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## Full Length Article

# The unbearable lightness of neoliberalism: Monsters, ghosts, and the poetics of neoliberal infrastructures

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## ABSTRACT

This article advances the concept of neoliberal infrastructures as the ghostly carriers of neoliberalism by drawing together two distinct research trajectories: the political critique of neoliberalism and the poetics of infrastructure. The framework of the argument is Kundera's famous dilemma in *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*: Should we approach life with heaviness or lightness? While lightness may be tempting, the only way for us to be 'real' is to confront the 'heaviness' of things. The article argues that Kundera's construct unwittingly underpins recent critiques that, by confronting the 'heaviness' of neoliberalism (its crises, exploitation, and violence), frame it as a 'monster'. The risk of this characterization, I contend, is to portray neoliberalism as an almost autonomous force, thus neglecting our involvement in its reproduction. Reversing Kundera's logic, I suggest that for us to be 'real' we also need to confront neoliberalism's lightness (its seduction, fascination, and enchantment) and thus understand it as a haunting presence, not merely as an oppressive monster. To advance this view, I discuss the notion of *hauntology* in the context of Mercato Mayfair, a deconsecrated London church turned glamorous community market. Building on the poetic dimension of the infrastructural turn and reflecting on how neoliberalism has established itself through processes of urban restructuring and spatial transformation, Mercato Mayfair is explored as a neoliberal infrastructure. Neoliberal infrastructures are theorized as lived spaces encompassing people, materials, symbols, histories, affects, and desires in which we enable and give life to the unbearable and ghostly lightness of neoliberalism.

## 1. Introduction

This article advances the concept of neoliberal infrastructures as the ghostly carriers of neoliberalism by drawing together two distinct research trajectories: the political critique of neoliberalism and the poetics of infrastructure. The framework of the argument is Milan Kundera's famous dilemma in *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*: Should we approach life with heaviness or lightness? For Kundera (1984, p. 4), building on Nietzsche, the answer depends on whether we believe that life happens 'once and for all ... like a shadow, without weight' or that 'every second of our lives recurs an infinite number of times'. In the latter case, 'we are nailed to eternity as Jesus Christ was nailed to the cross' and 'the weight of unbearable responsibility lies heavy on every move we make' (Kundera, 1984, p. 4). This may prompt us to choose lightness but, Kundera warns, 'the absolute absence of a burden causes man to be lighter than air, ... and become only half real, his movements as free as they are insignificant'. Conversely, '[t]he heavier the burden ... the more real and truthful [our lives] become' (Kundera, 1984, p. 5). Hence, while lightness may be tempting, the only way for us to be 'real'

is to confront the 'heaviness' of things.

This article argues that Kundera's construct – the idea that we need to confront the 'heaviness' of things to be 'real' – unwittingly underpins a series of recent academic and public critiques that, by confronting neoliberalism as crisis, exploitation, and violence ('heaviness'), characterize it as a 'monster' (Žižek, 2012, p. 42–43; Reich, 2022), whether as 'zombie' (Jaffe, 2017; Kotsko, 2020; Peck, 2010; Wilson, 2014), 'parasite' (Peck et al., 2009, p. 104), 'Frankenstein' (Brown, 2018, 2019, p. 10), 'mutant' (Callison & Manfredi, 2020), and 'virus' (Sparke & Williams, 2022). What are the implications of this characterization?

The idea I explore is that rather than making 'us' – the subjects of neoliberalism's condition of possibility – *more real* vis-à-vis neoliberalism, this representation runs the risk of framing neoliberalism as an almost autonomous force over which we have no control. The risk is reifying neoliberalism as 'a hyper-abstract impersonal structure' and overlooking that it 'would be nothing without our co-operation' (Fisher, 2009, p. 15). Following Mark Fisher (2009, p. 15), I suggest that '[w]hat is being disavowed in the [neoliberal] abjection of evil and ignorance onto fantasmatic Others' – the neoliberal 'monsters' problematized in

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this article – ‘is our own complicity in planetary networks of oppression’. The portrayal of neoliberalism as a monster can turn its critique into a discourse that unwittingly support the very monster it would want to challenge. How can this paradox and limitation be overcome?

