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## Symbiotic neoliberalism: Foucault and the impure critique of neoliberalism

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# Symbiotic neoliberalism: Foucault and the impure critique of neoliberalism

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## ABSTRACT



This article brings together two distinct research trajectories – the growing characterization of neoliberalism as a monster and the recent debate on whether Foucault was a neoliberal – to investigate a dimension that these bodies of scholarship have not examined: our involvement in neoliberalism’s reproduction. To this end, the article introduces the concept of ‘symbiotic neoliberalism’. Drawing on the notion of parasitic neoliberalism (which underpins depictions of neoliberalism as a monster) and on the study of ecosystems (which approaches parasitism as one of the manifestations of symbiosis), and building on Foucault’s notion of the subject as a ‘vehicle of power’, I develop an account of neoliberalism as a symbiotic force that is not a monster ontologically separate from ‘us’ – the subjects that partake in its reproduction. I then use this framework to analyse Foucault’s alleged fascination with neoliberalism. Rejecting the thesis of ‘neoliberal Foucault’, I suggest that his seemingly sympathetic stances may be read both as an (un)conscious endorsement of certain features of neoliberalism *and* an attempt to challenge its ‘game of truth’ by ‘playing it differently’. In this symbiotic neoliberalism – embodied by Foucault’s persona and inspired by his approach – the subject as a ‘vehicle of power’ is neither solely a victim nor merely an endorser of the neoliberal system but a combination of both. This dual capacity allows for the articulation of an *impure* critique of neoliberalism that begins with the recognition of our symbiotic/impure entanglement in its ‘regime of truth’.

## KEYWORDS

Neoliberalism; symbiosis; impure critique; Foucault; monsters and parasites; subject as a vehicle of power; game of truth

## Introduction

This article brings together two distinct research trajectories – the growing characterization of neoliberalism as a monster and the recent debate on whether Foucault was a neoliberal – to investigate a dimension that these bodies of scholarship have not examined: our involvement in neoliberalism’s reproduction. The depiction of neoliberalism as a monster, a longstanding feature of Marxist critique, has intensified since the 2008

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financial crisis well beyond the Marxist domain. This crisis brought the expectation that the time was ripe for the beginning of a postneoliberal phase (Stiglitz 2009; Konings 2016; Peck, Theodore, and Brenner 2009). Yet, a year later, it was already clear that neoliberalism was not only rising from the grave in which it had been hastily buried, but was thriving (Peck, Theodore, and Brenner 2019, 249; Maher 2022, 73). When in 2020 the COVID-19 pandemic erupted, scholars and commentators were quick to point out that its deadly effect had been amplified by neoliberal policies of inequality, privatization, competition, and austerity (Sparke and Williams 2022; Mavelli 2022). The old question resurfaced: Is this new crisis marking the end of neoliberalism?

This time, except for some early commentaries (Saad-Filho 2020; Žižek 2020; Mitchell 2020; Lent 2020), the postneoliberal hopes were much more contained (Standing and Davies 2020; Šumonja 2021). The aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis had made it evident that neoliberalism – both as a rationality of government and regime of subjectification – was not a fixed set of prescriptions but a mutable, adaptable, and evolving assemblage of norms and practices. As Wendy Brown (2015, 20) observed, this is a neoliberalism capable of insinuating itself in and exploiting different and often competing socio-political regimes well beyond the United States, including ‘Sweden’s welfarism, South Africa’s post-Apartheid, and China’s ‘Confucianism, post-Maoism and capitalism’.

While this broad focus has led some scholars to dispute the very usefulness of the concept of neoliberalism (Clarke 2008; Birch and Springer 2019; Maher 2022, 75), it has prompted others to approach neoliberalism as an evolving and resilient rationality capable to adjust, transform, and attach itself to seemingly contending social formations – like the populist and reactionary movements that since 2016 have dominated the global political scene (Callison and Manfredi 2020) – and to ‘non-marketized’ spheres of existence – such as carework, public goods, and the environment, forcing them into the domain of the market (Fraser 2022, xiv). Hence, in recent years, new characterizations of neoliberalism have been advanced to account for its protean character and enhanced exploitative practices, including ‘parasitic’ (Peck, Theodore, and Brenner 2009, 104), ‘Frankenstein’ (Brown 2018; 2019, 10), ‘mutant’ (Callison and Manfredi 2020), ‘viral’ (Sparke and Williams 2022), and ‘cannibal’ (Fraser 2022).

This article aims to reflect and build on these ‘monstrous’ depictions of neoliberalism by investigating a dimension that they have not examined: our involvement in neoliberalism’s reproduction. As late teacher, theorist, and blogger Mark Fisher (2009, 15) observed shortly after the 2008 financial crisis, neoliberal capitalism is ‘a hyper-abstract impersonal structure’ which nonetheless ‘would be nothing without our co-operation’. Whereas existing critiques have primarily focused on the mutability of neoliberalism as a structural force and characterized it as a monster ontologically separate from us, in this article I advance the notion of symbiotic neoliberalism to focus on ‘our cooperation’ in the symbiotic evolution and reproduction of neoliberalism. Symbiotic neoliberalism draws on the notion of parasitic neoliberalism – which, as I shall discuss, underpins depictions of neoliberalism as a monster – and on the study of ecosystems – which approaches parasitism as one of the manifestations of symbiosis – and crucially builds on Michel Foucault’s notion of the subject as a ‘vehicle of power’, in which the subject is simultaneously ‘an effect of power’ and an ‘element of its articulation’ (Foucault 1980, 98).

To explore the relevance of this symbiotic perspective, I engage with a seemingly unrelated yet crucially connected debate: whether Foucault was a critic or a supporter of

neoliberalism (Dean and Zamora 2021; Becker and Harcourt 2012; Dean 2014; Zamora and Behrent 2016; Friedrich 2021; Gordon 2015; Kelly 2015; Hansen 2015; Teurlings 2022; Tiisala 2021; Tanke 2023). At the heart of this debate lies the question of ascertaining ‘who Foucault *really* was’ (Hansen 2015, 292) and the need to reveal his ultimate stance vis-à-vis neoliberalism. This has resulted in accounts that either read Foucault in neoliberal terms or reject this characterization. I suggest that this way of approaching Foucault’s alleged neoliberal leanings rests on the same idea of critique that animates portrayals of neoliberalism as a monster: namely, critique as a pure act of self-transcendence that can enable us to recognize, distance ourselves from, and challenge the neoliberal structure of power.

