

Book Review

The Invisible Doctrine: The Secret History of Neoliberalism (& how it came to control your life) (2024) George Monbiot and Peter Hutchison

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While there have been other books on the rise of neoliberalism¹ this book seeks to bring the concept of neoliberalism to a wider public. It aims to offer a readable, accessible guide, to make visible the key concepts of this ideology, how it has been promoted, and to develop an argument which opposes a political logic that in recent years has advocated these concepts as the new “common sense” - immutable principles for which there is no alternative.

Monbiot and Hutchison use the example of the 16th century Portuguese exploitation of Madeira to grow sugar to explain the development of capitalism. They cite this as one of the earliest examples of the commodification of land, labour and money to make a profit. The Portuguese colonised the, in this case, uninhabited island to exploit local environmental resources, first for the trees and then the favourable environment to grow sugar, borrowing money (paying interest) for implementation and using slaves to provide the labour. When the land or the resources available were exhausted and were no longer profitable the capitalists simply moved on elsewhere. A pattern which continues across the world today.

The struggle for democracy in the richer countries of the world has meant a voting public could demand that their elected governments enforce some curbs on the worst excesses of capital and defend their interests by ensuring some redistribution of wealth. This was particularly relevant during the post 2nd world war period when there was a Keynesian economic consensus in the

¹ E.g. Daniel Steadman Jones (2012) *Masters of the Universe*, Hayek, Friedman and the birth of neoliberalism
David Harvey, (2005) *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*

richer countries of the world which accepted that the (economic) success of a country depended on public spending to meet its' citizens need for homes, income security, health and welfare. The authors point out that these concessions did not extend to poorer countries, however, which continued to be shamelessly exploited. The excessive inequality between rich and poor now being seen within richer countries was always a feature of the exercise of global capital between countries.

Neoliberalism is in a sense an extreme form of capitalism which conceives the "market" as the sole arbiter of success or failure. Its advocates seek to inhibit any curbs on the "freedom" of individuals to pursue power and wealth and for this reason can seek to influence government policy and democratic decision making therefore, ultimately, undermining democracy.

Examples of this are, what the authors describe as, "conspiracy fictions." While there are conspiracies which those abusing power seek to keep hidden from the public, fictional conspiracies can be manufactured to deflect public attention from what might really be happening. The goal is to create mistrust, insecurity, confusion and fear, and to misdirect the voting public's anger towards benign or indeed potentially supportive targets. This strategy was perhaps best summed up by US President Lyndon B. Johnson who famously said, "If you can convince the lowest white man he's better than the best colored [sic] man, he won't notice you're picking his pocket. Hell, give him somebody to look down on, and he'll empty his pockets for you."

The authors argue that the extreme political right have been effective in offering an easily understood narrative to a disenchanted voting public which provides a simple explanation for the hardship they are experiencing and how it can be addressed. We need, they argue, to come up with a new narrative, a different story.

It is essential, the authors argue, that we build on the universal human need for communities of belonging and appeal to the human capacity for empathy, altruism and compassion. For those involved in community development in all its forms the message is clear - your work matters!! We need to keep plugging away offering an alternative vision of human and environmental interdependence which combats discrimination and prejudice and defends hard won rights. This would aim to promote a more participative and deliberative democracy which gives people more power over decision making and encourages more informed, considered voting.

The book ultimately offers something hopeful and positive to those engaged in community work and who are alarmed by a global political climate which, in promoting competitive individualism, pits humans against one another, engenders extreme inequality and social isolation, and threatens ongoing life on this planet. Reviewing positive cultural and political changes that didn't seem possible in the past, the authors argue that there is a tipping point when enough people are convinced by an argument that undecided people are also persuaded and there is a cultural shift leading to social and political change. This has been reflected in everything from, for example, the right to vote, gay marriage, disability rights, the choices available to women and the challenges to the tobacco industry.

We perhaps should learn from those who advocated neoliberalism. Hayek, Friedman and their disciples waited over 30 years until the tide turned against Keynes economic model and they were ready having promoted their neoliberal doctrine during this time via a network of think tanks, academics, journalists and politicians who were positioned to influence those in power. The evidence of how the widespread adoption of this capitalist economic model is destroying life on the planet is now widely visible. This destruction is not inevitable, however, there is a different way to organise ourselves.

The message of this book is that when enough people are convinced the tide will turn (hopefully not too late!) and we need to be ready having spread this alternative, convincing narrative.

Dr Margaret Petrie 5/12/24