Reversing Kundera’s logic, I contend that for us to be ‘real’ vis-à-vis neoliberalism, we also need to confront its lightness, that is, its seduction, fascination, enchantment, and capacity to act not just *over* but *through* us, and therefore our involvement in neoliberalism’s reproduction. This suggests an understanding of neoliberalism as a ghost that haunts us, and not just as a monster that oppresses us. To advance this view, the article explores how neoliberalism has increasingly established itself through strategies of urban restructuring and processes of spatial transformation. Focusing on the case of Mercato Mayfair in London, a former early-19th century Anglican church, St Mark’s, recently converted into a fashionable community market, I show how this church-turned-market can be understood as a neoliberal infrastructure and regarded as an expression of the ghostly lightness of neoliberalism.

This analysis builds on and aims to push forward the investigation of the poetic dimension of the infrastructural turn (Amin, 2014; Berlant, 2016; Dawney, 2021; Larkin, 2013, 2018; McCormack, 2017; Strauss, 2020; Truelove & Ruszczyk, 2022). This approach concentrates on the sign and aesthetics of the infrastructure, rather than the referential meanings and technical functions, and on an expanded understanding of what counts as infrastructure (beyond roads, bridges, electrical grids, railways, airports, and sewage systems) to encompass potentially any spatial formation that connects people, materials, symbols, histories, affects, and desires. From this perspective, I theorize Mercato Mayfair as a neoliberal infrastructure whose genesis lies not exclusively and primarily with the monstrous violence of neoliberalism but with its ghostly enchantment. Drawing on Derrida’s concept of *hauntology*, I argue that Mercato Mayfair is the ‘generative common that stands in for the loss of previous forms of life’ (Dawney, 2021, p. 409), that is, the infrastructure that replaces the lost community in God with the newly found community in consumption.

This spatial transformation has not been established by substituting the body and blood of Christ with the body and blood of capital, but through the infrastructural incorporation of the former into the latter. Advancing the limited literature on redundant and converted churches – which discusses how churches mostly survive as ‘walls’, ‘shells’, or ‘containers’, whether as town hall, libraries, communal and exhibition spaces, storage facilities, markets, or residential accommodations (Albani, 2017; Lynch, 2014, 2016; Velthuis & Spennemann, 2007) – I emphasize how the distinctive feature of Mercato Mayfair is that St Mark’s original furnishings, such as the altar, the pulpit, and the baptismal font, have been embedded into the market. To interrogate the unbearable lightness of this incorporation – the possibility that the polytych depicting the resurrection of Christ no longer speaks to the mysteries of faith and the afterlife but becomes the glamorous backdrop against which the latest fashionable drink will be enjoyed – I develop an understanding of *neoliberal infrastructures as lived spaces that vehiculate the ghostly agency of neoliberalism through the acts, actions, passions, and desires of flesh-and-blood human beings*.

This ghostly hauntology is not separate from ‘us’ since infrastructures are ‘lifeworlds’ (2016: 393): not just material assemblages, complex networks, operational setups, and practical frameworks that ‘facilitate the flow of goods, people, or ideas and allow for their exchange over space’ (Larkin, 2013, p. 328) but ‘ontological experiments’ (Jensen & Morita, 2017) that ‘modify the affective capacities of different forms of life’ (McCormack, 2017, p. 421). Infrastructures are dynamic, interactive, evolving, and alive. They take life from the people who inhabit them and give them meaning. People are the living material of infrastructures in the sense that they shape and are shaped by them. Infrastructures are lived spaces that, to recall Gaston Bachelard’s *The Poetics of Space* (1994, pp. xxxiii, 8), ‘are in us as much as we are in them’, both ‘embracing and embraced’.

In terms of contribution to the existing literature, this article pursues two primary objectives: enriching the theoretical debate within political geography by contributing to existing critiques of neoliberalism and advancing the research on neoliberalism and infrastructure beyond materialist perspectives. In relation to the former (see for instance Blakey et al., 2022), it will show how an interdisciplinary dialogue between two areas of research that have never crossed paths, the critique of neoliberalism and the poetics of infrastructure, can advance both by highlighting the limitations of imagining neoliberalism as a monster and how confronting the lightness of neoliberalism by approaching it as ghost can shed light on neoliberal projects of urban transformation.