I argue that this perspective can limit *our* capacity to recognize *our* symbiotic/impure entanglement and participation in the reproduction of neoliberalism, and result in a dichotomous framework in which one is either ‘victim’ or ‘perpetrator’, ‘critic’ or ‘supporter’ of neoliberalism. The risk is analytical and normative. Neglecting how ‘individuals are [also] the vehicles of power, not [just] its points of application’ (Foucault 1980, 98) can conceal ‘our own complicity in planetary networks of oppression’ as *we* end up projecting the ‘evils’ of neoliberalism ‘onto fantasmatic Others’ (Fisher 2009, 15) – be they the ‘monsters’ of neoliberalism or the ‘neoliberal Foucault’ problematized in this article – while making *us* oblivious to the *impure* possibilities of critique and resistance encompassed by *our* embeddedness and symbiotic entanglement in the neoliberal system of power.

In defining the ‘we’, ‘our’ and ‘us’ in the previous paragraph, I follow Alexis Shotwell’s (2016, 6) idea that ‘complicity carries differential weight with our social position’ and therefore ‘people benefiting from globalized inequality’ are those bearing the greatest responsibility for acknowledging, recognizing, and acting upon, as Fisher (2009, 15) remarks, their ‘own complicity in planetary networks of oppression’. Yet, Shotwell (2016, 7) continues, although ‘[p]eople are not equally responsible or capable, and are not equally called to respond’ and ‘however the bounds of the “we” are drawn, we are not, ever, pure. We’re complicit, implicated, tied in to things we abjure’. Hence, ‘against purity’, Shotwell (2016, 18, 5) makes the case for ‘constitutive impurity’ as a way ‘of thinking about complicity and compromise as a starting point for action’. In this article, I build on these insights to explore a line of inquiry not addressed by Shotwell: specifically, what an impure critique of neoliberalism – one that emerges from recognizing our symbiotic entanglement with neoliberalism – might look like.

In advancing an understanding of ‘symbiosis’ as a metaphor for ‘impurity’, I draw on Foucault’s idea of the intrinsic ‘impurity’ of reason (McCarthy 1990; Foucault 1984b) and make the case for an understanding of neoliberalism as a symbiotic force that is not ontologically separate from ‘us’ – the subjects that partake in its reproduction. Rejecting the thesis of ‘neoliberal Foucault’, I propose that his seemingly sympathetic stances may be read both as an (un)conscious endorsement of certain features of neoliberalism, with Foucault as a ‘vehicle’ of neoliberal power, *and*, at the same time, as a critique that challenges neoliberalism’s ‘game of truth’ by ‘playing it differently’ (Foucault 1997, 295). In this symbiotic neoliberalism – embodied by Foucault’s persona and inspired by his approach – the subject is neither solely a victim nor merely an endorser of the neoliberal system but a combination of both. This dual capacity, I will argue, allows for the articulation of an *impure* critique of neoliberalism

that begins with the recognition of our symbiotic entanglement in its ‘regime of truth’ (Foucault 1980, 131).

### From parasitic to symbiotic neoliberalism

The almost permanent state of crisis ushered in by the 2008 financial crash, marked by the failure of neoliberalism and a socio-political incapacity to move beyond it, has led many scholars to invoke Antonio Gramsci’s famous observation: ‘The old is dying and the new cannot be born; in this interregnum, a great variety of morbid symptoms appear’. Slavoj Žižek (2012, 42–43) was one of the first to adapt this sentiment, altering the second part of the sentence to ‘Now is the time of monsters’. More recently, Nancy Fraser (2019; 2022) has described the morbid symptoms of this current ‘interregnum’ as nothing less than neoliberal capitalism turning ‘cannibal’. Žižek and Fraser are two among a growing group of scholars who, in recent years, have characterized neoliberalism as a monster. In this section, I first provide an overview of existing ‘monstrous’ characterizations of neoliberalism, illustrating how they rest on an often-implicit understanding of neoliberalism as a parasite. I identify at least three distinct interpretations of this idea and discuss their complementary meanings. I then address a limitation of this perspective: it constructs neoliberalism as an almost autonomous entity, ontologically separate from us, who are the condition of possibility of its reproduction.

The starting point of my argument is the critically acclaimed 2019 South Korean film *Parasite*, which has recently revived the idea of neoliberalism as a parasite. *Parasite* tells the story of a disenfranchised Seoul’s family, the Kims. They live in a basement, struggle to meet ends, and live of expediencies, like folding pizza boxes, hacking internet connections, and eating at cheap buffet restaurants. One day, their miserable existence cross-paths the glamorous life of another family, the wealthy Parks. They live in a luxurious villa, drink signature water, and feed their dogs organic crabsticks imported from Japan. Through a series of cons, the Kims progressively infiltrate the life of the Parks. The young Kims, a brother and sister in their twenties, manage to have themselves hired as tutors for the Parks’ two children and then succeed in having their father and mother hired as chauffeur and housekeeper. The Kims do not have the necessary qualifications for their jobs (which nonetheless they perform professionally) and have concealed their family connections and true identities to the Parks.

*Parasite* offers a powerful critique of neoliberal capitalism. The destitute Kims are the product of the social inequality, class divide, and limited social mobility that affect South Korean society. Struggling to stay afloat in ‘a society engineered to make sure [that] only the wealthy succeed’ (Balhorn 2019), the Kims’ strategy of survival is to become parasites of the wealthy, that is, ‘parasites on the body of capital’ (Shaviro 2015, 41). Yet, as the story unfolds, another interpretative possibility emerges: the Parks may be the real parasites. Entirely self-centred, the Parks are focused on the limited horizon of their wealth. For instance, when torrential floods strike Seoul and people living in basements, including the Kims, lose everything, their main preoccupation is their inability to properly celebrate their son’s birthday in the garden. The Parks are ultimately unable to carry out their lives without extracting value from an underclass of servants: they are the embodiment of a parasitic neoliberal capitalism that ‘lives and grows by expropriating the products of living labor’ (Shaviro 2015, 58).

