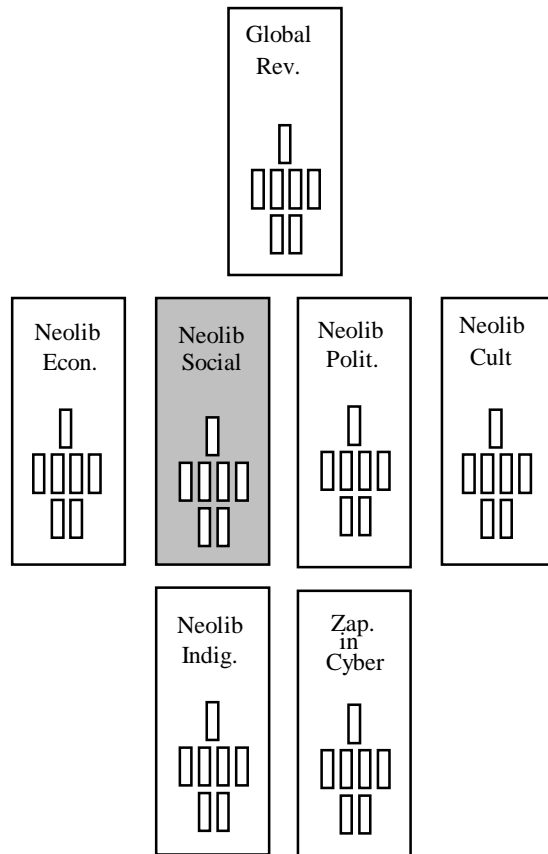


Neoliberalism: Social Aspects

One of a series of interconnected notes
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Neoliberalism

Neoliberalism as an ideology contains meanings, ideas, and values based on the social tenets of classical liberalism: the free market, individualism, the pursuit of narrow self interest and the proposition that these will lead to the social good. Neoliberalism also supplies a repertoire of strategies through which people may be dominated, subordinated, assimilated and excluded. A response to an earlier cycle of struggle by workers, students, women, minorities and peasants which threw an earlier stage of capitalism into crisis, neoliberalism seeks to disempower all of these groups by converting their differences into antagonisms along lines of income, race, gender and ethnicity.

Neoliberalism's neoconservative public policies undermine the middle class while redirecting their fear of decline against those struggling further down the wage hierarchy. Cuts in social programs and legal rights aim to disempower grassroots movements, leaving them vulnerable to the demands of big business. Struggles for equality are attacked through the criminalization of affirmative action. Victories for cultural heterogeneity in school systems and universities are countered by reducing the diversity of faculty, curriculum and funded programs. Women's reproductive freedom, sexual liberation and economic independence have come under especially ferocious attack by the organized Christian right. Homophobia has also been given religious sanction to roll back gay rights through private violence and public law. Xenophobic nationalism has been used to foster an anti-immigrant hysteria and fear of people of color. Such efforts have produced walled and guarded suburban communities and work places.

Neoliberalism and Violence

Central to the creation of such antagonisms is violence, both manifest and structural. Manifest or physical violence has been enacted legally through the terrorism of public executions, mass incarcerations, and the militarization of many communities and the border. It has been enacted illegally through private lynchings, rape, police beatings and paramilitary shootings and burnings. Structural violence, both economic and social, has been accentuated through symbol, ideology and policy to subject some to poverty, hunger, avoidable disease, under-education, peonage and disfranchisement while only threatening others with these horrors. Despite a pervasive rhetoric calling for the limitation of government, the state

has actually increased its intrusive role in society through the war on drugs, public surveillance and police and military intervention at home and abroad. The Army, INS, FBI and other military units and police agencies have opened low intensity war on the border and in urban areas with such operations as Operation Hammer, Operation Rock Crusher, and Operation Hold the Line. Rapidly multiplying prisons and work camps house growing numbers of young people of color criminalized for their youth, associations with alternative communities and attempts to exploit lucrative illicit markets.

Resistance

Resistance to all this manifest and structural violence has been both individual and collective. The most effective efforts have been based in earlier struggles where people learned to work together in autonomous informal networks, communities and social spaces that accepted difference and diversity. It has not been easy for neoliberals to roll back the gains of the 1960s and 1970s. People have resisted attacks on wages, social expenditures and free time through work slow downs, theft, sabotage and riot. Others have exploited alternative markets through illicit trade and underground systems of redistribution. Still others have elaborated evolving cultural critiques through music, art and theater.

Struggle Against Neoliberal Social Policies

Overcoming neoliberal social policies depends on the creative transformation of traditional institutions into new social networks which allow people to control their own learning, to redistribute their resources according to their needs and to enjoy difference without antagonism while pursuing the elaboration of their own desires. Many people have broken free from the traditional restrictive exaltation of the nuclear family by pursuing alternative lifestyles, living arrangements and social relationships. Others have openly challenged neoliberal values of private property, competition and emphasis on individual success through endless work and ostentatious consumption. Becoming a part of community organizations, centers and neighborhoods, they promote cooperative efforts in the production and distribution of necessities while reshaping their personal relationships into more self-empowering and mutually supportive forms. Many of these alternatives have incorporated a search for new approaches to the interrelationships between humans and the rest of nature. Successful abolition of neoliberal social policies can only come as all of these efforts to build a new world overshadow the old and provide the strength for its final destruction.

"It will primordially be a revolution that is the result of struggle on various social fronts, with many methods, under many social forms, with varying degrees of commitment and participation."
El Sup, January 20, 1994