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The following is the long version of an essay that I wrote for a class on political theory. The basic premise is that Liberalism is becoming defunct because it's political legitimacy is on the line. Most of my examples on criticisms and alternatives are from the left partially because of an interview with a political activist due to the prompt of the essay, and my own familiarity with leftists critiques of Capitalism, Liberalism, and Neoliberalism in general.

I do not have permission to post the full interview or reveal any names, however quotes from the interview as they were written in the essay will be included.

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### **Why Abandon Liberalism?**

An essay on the ills of Neoliberalism and why people may want to abandon Liberalism all together.

Nearly 3 decades ago, the Soviet Union fell, and with it the support system that kept the network of authoritarian socialist states alive as well. Nearly 8 decades ago, Nazi Germany and the Empire of Japan were defeated by the Allied powers and the project of right-wing nationalism and fascism was put to an end and discredited for the rest of the century. Two centuries ago in the early 19th century Liberalism was a fringe ideology that only caught ground in the United States and in limited facets in everyday life in France after the Bourbon Restoration, and after the French Revolution it was viewed as a destructive force politically that if taken at all, needed to be tempered with conservative monarchism. These are all realities that have existed in the past and stand in stark contrast to our world now where Liberalism is dominant in many parts of the world, and where the most powerful nations are ones with laws that are derived from this ideology, and it stands in contrast even more when those in the West

under the age of 30, don't even know of a time when Liberalism wasn't a dominant global political ideology. Sure, we learn of the American Revolution and the French and Russian ones, and WW2 and the Cold War in school, but most of that is becoming a distant memory even with people still alive with vivid memories of part of that world. This however is changing, as many are discontent with the status quo across the world, and this is the clearest in Western Liberal Democracies (I will abbreviate to WLD's), and many are starting to abandon Liberalism. The reasons are many and extremely interconnected, many are discontent with the results of a globalized economy as they aren't seeing the benefits from it, many are reacting to changing socio-political realities and the failure of current WLD's to give them a window of opportunity to change it in their directions, many see the increase in totalitarian control due to advances in technology and may want to fight against that or use it for good, and think that Liberalism is outdated to deal with these issues, whatever the reason, it's clear that WLD's are starting to lose legitimacy and Liberalism is becoming less and less popular. Here, I will argue that Liberalism is being abandoned at an ever-increasing rate in the West because of its relationship with Capitalism and the synthesis, Neoliberalism, and it's (Neoliberalism's) social, economic, and political impact and the reaction among people in the west (particularly America).

## **Liberalism, Capitalism, and Neoliberalism**

First, in order to figure out what we're talking about, we are going to need some basic definitions. 'Liberal' in casual political discourse is often synonymous with progressive, however in political theory it takes on a related meaning for its circumstance, but a distinctly different meaning from this one. Liberalism in political theory, is a political tradition characterized fundamentally by the belief that liberty should be the guiding principle in organizing a society ([Liberalism 1.1](#)). This is an extremely broad statement that can mean many things but liberals often believe in concepts such as inalienable rights, the rule of law, and social justice, and often hold up values such as individuality and egalitarianism. To most in the West and especially America this seems like common sense considering the nation was founded on such principles, and since political theory and discourse in the West is dominated by a liberal

worldview, so in this context, it becomes less of an ideology and more of the only way of understanding the world, but as we've seen recently this idea has been challenged for the first time in a while. There are two conceptions of liberty that are important for understanding the contemporary issues at hand, negative and positive liberty. Negative liberty is the most ubiquitous conception of liberty, as it's the idea that liberty is the "...absence of coercion by others" ([Liberalism 1.2](#)), it can be therefore said that to have negative liberty is to have freedom from, or the lack of prevention by others. Positive liberty on the other hand is less ubiquitous, and is understood to be freedom in the context of having the ability to do something, in this way, "Positive freedom *qua* effective power to act closely ties freedom to material resources." ([Liberalism 1.3](#)). These conceptions of liberty are absolutely necessary in order to understand the relationship between Liberalism and Capitalism, and Liberalism and Social Democracy for instance, because what definition of liberty is used will determine what kind of liberty through political economy should be achieved.