*Parasite* vividly illustrates a first meaning of the notion of parasitic neoliberalism: an enhanced regime of extraction and exploitation that feeds off the life of its victims. This idea is often associated with the Marxist critique. For Marx (1976, 342), capital is a very specific kind of parasite: it is ‘dead labour, which, vampire-like, lives only by sucking living labour, and lives the more, the more labour it sucks’. Its ‘thirst for the living blood of labour’ will not stop ‘so long as there is a muscle, a nerve, a drop of blood to be exploited’ (Marx 1976, 367, 416). As Japhy Wilson (2016, 593) observes, the Marxist perspective draws on a gothic narrative that frames ‘Frankenstein, Dracula and zombie hordes’ as ‘fetishized representations of class relations’. The bourgeoisie is the parasite-vampire that sucks the blood of the proletariat; the zombie is the proletariat turned brainless by a parasitic consumer culture that commodifies every aspect of human existence.

Recent Marxist critiques evoking the figure of the parasite have focused on the financial sector and digital economies. Economist Michael Hudson (2015, 15), for instance, has argued that ‘financial parasites’ are destroying the global economy and that the practice of ‘bleeding the host’ with leeches still survives in the neoliberal order in the form of austerity measures. Parasitic finance, he (2015, 24) contends, ‘leaves economies emaciated by monopolizing their income growth and then using its takings in predatory ways to intensify the degree of exploitation’. While not generally regarded as a Marxist scholar, Shoshana Zuboff (2019, 8) evokes a Marxist imaginary in arguing that the ‘surveillance capitalism’ of digital platforms, such as Google and Facebook, is ‘a parasitic economic logic in which the production of goods and services is subordinated to a new global architecture of behavioral modification’. Surveillance capitalism, she (2019, 16) argues, ‘revives Karl Marx’s old image of capitalism as a vampire that feeds on labor, but with an unexpected turn. Instead of labor, surveillance capitalism feeds on every aspect of every human’s experience’.

Analyses such as Hudson’s and Zuboff’s are expressions of broadly understood Marxist critiques that tend to consider neoliberalism as an ‘acceleration’ and ‘intensification of capitalist exploitation’ (Callison and Manfredi 2020, 11; Oksala 2015), and as an ‘excessively parasitic phase of capitalism’ (Bourassa 2020, 32) marked by new regimes of extraction, deregulation, financialization, marketization, and dismantlement of welfare provisions. The figure of the parasite thus evokes the enhanced blood-sucking, extractive, and exploitative features of the neoliberal logics of production and accumulation.

A second understanding of parasitic neoliberalism focuses on its capacity to penetrate and colonize contending domains of existence. This view tends to draw on a Foucauldian perspective that approaches neoliberalism as governmentality and regime of truth that radically alters ‘the values, coordinates, and reality principles that govern, or “conduct conduct,” in liberal orders’ (Brown 2019, 20). Specifically, neoliberalism thus understood is a system of economization that extends the logic of the market – particularly the principles of value, competition, enterprise, production, and inequality – to all spheres of human existence to encourage regimes of self-government (Foucault 2008; Dardot and Laval 2013, 17; Brown 2015, 31; Mavelli 2022, 8–13). Accordingly, neoliberalism is ‘a set of rules for the production of truth’ that establishes the market as ‘a site of veridiction for governmental [and societal] practice’ and reshapes the political, social, and individual spheres in the image of the market (Foucault 2008, 33). Neoliberalism creates new subjectivities beyond those established by the material logics of production and exploitation

and its governmentality (rationality of government) is not primarily one of coercion and oppression but of self-management, individual resilience, and self-realization. From this perspective, the parasitic nature of neoliberalism stands primarily for its capacity to penetrate and govern contending spheres of existence, political systems, and social arrangements.

This view has been forcefully advanced by Peck, Theodore, and Brenner (2009, 104) shortly after the onset of the 2008 financial crisis: ‘neoliberalism invariably exists in an essentially parasitical relationship with those extant social formations with which it has an antagonistic relationship, such as state socialism, social democracy, or neoconservative authoritarianism’. More recently, this idea has been explored by Brown (2019, 1; albeit without using the term ‘parasite’), who evokes the image of ‘Frankenstein/Frankensteinian neoliberalism’ to analyse neoliberalism’s nationalist, racist, and authoritarian turn as witnessed by the election of ‘neo-Nazis in the German parliament, neofascists in the Italian one, Brexit ushered in by tabloid-fueled xenophobia, the rise of white nationalism in Scandinavia, authoritarian regimes taking shape in Turkey and Eastern Europe, ... , Trumpism’ and the rise of ‘anti – Islamic, and anti – Semitic hatefulness and bellicosity’.

For Brown (2019, 9), the ‘popular enthusiasm for autocratic, nationalist, and in some cases neofascist regimes, fueled by myth mongering and demagoguery’ deviates significantly from the neoliberal ideals of ‘Friedrich Hayek, Milton Friedman, and their half-siblings, the German Ordoliberal’ who ‘would be horrified’ by these developments. Nonetheless, Brown (2019, 9) maintains, ‘neoliberal and neoconservative rationalities’ *are not* ‘distinct in origins and characteristics’ as neoliberalism at its roots ‘aimed at releasing markets and morals to govern and discipline individuals while maximizing freedom, and it did so by demonizing the social and the democratic version of political life’. Hence, the current ‘catastrophic present’ is neoliberal because although not the ‘intended spawn’ of the neoliberalism imagined by its ‘founding fathers’, it is ‘its Frankensteinian creation’ (Brown 2019, 9). In Brown’s account, neoliberalism has been able to parasitically attach itself to the very reactionary forces it has (unintentionally) contributed to create.

In a recent edited collection, Callison and Manfredi (2020) have generalized the image of ‘Frankenstein neoliberalism’ by resorting to that of the ‘mutant’ to consider how new species of neoliberalism are emerging. Neoliberalism’s parasitism of seemingly contending socio-political formations, such as ‘far-right’ and ‘reactionary’ forces, is changing the very ‘genetic code’ of both neoliberalism and these formations. ‘Within the “species” of neoliberalism’, Callison and Manfredi (2020, 3) argue, ‘new variants are emerging that are distinct but nevertheless members of the same cast’. The image of neoliberalism as a genetic code in an evolutionary process has acquired new salience in the aftermath of the COVID pandemic. Drawing on Jamie Peck’s argument that neoliberalism is responsible for “parasitical” infections and mutations’ as it ‘both occupies and draws energy from its various host organisms’, Sparke and Williams (2022, 17) maintain that ‘neoliberalism has also now evolved into actual viral infections’. The ‘neoliberal disease’, they (2022, 15) suggest, is the product of a ‘socio-viral co-pathogenesis’, with the virus ‘found[ing] weaknesses in a market-transformed global body politic that it has used to viral advantage’.