In relation to the latter, the existing scholarship has primarily engaged infrastructures from a materialist perspective, focusing on their referential meanings and technical functions, and explored how their neoliberalization through privatization and financialization has often negatively impacted citizenship, development, and the provision of public services (Dwyer, 2020; Furlong, 2020; Harvey, 2007; Horan, 2023; Lemanski, 2020). David Harvey (2001, p. 28), for instance, argues that neoliberalization has turned infrastructures into ‘foci of investment to absorb surpluses of capital and labor’ and boost ‘the temporal dynamics of continued capital accumulation’ by facilitating ‘spatial movement’. This article develops a different perspective. It looks at infrastructures from a poetic angle, expands their traditional meaning beyond motorways, waterworks, and electrical grids to include churches and community markets, and regards them not just as the *outcomes* of neoliberal rationalities but as their very *conditions of possibility* through their being lived spaces that mobilize the unbearable and ghostly lightness of neoliberalism.

## 2. Methodology

This study adopts a mixed methodology that combines critical interpretive analysis and a theory-infirming and theory-generating case study as part of a research design that moves from *text* (section 2) to *text-in-context* (section 3), to *counter-text* (section 4). The *text* to be analysed in the next section is the representation of neoliberalism as a monster in recent critiques. The goal is not to critique these critiques, but to consider the risks of evoking a monstrous imaginary for neoliberalism. I draw on a Foucauldian perspective that views critical interpretive analysis as the investigation of the language, discourse, and ways in which knowledge is constructed. Its ethos ‘consists of analyzing and reflecting upon limits’, namely, questioning how ‘what is given to us as universal, necessary’ may be ‘singular, contingent, and the product of arbitrary constraints’ (Foucault, 1984, p. 45). My analysis thus focuses on the limits – the ‘arbitrary constraints’ – that the portrayal of neoliberalism as a monster casts upon us as ‘subjects of our own knowledge’ (Foucault, 1984, p. 49).

The *text-in-context* investigation carried out in section 3 is the attempt to move beyond these limits by developing a complementary understanding of neoliberalism as a ghost through a conceptual engagement with the Derridean notion of *hauntology* and the poetics of infrastructure from the privileged observational space of Mercato Mayfair. The in-situ observations that support the theoretical analysis (Menga et al., 2024, p. 2; Kuus, M. 2023; Luger, 2022, p. 6) were carried out in April 2023 over a period of four weeks. Drawing inspiration from Gaston Bachelard (1994), my goal was to develop an emotional understanding of Mayfair as a ‘lived space’ that has been not just occupied but ‘appropriated’ by neoliberalism. While Bachelard does not explicitly use these terms, they are woven in his analysis (Game & Metcalfe, 2011): spaces are ‘lived’ in the sense that in inhabiting and making them our own, they shape our perceptions, connections, experiences, thoughts, memories, and imagination. This idea of a mutual co-constitution of neoliberal subjectivity and space shapes my conceptual engagement with the poetics of infrastructure and the social, cultural, and economic exploration of Mercato Mayfair.

The *counter-text* analysis developed in section 4 discusses and defuses

some potential objections to my argument. It delves into the differences between materialist and poetic readings of infrastructure and further supports the case for a poetic approach to the study of infrastructures and the critique of neoliberalism.

The understanding of neoliberalism that guides my analysis draws on Foucault's seminal notion of economization and recent elaborations (Foucault, 2008; Dardot & Laval, 2014; Brown, 2015). Specifically, I approach neoliberalism as a process of economization that extends the model of the market (its logics of profit, consumption, competition, and inequality) to all domains of human existence. Neoliberalism thus understood is 'a process of remaking ... the knowledge, form, content, and conduct' of 'other heretofore noneconomic spheres and activities' in the image of the market (Brown, 2015, pp. 30–31). 'What happens', asks Wendy Brown (2015, p. 10), 'when the practices and principles of speech, deliberation, law, popular sovereignty, participation, education, public goods, and shared power entailed in rule by the people are submitted to economization?' This article poses a question along similar lines: What happens when a church is submitted to economization, that is, transformed into a market and turned into a neoliberal infrastructure?

The conversion of churches to secular use is a diffuse and growing phenomenon. In Spain, the Church of Santa Barbara in Llanera was turned into a Red Bull-sponsored skate park in 2015. In the Netherlands, one in five of its 6900 churches have been converted into libraries, bookshops, theatres, bars, restaurants, nightclubs, and exhibition spaces, and hundreds more will be converted in the coming years (Kuruville, 2019). In the UK, converted churches include Kelvinside Parish Church in Glasgow, now Óran Mór, a multi-purpose venue with bars, restaurants, and a nightclub; St. Peter's Catholic Church in Liverpool, now Alma De Cuba, a Latin-inspired eatery offering 'entertainment and dancing' with 'Samba girls' and 'Voodoo shamans'; and St Thomas Church in London, now Amazing Grace, described as a 'mega church turned street food mecca'. These churches have all been economized, that is, their existence as lived spaces has been shifted from the domain of faith to the domains of profit and consumption.