Liberalism is often seen as the political compliment to Capitalism, as the two have a history in their theoretical and applicational development. Capitalism is an economic mode of production in which the means of production are privately owned, profits are made off the products that those means produced, and those profits are invested as capital in order to continue this cycle. Capitalism's relationship with Liberalism in its development is a complicated one, but to simplify, it's often assumed that the two are inseparable in a society, specifically with the common belief that capitalism leads to a middle class bourgeoisie which in the case of an authoritarian society, usually in a monarchy or in a dictatorship, will want to gain greater political rights and therefore advocate for Liberalism along with democracy. While such a thing has happened in history (e.g. the French Revolution(s)), this is an oversimplification, and some argue that this relationship between Liberalism and Capitalism is not a given. Historical and contemporary examples of non-liberal and non-democratic Capitalist economies are abound (e.g. Pinochet's Chile, (controversially) contemporary China), though the application of liberalism in

political economy has lead to ideas such as Lassiez-Faire Capitalism, and Economic Liberalization.

Neoliberalism is another application of Liberalism in political economy, and is a reaction to the previous Keynesian Social Democracy of post-war period in America and much of the West ([Gamble](#)). Neoliberals believe that the government should be used as a mechanism to create a freer market by encouraging economic growth and the creation of jobs through the deregulation of industries and implementing austerity measures such as cutting social welfare programs, the maxim at work here being ‘The freer the market, the freer the people.’ They also take the role of the individual in society and emphasize the role of personal responsibility as the primary driver behind a person’s success, and this is key to understanding the social issues behind Liberalism and Neoliberalism as it can help us understand how this ideology manifests at even the smallest level. This synthesis of Liberalism and Capitalism was adopted by the center-right parties in the Anglosphere and was a key program in the Thatcher and Reagan Administrations and was soon adopted by the center-left as well. Neoliberalism in America and parts of the West is extremely ubiquitous and the affects of it are all encompassing, and as it was made clear earlier there are many who feel that this form of Liberalism is the cause of their problems, and that Liberalism can’t solve those problems.

### **Problems With Neoliberalism**

Understanding what Liberalism and Neoliberalism are, what are the contemporary issues that have relationships with this ideology and its program that we can identify, and what is causing this crisis of ideological legitimacy. There are three clear issues that we can identify that is the result of Neoliberal policy implementation and ideological entrenchment: Increasing economic disparity, the commodification of social justice issues, and the erosion of democratic institutions.

## 1. Economic Disparity

Regarding the first issue, it's been well documented that Capitalism produces economic inequality and it's been argued in academic circles and in public discourse for almost two centuries now over whether it's inherently good or bad and what should be done about it. Regardless, economic disparity will not sit well with everyone, particularly those who are experiencing the negative effects of that disparity, and this can be a major problem to the legitimacy of an ideology and those forces that promote it. This disparity in Neoliberal political economies happens in many ways but three that are of particular importance are: Disparity through the measurable efforts of private industry to maximize profits by decreasing or failing to increase wages and requiring more hours worked for less pay, efforts by governments to deregulate industries and suppress the power of unions therefore leaving people vulnerable to an autocratic capitalist system in which the primary drive is profits, and the effort by governments to cut social welfare programs as part of austerity measures. The first way is clear as to how disparity is manifest, and how this can be manifested in this political economy, as the focus of the individual and the government is about job creation and obtaining a job, rather than providing a job that pays enough in order to live beyond mere survival, then it becomes easy to believe that if a person is struggling in this economy then it's the result of a lack of hard work, or financial mismanagement. The second way is also clear in its manifestation, the Neoliberal argument against these protections and unions is that they prevent the kind of flexibility needed for a healthy economy, but if we understand that the creation and flow of capital requires profits to be made, and those profits come at the expense of those workers through the form of wage decreases, long hours, and the lack of benefits, then through Neoliberal lenses that is true, but through Keynesian or even Marxist lenses this is an issue, for either reasons of legitimacy or for reasons of ethics ([Gamble](#)). What happens is that individual workers lose the power and leverage that was provided to them and they lose freedom in this aspect of their lives. The third way this

happens is the most clear as to how this leads to impoverishment of the population, many people rely on the kind of welfare programs to provide services that they can't hope to get themselves through their own labor, including healthcare, and education services for them and their children. The combination of all of these gives a clear summary as to how increasing economic inequality in our time is tied to Neoliberal ideology and policies.