A third understanding of parasitic neoliberalism can be found in Nancy Fraser’s notion of ‘cannibal capitalism’ (2022). While not explicitly employing the term ‘parasite’,



cannibal capitalism somewhat combines the two understandings of parasitism considered above: namely, the capacity of neoliberalism to penetrate contending domains of existence and how this has resulted in enhanced regimes of surplus extraction and exploitation. For Fraser (2022, xiv), capitalism is more than an economic system: it is ‘a societal order that empowers a profit-driven economy to prey on the extra economic supports it needs to function – wealth expropriated from nature and subject peoples; multiple forms of carework, chronically undervalued when not wholly disavowed; public goods and public powers, which capital both requires and tries to curtail; the energy and creativity of working people’. Accordingly, Fraser (2022, xiv) maintains, cannibal capitalism is ‘a system that’s wired to devour the social, political, and natural bases of its own existence – which are also the bases of ours’. This understanding is consistent with the definition of parasite: an organism that derives sustenance and benefits at the expense of the other while harming it, with the effect of undermining the conditions of its own existence.

As this brief overview of the literature suggests, the idea of neoliberalism as a parasite (in its ‘vampire’, ‘Frankenstein’, ‘mutant’, ‘viral’, and ‘cannibal’ declensions) has gained prominence in academic (and, as I shall discuss in a few paragraphs, also public) debates. It accounts for the impersonal and structural force of a socio-political and economic rationality capable to evolve, mutate, and thrive through new forms of exploitation and extraction in different political contexts and profit from conditions of crisis it has contributed to create. In the remaining part of this section, I consider a potential limitation of this characterization. What follows is not, I should stress, a critique of the above critiques of neoliberalism, but of the use of a ‘monstrous’ and ‘parasitical’ imaginary to make sense of neoliberalism.

The idea of neoliberalism as a parasite tends to frame neoliberalism as an almost autonomous entity, which has an agency and will of its own, and can evolve and mutate independently from our actions. The risk of this characterization is to unwittingly support an understanding of neoliberalism as a force that is ontologically separate from us and conceal how, as I have argued elsewhere, ‘our acts of consumption, logics of investment, practices of socialization, political behaviours, ignorance, silence, and supine acceptance of neoliberal rationalities ... contribute to sustain neoliberalism’s reproduction’ (Mavelli 2024, 5). Portraying neoliberalism as a parasite provides what Barnett (2005, 10) has described as a ‘consoling image’ of neoliberalism conjuring up a world ‘divided between the forces of hegemony and the spirits of subversion’ in which one is either a supporter or a critic of neoliberalism, a perpetrator or a victim, an oppressor or an oppressed. This obscures, to return to Fisher’s argument (2009, 15), ‘our co-operation’ and ‘own complicity in planetary networks of oppression’.

The problem is that the notion of parasitic neoliberalism relies on an understanding of power as repression. This view tends to neglect the idea, most prominently put forward by Foucault, that ‘power is productive and not simply repressive; power is not exercised primarily through domination but rather with the consent of the governed; and power is not the opposite of freedom’ (Flew 2014, 60). Specifically, for Foucault (1980, 74, 72), the individual should not be regarded as ‘a pre-given entity which is seized on by the exercise of power’ because ‘power ... is much more ambiguous, since each individual has at his disposal a certain power, and for that very reason can also act as the vehicle for transmitting a wider power’. Power, therefore, is not that which ‘makes the difference between

those who exclusively possess and retain it, and those who do not have it and submit to it' as '[t]he individual which power has constituted is at the same time [the] vehicle of its articulation' (Foucault 1980, 98). From this perspective, the power of neoliberalism should be considered symbiotic, rather than parasitic, as it works in conjunction with the subjects it contributes to constitute.

In the study of ecosystems, parasitism is defined as 'the interaction between two species where only one benefits from the other organism and the other is harmed in return' (iNaturalist 2015). Parasitism is one of the three main manifestations of symbiosis, the other two being mutualism (an interaction in which both species benefit) and commensalism (when one organism benefits and the other is not harmed). A symbiotic relationship is one in which organisms belonging to different species interact 'in order ... to survive and continue the circle of life' (iNaturalist 2015). By applying this classification of biological interactions to the study of neoliberalism, symbiotic neoliberalism emphasizes how the neoliberal subject can be a target, victim, or critic of neoliberalism, and at the same time, its condition of possibility – whether as an unwitting supporter or a conscious endorser. Symbiotic neoliberalism does not suggest that we are all equally responsible for neoliberalism, as our responsibility is proportional to the benefits we gain from the system of inequalities on which neoliberalism rests, but it does suggest that we all participate, albeit to very different degrees, in the reproduction of neoliberalism. Symbiotic neoliberalism highlights the ultimate impurity of our neoliberal condition: we are not merely victims of the neoliberal parasite but differentially responsible for its existence and reproduction.

To elaborate on this point, let me briefly discuss a recent op-ed by economist, former US Secretary of Labour, and longstanding critic of capitalism's excesses, Robert Reich (2022), which indicts former US President Donald Trump, billionaire Elon Musk, and former billionaire Sam Bankman-Fried (whose cryptocurrency empire collapsed overnight at the end of 2022) as 'The Monsters of American Capitalism'. Trump 'took bogus deductions to reduce his tax liability all the way to zero in 2020', Musk recklessly diverted resources from Tesla to Twitter, causing Tesla stock to crash, and Bankman-Fried appropriated FTX customer funds 'to grow its empire' (Reich 2022). In different ways, Trump, Musk, and Bankman-Fried could be regarded as neoliberal parasites as their wealth is premised on draining wealth and resources from taxpayers, investors, and customers. Yet, from the perspective of symbiotic neoliberalism, while the responsibility of Trump, Musk, and Bankman-Fried in feeding, nurturing, and reproducing the neoliberal parasite is no doubt incomparably greater than that of 'ordinary people', it is nonetheless the case that many ordinary people voted (and will still vote) for Trump, buy Tesla or use X/Twitter (both owned by Musk), and invested in cryptocurrencies via Bankman-Fried's FTX platform, thus propping up some of the pillars of the neoliberal order.