Among these converted churches, Mercato Mayfair is the most famous and significant in terms of size, visitor numbers, economic impact, and media coverage. Most importantly for the purposes of this article, it is the one that more fully and completely incorporates religious elements and symbols in its neoliberal infrastructure. This incorporation was crucial for the residents' association to grant approval for the urban requalification project, as this was perceived to preserve, rather than violate, the history and memories of the area. Hence, Mercato Mayfair offers a privileged vantage point to appreciate how neoliberalism can work through ghostly absorption and courtship rather than monstrous imposition and erasure of other domains of existence.

For these reasons, the analysis of Mercato Mayfair as expression of a single case study research design (Odell, 2001) is both *theory-infirming* and *theory-generating*. '[T]heory-infirming case studies', Lijphart (1971, p. 692) explains, 'are analyses of single cases within the framework of established generalizations' that aim to question existing conceptual propositions. Theory-generating cases are individual case studies that approximate and embody key dimensions of a Weberian ideal type, namely, they provide an '*accentuation* of one or more points of view' and the 'synthesis of a great many diffuse ... concrete individual phenomena' (Weber, 1949, p. 89) that enable the articulation of 'theory-generating constructs' (Elfversson et al., 2023, p. 6).

The case of Mercato Mayfair is *theory-infirming* as it 'raises doubts' (Collier, 1993, p. 106) and exposes the limits of monstrous characterizations of neoliberalism that do not consider its ghostly lightness. It is *theory-generating*, as it 'does not generalize over empirical phenomena' (it acknowledges that neoliberalism can also be monstrous heaviness) 'but idealizes these phenomena to bring out the peculiarities' (Weinert, 1996, p. 76) required to magnify and illuminate broader questions on the nature, meaning, power, and transformative capacity of neoliberalism and neoliberal infrastructures. Hence, through an immersive

conceptual engagement with Mercato Mayfair, this article explores how an ideal typical 'ghostly space' can be understood as an infrastructure that vehiculates the unbearable lightness of neoliberalism.

### 3. Text: The heaviness of the neoliberal monster

In his famous 2009 book *Capitalist Realism*, the late teacher, theorist, and blogger Mark Fisher (2009) argues that the strength of capitalism lies in its capacity to have established a reality governed by 'the widespread sense that not only is capitalism the only viable political and economic system, but also that it is now impossible even to *imagine* a coherent alternative to it'. According to Fisher (2009, p. 2), neoliberals, as epitomized by 1980s British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher and her doctrine that 'there is no alternative' (T.I.N.A.), 'are the capitalist realists par excellence'. Existing critiques have recognized this ultimate strength of neoliberalism and denounced its artificial, contingent, and manufactured nature. Two main routes have been pursued in this regard: Marxist and Foucauldian (Callison & Manfredi, 2020).<sup>1</sup> I will briefly introduce these perspectives and then consider how they have frequently converged on a representation of neoliberalism as a 'monster'.

Marxist approaches have indicted neoliberalism – understood as an 'acceleration' (Callison & Manfredi, 2020, p. 11) and 'intensification of capitalist exploitation' (Oksala, 2015) – as a regime of false consciousness. Neoliberal capitalism presents itself as a *reality* that is the mirror image of the *real*; a reality in which casualization is freedom, precarity is autonomy, crisis is regenerative, uncertainty is entrepreneurial, inequality is creative, exploitation is the just reward for one's own talents, and ruthlessness is the benign 'animal spirit' of capitalism. To resist neoliberalism and become real thus requires 'invoking the Real(s) underlying the reality that capitalism presents to us' (Fisher, 2009, p. 18).

In broad terms, Foucauldian approaches argue that there is no underlying 'real' beneath the 'reality' of neoliberalism. Yet, this does not make the neoliberal condition less constraining and dominating as it rests on an underlying logic of necessity. Challenging the idea that 'There Is No Alternative' to neoliberalism, that humans cannot govern the markets, that financial crises are inevitable and that the only way to respond to them is austerity, that greed is good, that inequality reflects human nature, that consumer sovereignty is freedom, that states and societies should be organized on the model of the market, means confronting the shackles of the neoliberal condition and undertaking a process of self-creation.