## 2. The Commodification of Social Justice Issues

The second issue listed is one that's not entirely clear at first glance, but after clear thought, is a result of Neoliberal ideology. The cultural left that was left after the wake of the Vietnam Wars and the initial rise of Neoliberal ideology was one that was weakened in its political potency compared to the movements of the left in the past. While positives of this movement were all too clear, the advancement of the rights of racial minorities, women, and queer individuals to name a few, this political movement took a turn towards political complacency, as they saw the entrenched power of political elites and the ascendant capitalists of the new Neoliberalism as impossible to reform, let alone even worth it to take up arms in a revolution. This left a left, in the United States in particular, concerned mainly with social issues rather than dealing primarily with core Social Democrat or Socialist issues, such as wages issues, worker protection issues, and advocacy for welfare programs. This state of affairs so entrenched itself that even the Democrats in America and the Labour Party in Britain took up Neoliberal economics with a Social Democratic spin, the so called "Third Way" position, and the only clear differentiation between the two parties nowadays have to do with socio-cultural issues such as immigration reform, and abortion access. What this has led to in recent years is a mixing of cultural issues and Neoliberal economics, and a subsequent commodification as Marx would understand the issue. A popular meme on the internet and in leftist circles in particular recently is the term "HIRE MORE WOMEN GUARDS", the source of which is from a tweet that was trying to mock Democrats, explained as "...a [snowclone](#) and [corypasta](#) popular on Twitter meant

to mock liberal and neoliberal priorities which suggest that rather than dismantle oppressive systems, society should make those systems more diverse.” ([knowyourmeme.com](https://knowyourmeme.com)). This, while a joke made specifically to highlight the phenomena, is just one example of the co-option of these issues to support a Neoliberal framework rather than using such issues to discredit Neoliberalism. You’ll often see ads nowadays that promote one social movement or another, showing a gay relationship in a positive light or a dad with his trans son encouraging healthy, or sometime you may even go on twitter and see an account for one corporation or another making snide remarks against bigoted trolls, and while on the surface it can be viewed as simply support for a social movement or another, the motive behind is clear, the goal is to take advantage of a movement to gain more customers. It’s been argued by some that this support is crucial for social issues but by others that this prohibits real social change. More and more in recent years its been voiced by activists and by the new wave of leftism that the two are inherently linked, and that we cannot deal with social issues without also dealing with economic issues, as those who are destitute in society aren’t just destitute, they’re also the stigmatized. The new synthesis of the old “Labor and Unions” Left and the new Cultural Left has lead to this attitude, and can be expressed clearly when I interviewed an activist in the community and asked her what she thought about Liberalism, she replied to the question “I think that it’s pretty obvious that liberal democracy has failed just about everyone. It has some nice ideas but with the realities of capitalism and white supremacy it really never stood a chance. I don’t necessarily have a pretty solution for how I think that society should be organized but I do think that every person should be provided for and valued equally by society.”

### 3. The Erosion of Democratic Institutions

The last issue relating to Neoliberalism is also not clear at first glance, but has become ever more clear in recent years. The cause behind the erosion of democratic institutions caused by Neoliberalism has to do with how power becomes distributed under this system. With the

lifting of previously mentioned protections on workers rights and the crack downs on unions, corporations became richer and more powerful as a result, meaning they could spend money on advertising to increase their customer bases, spend money on lobbying in order to create policy that's favorable to themselves and their industries, and the average workers had less to protect themselves with politically. This created a country with interest groups as powerful as the gun lobby and 'Big Pharma' as its called, who can shape policy in their favor, such as the attempt on Pharmaceutical and Health Insurance lobbyists to destroy or severely limit the terms of Obama's ACA as an example, and ones that have had increasing autocratic control over worker's lives, including using Neoliberal ideology to create workplace environments in which employees adopted their company's identity in significant ways, and specifically instructing workers to support specific political movements at the threat of their jobs. Not only that, but in recent years many of these larger corporations have massive wealth to the point where they can influence international politics, with some like apple having more wealth than most nations can produce in a year. All of this to say is that the power such non-state corporate entities hold is enough to influence politics and disrupt democratic institutions by influencing elections and policies, all while having no accountability to nobody but their shareholders. ([Brown](#))