Hence, in symbiotic neoliberalism we are all involved and contribute, to varying degrees, to neoliberalism's reproduction. Zuboff's 'surveillance capitalism' and Brown's 'Frankensteinian neoliberalism' are ultimately symbiotic forces enabled by our actions, be they our compulsive consumption, relentless and free-willed production of content for digital platforms (posts, tweets, feeds), or support for populist leaders. Still, as previously mentioned, our social positions determine the weight of our complicity, with those who benefit most from neoliberal globalized inequality bearing the greatest

responsibility to acknowledge and address their role in perpetuating this oppressive system. However, as Shotwell (2016) argues, even though we are not all equally responsible or capable, and not all equally called to respond, none of us are entirely pure – we are all complicit, implicated, and entangled in systems we might seek to reject. This means that, in different ways, we all have multiple, symbiotic, and impure relationships that complicate the simplistic account of a world, to return to Barnett (2005, 10), ‘divided between the forces of hegemony and the spirits of subversion’.

To further elaborate on symbiotic neoliberalism, the condition of impurity it undergirds, and the possibility for critique it may disclose, the next section focuses on a recent and ongoing debate that has been strongly informed by the ‘forces of hegemony’ versus ‘spirits of subversion’ framework: whether Foucault was a powerful critic or one of the strongest supporters of neoliberalism. In rejecting the ‘neoliberal Foucault’ thesis, I will argue that Foucault’s seemingly sympathetic views can be read as both an (un)conscious endorsement of certain features of neoliberalism *and* an attempt to subvert its ‘game of truth’ by ‘engaging it differently’. Hence, symbiotic neoliberalism, embodied by Foucault and inspired by his notion of the subject as a ‘vehicle of power’, will be theorized as the springboard for an *impure* critique of neoliberalism.

### **Foucault and the impure critique of neoliberalism**

The publication of Mitchell Dean and Daniel Zamora’s *The Last Man Takes LSD: Foucault and the End of Revolution* (2021) is one of the most recent and comprehensive interventions arguing that Foucault’s later work, particularly his 1978-79 Lectures at the Collège de France, *The Birth of Biopolitics*, represents ‘a laudatory exposition’ rather than ‘a devastating critique of neoliberal reason’ (Friedrich 2021, 257). For Dean and Zamora (2021), the evidence is more than circumstantial: Foucault’s support for a negative income tax, his focus on the individual rather than the structure, his idea of resistance as grounded in the transformation of the self rather than revolution, his understanding of labour as human capital, and his sympathies for some of the policies of right-wing French President Giscard d’Estaing are all clear indications that Foucault was a neoliberal.

This view has been met with criticism. Some scholars have described ‘the claim that Foucault “endorsed” or “embraced” some or all forms of liberalism and neoliberalism’ as ‘attention-seeking’ and ‘falsification’ (Gordon 2015). Others have observed that there is ‘nothing’ in *The Birth of Biopolitics* ‘to suggest any affinity of Foucault to liberalism in general or neoliberalism more specifically’ (Kelly 2015) and that any claim in this regard rests on a dangerously selective analysis (Hansen 2015). Others yet have contended that the idea of a neoliberal Foucault rests on a ‘maximalist reading’ (Teurlings 2022). Yet, even analyses acknowledging that Foucault’s later work contains many supportive statements of neoliberalism eventually feel compelled to dismiss this stance as either a radical form of critique in the spirit of Foucault’s idea that limits must be transcended (Teurlings 2022; see also Tanke 2023) or as a selective endorsement of certain aspects of neoliberalism which should not at all be mistaken for ‘a blanket ascription of neoliberal commitments’ (Tiisala 2021, 25).

My goal in this section is to reconsider the question of ‘neoliberal Foucault’ from the perspective of symbiotic neoliberalism. I will start by addressing what I regard as a

paradox at the heart of the current debate: in seeking to ascertain Foucault's ultimate stance vis-à-vis neoliberalism, existing accounts impose upon Foucault the very power of normalization he denounced and opposed. As Tuomo Tiisala (2021, 29) observes, Foucault's critique 'is meant to reinforce ongoing struggles against the "government of individualization" in the fields of mental health, penalty, and sexuality, all functioning as parts of the apparatus of normalization'. The main goal of these struggles, he continues citing Foucault, is to attack 'a technique, a form of power ... that categorizes the individual, marks him by his own individuality, attaches him to his own identity, imposes a law of truth on him that he must recognize and others have to recognize in him' (Foucault, cited in Tiisala 2021, 29). The attempt to label Foucault as a neoliberal or reject this characterization is ultimately an expression of this logic of power, that is, of the attempt to reduce Foucault to a stable, single, original, and immutable identity, and to disclose a 'primordial truth fully adequate to its nature' (Foucault 1984a, 78).

From the perspective articulated in the previous section, the binary 'neoliberal' versus 'non-neoliberal' Foucault is another instantiation of Barnett's (2005, 10) 'consoling image' of neoliberalism, with Foucault either enlisted in 'the forces of [neoliberal] hegemony' or defended as a 'spirit of subversion'. Is it possible to advance a different reading, namely, rejecting the thesis of neoliberal Foucault without characterizing him as a pure 'spirit of subversion'? Is it possible to suggest that, while a critic of neoliberalism, Foucault's critique is *impure* as it reflects the symbiotic stance of a subject who has power because it is 'an effect of power' and 'precisely to the extent to which it is that effect, it is the element of its articulation' (Foucault 1980, 98)?

This interpretation requires expanding the notion of the individual as a 'vehicle of power' introduced in the previous section. To this end, let me focus on a key argument that underpins Dean and Zamora's thesis of Foucault as neoliberal (2021, 114), namely, the idea that Foucault migrated 'from a study of practices of objectification (discipline and biopolitics) to a study of practices of self-initiated subjectification (ethics)'. With biopolitics Foucault would focus on 'the action of power upon individuals in order to shape their subjectivity', whereas with the neoliberal care of the self he would concentrate on 'the action of individuals upon themselves in order to contrast such a power' (Dean and Zamora 2021, 114). Hence, in Dean and Zamora's reading, for Foucault neoliberalism would be a break with and a way of resisting biopolitics.