While Marxist and Foucauldian critiques differ on what it means to be 'real' – stripping the veil of false consciousness for the former; becoming 'other' than what the discourse of truth of neoliberalism has decreed for the latter – they nonetheless agree on the idea that questioning and resisting neoliberalism requires confronting the supposedly natural reality of neoliberalism. It requires challenging a philosophy, economic theory, rationality of value, mode of subjectivation, and system of practices which has succeeded in 'occupy[ing] the horizons of the thinkable' (Fisher, 2009, p. 8). The magnitude of this task is well captured by Fredric Jameson's 2003 famous pronouncement that 'It is easier to imagine the end of the world than to imagine the end of capitalism' (Jameson, 2003, p. 16).

Despite the popularity of the above statement, few have noticed that this is a much bleaker version of a view that Jameson (1994, p. xii) had already advanced in 1984: 'It seems to be easier for us today to imagine the thoroughgoing deterioration of the earth and of nature than the

<sup>1</sup> This classification does not wish to suggest a clearly demarcated divide. Rather, it should be understood as a heuristic device for appreciating different sensibilities and emphases in the critique of neoliberalism. For a discussion of the differences between Marxist and Foucauldian critiques, see Oksala (2015) and Callison and Manfredi (2020). For an approach that explicitly draws on both, see Brown (2019).



breakdown of late capitalism'. Almost twenty years later, Jameson not only felt the need to replace 'the thoroughgoing deterioration of the earth and of nature' with 'the end of the world'. He also considered a different implication of this argument. When in 1984 he reflected on how this condition was due 'perhaps ... to some weakness in our imaginations', he implicitly hinted at the possibility that (maybe) this weakness could be fixed, and that a different imagination could be possible. In 2003, this glimpse of hope was gone. The prospect of an imagination beyond neoliberalism was no longer contemplated. The most, and possibly only thing, we could do was 'attempt[ing] to imagine capitalism by way of imagining the end of the world' (Jameson, 2003, p. 16).

Presently, Jameson was anticipating a trajectory of scholarly inquiry that would grow and solidify following the 2008 financial crisis. This trajectory has focused on the role of neoliberalism in fostering a condition of permanent crisis, processes of extraction and destruction, a politics of catastrophe, environmental degradation, global pandemics, the exacerbation of natural disasters, radical uncertainty, and social disintegration (see, among others, Mirowski, 2013; Roitman, 2013; Dean, 2014; Standing & Davies, 2020; Sparke & Williams, 2022; Mavelli, 2022). The effort to theorize neoliberalism 'by way of imagining the end of the world' has been the product of confronting the heaviness of neoliberalism, which has resulted in its characterization as a monster. In the remainder of this section, I provide an overview of this view and its limitations.

Writing in 2012, Slavoj Žižek (2012, pp. 42–43) evoked Antonio Gramsci famous sentence 'The old world is dying away, and the new world struggles to come forth' to describe how a neoliberal crisis of epic proportion had not resulted in a new horizon of thinking beyond neoliberalism and the opening of a new post-neoliberal phase. Yet, while Gramsci ended his sentence with 'in this interregnum a great variety of morbid symptoms appear' Žižek, (2012, p. 43) offered a different translation: 'Now is the time of monsters'. The idea that capital is 'an animated monster', a 'vampire thirst for the living blood of labor' draws on a Marxist imaginary (Marx, 1990, pp. 302, 367). In the aftermath of the 2008 crisis, representations of neoliberalism as a monster have gained growing popularity and have been embraced beyond the traditional Marxist domain, with neoliberalism increasingly portrayed as a 'zombie', a 'parasite', a 'Frankenstein', a 'mutant', and a 'virus'.

Following Mark Fisher (2009, p. 6), it could be argued that the neoliberal 'monsters' ominously evoked by Žižek have increasingly taken the shape of 'the Thing in John Carpenter's film of the same name: a monstrous, infinitely plastic entity, capable of metabolizing and absorbing anything with which it comes into contact'. This understanding appears in an influential article on the future of neoliberalism written by Peck et al. (2009) shortly after the onset of the financial crisis. In reflecting upon neoliberalism's remarkable resilience, they suggested that 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' (Peck et al., 2009, p. 104). Neoliberalism is a parasite that is unfazed by the encounter with other species/social formations. Quite the opposite, the very and only way for neoliberalism to survive and thrive is to colonize contending ideologies, opposing practices, and ostensibly different regimes of existence.