Understanding all of this, we can see the clear affect that this has on society, even with those who don't identify it by name, many feel the backend of these policies and the effect the ideology has had at a basic social level, and its no wonder that many are turning away from Liberalism, or at least partially so, for solutions to their problems.

### **Alternative Viewpoints**

Despite the ideological entrenchment in WLDs, Neoliberalism as it stands is being challenged ideology because of all of these compounding factors. Many want to challenge it because of its effects on democratic institutions, many want to because they want a resurgent left who can deal with labor issues and economic inequality, but many also take other paths and give



different justifications as to why the state of affairs is the way it is. As it stands right now there are two alternatives to such an ideology being brought up in the light for the first time in decades, left-wing populism, and right-wing populism respectively. Such ideologies are varied on both the left and the right but they include on the left primarily: Social Democracy mainly, and smaller support for Marxism-Leninism and Anarchism and associated ideologies, and on the right primarily different forms of White Nationalism/White Supremacy. From the information from my interview, I will talk about the Left and its dynamics specifically. The attitude on much of the left can be summarized by quotes from the interview I conducted, as the person mentioned is an anarchist. When I asked her what her position was on contemporary economic issues, she replied, “In a world where wealth and currency exists it should be evenly distributed but in my ideal world currency and wealth as we know it would not exist.”, when I asked her about what her views on state power is, she replied this, “I do not believe in the state as a legitimate entity and I think that all arms of state power and suppression should be abolished.”. While these views are only representative of anarchists, and are clearly so far left as to be out of what’s normally considered to be in the Overton window, it’s clear that such ideologies are becoming more popular and the idea of such radical solutions to societal issues, are becoming more and more accepted, and it’s clear some of these views have to be taken at least in small doses in order for a resurgent Social Democratic movement to rear its head. However, despite this resurgence of Leftist Ideology, Liberalism in this sphere isn’t completely being abandoned. Talking about key Social Democratic issues means 1. Talking about democratic participation, specifically in a Liberal Democracy, and 2. Talking about the definition of Liberty. What’s clear here is that there’s a shift away from one definition of liberty to another, the negative to the positive. The fight for a positive conception of Liberty is being fought for here, the conversations on talk shows and on internet forums are about if whether you can be free if you’re in debt because you fell down the stairs. Democratic Presidential Candidates who are taking a more social democratic turn talk about these things in the language of Liberty and Freedom. Social Democracy itself is a synthesis of Liberal political values and Socialist economic objectives. The activist that I interviewed even reflected this attitude when I asked if it was more important to have the

opportunity to pursue material needs or to have them provided, she said “I think that it is far more important for people to have their needs met than to be provided with supposed rights to pursue those needs. Food, shelter and healthcare are all rights, working for those things is not a right.” Though despite this fight, to many, these principles can be an obstacle for those who are more persuaded by the idea of revolution rather than reform. Many still associate Liberal Democracy with Capitalism, especially in its form of neoliberalism, and many believe like the activist I interviewed that with the combination of the two, Liberalism “never stood a chance.”

## **Conclusion**

I argued that Liberalism is being abandoned at an ever-increasing rate in the West because of its relationship with Capitalism and the synthesis, Neoliberalism, and its social, economic, and political impact and the reaction among people in the is because of the increasing economic disparity in society, the commodification and co-option of Social Justice issues, and the erosion of Democratic institutions. Although this is true to some extent many are using Liberal principles to oppose Neoliberalism, although it's clear that some, if not many, think that it's time for a change.

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