Foucault, however, never really framed neoliberalism in opposition to biopolitics. Indeed, he argues that (neo)liberalism is 'the general framework of biopolitics' and that only by understanding neoliberalism 'will we be able to grasp what biopolitics is' (Foucault 2008, 22). For Foucault (1978, 138), biopolitics is a substantial transformation in the logic of power: from the traditional sovereign power 'to take life or let live' to the modern biopolitical 'power to foster life or disallow it to the point of death'. Biopower is not a regime of deduction of wealth, labour, services, and 'ultimately life itself', but one of production aimed at 'generating forces' (Foucault 1978, 136). This effort is a rationality of 'care' that aims to construct neoliberal subjects capable to generate value, as Brown (2016, 3) reminds us, 'for themselves, for a business, and for a national or postnational economic constellation'. In the neoliberal-biopolitical apparatus the possibility to live is indexed to the capacity of individuals and populations to generate value. Those who fail in this task because unwilling or unable to become neoliberal entrepreneurial selves can be killed or left to die (Mavelli 2022). Hence, given that biopolitics is an

essential component of neoliberalism and given that ‘for Foucault there is no outside of power’, as Dean and Zamora (2021, 117) also discuss, it becomes difficult to argue that Foucault envisaged neoliberalism as an outside from which biopolitical power could be resisted.

If my argument has any force, it suggests that the neoliberal-biopolitical apparatus cannot be fully transcended. This view resonates with an established line of critique that has questioned the possibility of an outside to neoliberalism (Fisher 2009; Peck, Theodore, and Brenner 2009; Brown 2019; Fraser 2019, 2022; Mavelli 2022). For Nancy Fraser (2019, 23), neoliberalism is ‘no mere economic system but something larger: an institutionalized social order’ that ‘encompasses a set of noneconomic background conditions that are indispensable to a capitalist economy’. The capacity of neoliberalism to co-opt diverse domains of existence is vividly captured by what she describes as ‘progressive neoliberalism’: a hegemonic bloc that has successfully combined ‘an expropriative, plutocratic economic program with a liberal-meritocratic politics of recognition’ to achieve dominance (Fraser 2019, 9). For Wendy Brown (2019, 8), neoliberalism is a regime of economization that occupies and rewrites all domains of human existence, and ‘nothing is untouched by a neoliberal mode of reason and valuation’, to the effect that disentangling oneself completely from neoliberalism is virtually impossible. It follows that, albeit with very different – and often incommensurable – responsibilities, *we are all neoliberal subjects*, and not just in the sense that we are ‘constructed and interpellated’ by neoliberal rationalities (Chandler and Reid 2016, 9), but that we are also their very condition of possibility.

If neoliberalism cannot be fully transcended and we are all, to varying degrees, neoliberalism’s ‘vehicles of power’, where does this leave us in terms of possibilities for critique? According to Fraser, ‘a critique of capitalism is [only] possible from within it’, that is, by resisting ‘the inside/outside picture of capitalist society’ (Fraser and Jaeggi 2018, 55). This means rejecting the idea that “non-economic” realms’ such as ‘society, polity, and nature’ may afford ‘a wholly external standpoint that could underwrite an absolutely *pure and fully radical form of critique*’ because ‘political projects that appeal to what they imagine to be capitalism’s “outside” usually end up recycling capitalist stereotypes’ (Fraser and Jaeggi 2018, 57–58; emphasis mine). In the remainder of this section, I will explore this idea in relation to Foucault’s scholarship, specifically how his writings contain not sympathetic stances toward neoliberalism, but rather elements of an impure, yet no less radical, critique. I identify four main elements/steps of this critique.

First, Foucault (1997, 292) considers that the presence of a ‘relation’ with (neoliberal) power necessarily implies ‘the possibility of resistance because if there were no possibility of resistance ... , there would be no power relations at all’. Second, power needs to be approached as that which constitutes ‘regimes of truth’, that is, the ‘types of discourse’ which a society accepts and ‘makes function as true; the mechanisms and instances which enable one to distinguish true and false statements, the means by which each is sanctioned; the techniques and procedures accorded value in the acquisition of truth; the status of those who are charged with saying what counts as true’ (Foucault 1980, 131).

The third step is recognizing that neoliberalism is first and foremost a regime of truth. Neoliberalism establishes the market as ‘a site of veridiction for governmental practice’, competition as a ‘principle of formalization’ of social relations, society as that which

should resemble ‘the model of the enterprise’, the individual as *homo oeconomicus* who is for himself his own ‘capital’, ‘producer’, and ‘source of earnings’, and inequality as ‘general regulator of society that clearly everyone has to accept and abide by’ (Foucault 2008, 33, 120, 160, 226, 143). Fourthly, and accordingly, challenging the ‘effects of domination’ linked to the neoliberal market as an institution ‘entrusted with truth’ is only possible ‘within the field of the obligation to truth’, that is, within the remit of a knowledge recognized as truth. This means ‘playing a game’ that *is not* ‘totally different from the game of truth but by playing the same game differently, or playing another game, another hand, with other trump cards’ (Foucault 1997, 295). Thus, a ‘state of domination’ caused by ‘an unjustified political situation’, can only be challenged by ‘playing a certain game of truth’ (Foucault 1997, 295).

This argument opens two possible ways of understanding the *symbiotic impurity* of Foucault’s critique. First, Foucault’s endorsement of the neoliberal policies documented by Dean and Zamora may be read as an attempt to mobilize some of the resources and ideas of neoliberalism to challenge its totalizing hold from within in the awareness that neoliberalism cannot be fully transcended and can only be resisted by mobilizing forms of freedom, autonomy, and agency which are inevitably shaped by neoliberalism and ultimately reflect its ‘language of truth’. This interpretation would certainly raise questions on the limits of Foucault’s critical project. As Audre Lorde (2018, 20) has famously observed, ‘the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house. They may allow us temporarily to beat him at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change’. In fact, the risk of this strategy of critique is reinforcing the ‘master’s house’, that is, the neoliberal regime of truth.

