

More and more frequently life in all its forms is being taken for granted; leading us to lead morally blind, deaf, and mute. Ignoring the ramifications of our actions or those we choose to participate in. The corporation is the system which most encourages people to act in a dispassionate ‘professional’ manner, and in so doing ‘pass the buck’ morally to our bosses, HR, and the C-suite executives who make the decisions. Shirking the moral responsibility and passing it to others is not only mentally lazy but criminal, as we can point to its costs in human lives, the extinction of species, destruction of natural habitats, increasing use of mood enhancing drugs and heightened socioeconomic inequality and injustice on a global scale. If the answer to any of these questions is/was “I was only doing my job” or “I was only following orders” it is sure that the externalities and collateral damage will be high.

Since first writing this article for my family’s consumption, the author has found some of his favorite researchers have confirmed what this paper first used socioeconomic trends and societal norms to propose. These researchers include Thomas Piketty, Emmanuel Saez, Gabriel Zucman, Lucas Chancel, and Facundo Alvaredo at the World Wealth and Income Database. This author has chosen to frame the arguments, conclusions, and moral or ethical considerations may be branded by some to be gonzo, or not sanitized and nuanced enough to be entirely academic; but we are not talking merely about numbers, ease of living, fairness, or equity. The findings in this and similar papers amounts to people dying, the largest extinction event perhaps in the history of the world, the permanent destruction of environmental resources, suffering en masse, and pain on a worldwide scale. It is the opinion of this author that not using more direct language, more powerful words and examples to get the point across would be a moral failing.

As this article points out, the period of 1950s through the 1970’s was in fact, the only one in modern history in which the average welfare and opportunities for the lower and middle classes increased. However, from 1970 to 1980 this trend slowly died; and from the Reagan era onward any gains of that period have been replaced with the increased welfare of the wealthy and rich. As such our society has for the past 38 years created a situation that is the opposite of any logical purpose of individuals coming together to form a society.

This article provides only a minor sampling of data and overwhelmingly proves the case. American socioeconomic realities more closely resemble a Hobbesian dystopia, except that the

leviathan is made up of the wealthy and rich and its power used for their own benefit. Those who do not make an obscene income, or are wealthy are expelled from the realm of social obligation. Dehumanized and thus judged as undeserving of their share of earth’s resources, which were, in fact, their birthright. By the sheer act of our birth on this planet, we all share an equal claim and responsibility to protect the resources of this planet. Any attempt to hoard more than this is not only unethical and immoral but, is in fact violence against all those who live now and those to come. In the face of such inhumanity and selfishness, any defense or fashioning of apologetics in the defense of these systems is a cravenly attempt to deify thieves and oppressors.

Appendix: General Wage and Income Data
Nominal Minimum Federal Minimum Hourly Wage and Adjusted to 2017 USD.62

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55.63% of American income-earners make less than $33,000 annually.
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Declaration of Conflicting Interests: The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding: The author received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.