Wendy Brown (2015, 24–25), for instance, has analysed how US President Barack Obama’s calls for ‘protecting Medicare; progressive tax reform; increasing government investment in science and technology research, clean energy, home ownership and education; immigration reform; fighting sex discrimination and domestic violence; and raising the minimum wage’ were all framed ‘in terms of its contribution to economic growth or American competitiveness’. Far from strengthening the Obama’s administration’s commitment to ‘equality, liberty, inclusion, and constitutionalism’, this approach subordinated the pursuit of these goals to economic growth, turning the latter – in a typical neoliberal fashion – in the ‘end and legitimation of government’ (Brown 2015, 24–25) with the effect of reinforcing, rather than dismantling, the market as ‘a site of veridiction for governmental practice’ (Foucault 2008, 33).

A second interpretation consists in reading Foucault’s critique as an expression of what Thomas McCarthy (1990, 437) has described as ‘the intrinsic “impurity” of what we call “reason”’, namely, ‘its embeddedness in culture and society, its entanglement with power and interest, the historical variability of its categories and criteria, the embodied, sensuous, and practically engaged character of its bearers’. This, in turn, opens two interpretative pathways. The first one suggests that Foucault’s endorsement of some neoliberal policies may be the expression of an ‘embedded reason’ that while seeking to transcend the neoliberal regime of truth inevitably and possibly unconsciously ends up articulating, reproducing, and vehiculating its power, in line with the idea of the individual as a ‘vehicle of power’. This understanding does not stand in opposition to, but can be combined with, a second interpretative pathway, which is the one I privilege. According to this reading, Foucault’s approach is the expression of a non-transcendental form of

critique that abandons the ‘search for formal structures with universal value’ and engages with ‘the events that have led us to constitute ourselves and to recognize ourselves as subjects of what we are doing, thinking, saying’ (Foucault 1984b, 46). Foucault (1984b, 45) describes this ethos as ‘limit-attitude’ against the background of the Kantian idea of knowledge and critique, which he sees as the cornerstone of the Enlightenment and modernity.

In Foucault’s reading, Kant’s quest to establish a foundation for human knowledge grounded in human reason and experience leads him to perform a startling epistemic inversion. The fact that we can acquire knowledge only within the limits of experience does not suggest that our individual understanding is limited, but rather that knowledge itself has inherent limits and that ‘these limits exist entirely within the structure of the knowing subject’ (Foucault 2005, 26). As Foucault (1984b, 45, 34) explains in his famous essay ‘What is Enlightenment?’, ‘the Kantian question was that of knowing what limits knowledge has to renounce transgressing’ to achieve purity, distance itself from the phenomenal world, and release us ‘from the status of “immaturity”’. Foucault (1984b, 45) acknowledges the ‘importance’ and ‘effectiveness’ of Kant’s thought over the last two centuries and agrees that ‘[c]riticism indeed consists of analyzing and reflecting upon limits’. However, he argues,

if the Kantian question was that of knowing what limits knowledge has to renounce transgressing, it seems to me that the critical question today has to be turned back into a positive one: in what is given to us as universal, necessary, obligatory, what place is occupied by whatever is singular, contingent, and the product of arbitrary constraints? The point in brief is to transform the critique conducted in the form of necessary limitation into a practical critique that takes the form of a possible transgression. ... We have to move beyond the outside-inside alternative; we have to be at the frontiers (Foucault 1984b, 45).

What does this mean for symbiotic neoliberalism and the debate on ‘neoliberal Foucault’? The characterization of neoliberalism as a parasite-monster reflects the ‘outside-inside’ of the Kantian perspective, with the parasite-monster as the ‘universal, necessary, obligatory’ ‘outside’ challenged by the transcendental ‘inside’ of the critical subject distancing themselves from the forces of subjection. Hence, the critique of the parasite-monster rests on a self-imposed limit: renouncing to transgress the idea that the outside is also inside and thus dissimulating the fact that we are not just the ‘points of applications’ but the very ‘vehicles of power’ of neoliberalism.

The same logic is reflected in the debate on whether Foucault was a neoliberal. To portray Foucault in such terms or reject this characterization by dismissing the possibility that he may have been attracted and influenced by certain aspects of neoliberalism, whether consciously or unconsciously, is to retain a pure a transcendental idea of critique that once again rests on a self-imposed limit: concealing Foucault’s and thus our *impure* involvement in neoliberalism’s reproduction. A symbiotic reading of neoliberalism advocates for a positive limit-attitude towards critique: standing at the frontier and recognizing the ‘singular, contingent, [and] arbitrary’ nature of neoliberalism as a force *dependent* on our cooperation. This acknowledgment is not a call for resignation, but for an impure form of critique that starts with the recognition of our symbiotic entanglement with neoliberalism.

From this perspective, Foucault’s alleged sympathies for neoliberalism need not to be taken as indicative of a neoliberal identity or dismissed as unrepresentative of a pure

‘spirit of subversion’ but can be regarded as the expression of the impure critique of neoliberalism of an ‘embedded reason’ that tries to play the neoliberal ‘game of truth’ differently and recognizes its entanglement in the system of power it challenges. This reading, to be sure, does not wish to suggest, in a different form, that Foucault deeply inside was not a neoliberal, nor claims to be the most authentic reading of Foucault. What ultimately matters is not ‘what Foucault really thought’ but whether his works provides a perspective to approach and challenge neoliberal power. What matters, in other words, is what *we* think and *make* of his work, and thus how we can *use* his ‘toolbox’<sup>1</sup> to develop a perspective that can advance existing critiques by raising questions on extant characterization of neoliberalism as a monster-parasite as well as on the very characterization of Foucault as a neoliberal.

One possible application of the impure and symbiotic critique of neoliberalism that I have articulated is to rebut the accusation from neoliberal sympathizers that critics of neoliberalism are hypocrites for challenging a system they themselves are part of and help sustain. Consider an episode, recalled by Fisher (2012), from the comedy panel show *Have I Got News for You* taking place during the 2011 Occupy London Stock Exchange protests (inspired by the 2011 Occupy Wall Street movement against global finance, inequality, and poverty). During the show, conservative politician Louise Mensch described the protesters as hypocrites for denouncing the horrors of corporate capital while sipping Starbucks coffees and tweeting from their iPhones (Fisher 2012, 131). ‘You cannot be against capitalism and take everything that it provides’, she argued. While her comments were ridiculed by the other panellists, Fisher (2012, 131) considered that the question raised by Mensch could not be ‘so easily dismissed’ as it reflected a widespread feeling among supporters of neoliberal capitalism that the only way of being anti-capitalist is ‘being an anarcho-primitivist’, that is, transcending entirely the neoliberal order in which we live in. In this case, illustrative of a widespread discourse, Mensch used the impossible purity of critique as a ‘de-collectivizing’ and ‘de-mobilizing’ (Shotwell 2016, 9) neoliberal politics of the status quo.

The impure critique grounded in the symbiotic understanding of neoliberalism advanced in this article refutes claims such as Mensch’s that ‘any critic [of neoliberalism] who is not perfect in all their life activities is merely a hypocrite’ and challenges the increasingly pervasive idea that ‘You can only stop being hypocritical by accepting the prevailing [neoliberal] order’ (Connolly 2015, 274). For political theorist William Connolly (2015, 274), resisting this accusation starts with ‘acknowledg[ing] that we are always implicated in the larger world we seek to contest on specific fronts. The gradual mobilization of a larger critical assemblage may depend upon the ability to magnify internal invitations as we curtail the sharpness of internal accusations’. In this article, I took up Connolly’s invitation through the notion of symbiotic neoliberalism as a perspective that acknowledges our symbiotic entanglement with neoliberalism and turns it into the very condition of possibility for an *impure* critique of neoliberalism.

## Conclusion

Drawing together two distinct research trajectories – the growing characterization of neoliberalism as a monster and the recent debate on whether Foucault was a neoliberal – this article has investigated a dimension that these bodies of scholarship have not



examined: our involvement in neoliberalism's reproduction. Questioning existing characterizations of neoliberalism as a parasite-monster, the article has argued that this perspective is based on the same logic used to depict (and reject) Foucault as a neoliberal, namely, critique as a pure act of self-transcendence that marks a sharp divide between the noumenal inside and the phenomenal outside. Drawing on Foucault's 'toolbox' and particularly his notions of the subject as a 'vehicle of power', neoliberalism as a 'regime of truth', and critique as a 'limit-attitude', I have developed the concept of symbiotic neoliberalism as a critical perspective that recognizes our 'impure' involvement in neoliberalism's reproduction.

This perspective has exposed the limits of existing characterizations of neoliberalism as a parasite-monster – a force that is ontologically separate from us – and developed a different approach to reflect upon Foucault's alleged neoliberal sympathies, rejecting the thesis of neoliberal Foucault without characterizing him as pure 'spirit of subversion'. It has outlined the contours of an impure critique of neoliberalism that abandons the myth of an impossible purity (which ultimately plays into the hands of neoliberal apologists) and, by acknowledging our symbiotic entanglement with neoliberalism, turns our condition of impurity from one of supine acceptance or moral failure into a critical possibility that may be 'harness[ed] for radical purposes' (Linklater 1998, 164).

In these concluding remarks, I wish to consider some further potential applications as well as limitations of symbiotic neoliberalism by returning to the film *Parasite* and examining it not just as a critique of neoliberalism but as a potential vehicle of neoliberal power. In February 2020, it was reported that a small Seoul-based hedge fund which had invested around \$500,000 (about a fifth of its assets) in *Parasite* had accrued a staggering return of 72% thanks to the worldwide critical and financial success of the Oscar-winning movie (Fortune 2020), whereas the film's production company, Barunson Entertainment & Arts, saw its stocks surging 90% following the Academy Awards (CNBC 2022). From the perspective of parasitic neoliberalism, this case would stand as an illustration of the mutable and adaptable nature of neoliberalism, which is capable of profiting even out of an incisive and compelling critique of itself. What about the movie's critique though? Should it also be dismissed as unauthentic and insincere, as the ultimate expression of hypocrisy and connivance with the neoliberal order?

From the perspective advanced in this article, this case reveals the symbiotic nature of neoliberalism and thus the impossibility of securing a place from nowhere – an ultimate condition of purity – from which neoliberalism may be questioned without accusations of complicity. Yet, the symbiotic necessity of financing a film in a neoliberal environment does not detract from the critical efforts that the director, the screenwriter, and the staff have deployed and from the critique advanced by the movie. Ultimately, as in the case of Foucault, what matters is not 'what the director of *Parasite* really thought' but whether his film provides a perspective to approach and challenge neoliberal power. What matters, in other words, is what *we* think and *make* of this film.

This answer, however, begs the question of where this leaves us as spectators. Does watching *Parasite* from a symbiotic critical stance make us more critical and engaged in a genuine act of resistance? Following Fisher, the risk here is letting 'the film perform[...] our anti-capitalism for us, allowing us to continue to consume with impunity' (Fisher 2009, 12). The problem, Fisher (2009, 12) observes, is that in neoliberal capitalism 'subjugation no longer takes the form of a subordination to an extrinsic

spectacle, but rather invites us to interact and participate'. Our interaction with *Parasite* – watching a movie that denounces the violence and misery of neoliberal capitalism – can give us the illusion of agency and resistance, thereby strengthening, rather than weakening, neoliberalism.

This argument raises questions on the limits of symbiotic neoliberalism. Framing neoliberalism as a symbiont that we both sustain and challenge, hence acknowledging our own impurity vis-à-vis neoliberalism, could also become a self-absolutive exercise: we keep enjoying some of the perks of neoliberalism while decrying others, and seemingly offset them through passive forms of critique, like watching *Parasite*. These considerations suggest that harnessing symbiotic neoliberalism for radical purposes requires transcending the passive domain of consumption – whether it be a film or a book critical of neoliberalism, or a commodity produced with respect for labour standards, gender equality, animal welfare, and environmental sustainability.

Interactive forms of action – from engaging in protest to joining a political party, supporting trade unions, donating to or getting involved in charitable work, organizing campaigns, creating contents, disseminating ideas, and the likes – are needed. To embrace these interactive endeavours from the perspective of symbiotic neoliberalism means, at the very least, freeing the individual from the inaction that may arise from striving for an unattainable critical purity, warding off accusations of hypocrisy and, possibly, reclaiming emotions, ideas, practices, and desires – domains of existence and spheres of life – from the (in)escapable horizon of neoliberalism.

## Note

1. As Foucault (1974, 523–24) once famously stated: 'I would like my books to be a kind of tool-box which others can rummage through to find a tool which they can use however they wish in their own area'.

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