According to several commentators, in the aftermath of the financial crisis, neoliberalism has continued unabatedly to perform this relentless expansion in a 'zombie' form (Jaffe, 2017; Kotsko, 2020; Peck, 2010; Wilson, 2014). Although the crisis had made evident the untenability of neoliberal tenets, economist Paul Krugman (2020, p. 3) remarks, 'ideas that should have been killed by contrary evidence ... keep shambling along, eating people's brains' like zombies. Neoliberalism 'has somehow survived its own death', it has been suggested, 'and lives on as a zombielike shell of itself' (Kotsko, 2020, p. 453).

The remarkable capacity of neoliberalism not only to survive its catastrophic failure but also to become an almost autonomous force

capable of exercising independent agency is captured by Wendy Brown's (2018; 2019) characterization of neoliberalism as a 'Frankensteinian creation'. For Brown (2019, pp. 8–9), neoliberal ideas have specific forefathers, which include 'Friedrich Hayek, Milton Friedman, and their half-siblings, the German Ordoliberalists'. Yet, she argues, none of them would recognize themselves in 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-fuelled 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' both 'in the streets and across the internet' (Brown, 2019, p. 1). The 'catastrophic present' of neoliberalism, Brown (2019, pp. 9–10) contends, 'was not neoliberalism's intended spawn, but its Frankensteinian creation'. Neoliberalism may have been a human creation but, like Frankenstein's monster, has developed a will of its own which it uses to attack its human master.

With the notion of 'mutant neoliberalism' Callison and Manfredi, (2020) push the idea of neoliberalism's autonomous capacity to evolve, mutate, and act even further. For them, the evolution and transformations of neoliberalism can be understood as the product of 'changes at the level of an organism's genetic code' (Callison & Manfredi, 2020, p. 3). The evolution of neoliberalism, its capacity to survive crises, and its remarkable resilience appear as the product of random mutations in the body of neoliberalism. Some of these mutations have contributed to the emergence of stronger variants of neoliberalism which 'are distinct but nevertheless members of the same cast' (Callison & Manfredi, 2020, p. 3). The image of neoliberalism as genetic code in an evolutionary process has acquired new salience in the aftermath of the COVID pandemic. Neoliberalism has been compared to a 'viral infection', to a 'disease' which is part of a 'socio-viral co-pathogenesis' (Sparke & Williams, 2022). The COVID-19 virus 'found weaknesses' in a 'global body politic' affected by the neoliberal virus and exploited this weakness – reduced healthcare infrastructure, inequality, precarity, poverty, and unwillingness to disrupt the economy – to its advantage (Sparke & Williams, 2022).

The disruptiveness of the neoliberal monster has been recently denounced by former US Secretary of Labour and longstanding critic of capitalism's excesses, Robert Reich (2022). In a 2022 op-ed, he portrays 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'. These billionaires are 'as much products of this public-be-damned era as they are contributors to it' for their ruthless exploitative practices, broken morals, and disdain for the law, writes Reich (2022). In this account, the neoliberal monster is a responsibility of the few (Trump, Musk, Bankman-Fried) and a quasi-autonomous force as these few are both the condition of possibility and a product of neoliberalism.

If we analyse these depictions of neoliberalism from Kundera's perspective of 'heaviness' and 'lightness', it can be argued that the 'monster' created by the few and that we no longer control ('Frankenstein's creature'), capable of infiltrating all domains of existence by colonizing contending regimes of value from within ('parasite') and of evolving and mutating on its own ('mutant' and 'virus') to the point of escaping death ('zombie') can only be seen and confronted if we face the heaviness of our neoliberal condition. Normatively, it is a way of denouncing in the strongest possible terms the totalizing nature of the neoliberal project and resisting its violence.

Following Kundera, we could argue that, by imagining a virtually immortal neoliberalism by way of imagining an end of the world that is constantly re-enacted, anticipated, celebrated, and disavowed crisis after crisis – that 'recurs ad infinitum' and nails us to the non-transient nature of our neoliberal condition 'as Jesus Christ was nailed to the cross' (Kundera, 1984, p. 4) – the critique of neoliberalism as a monster enables us to embrace the 'reality' of the all-powerful and mighty neoliberal order, the burden of its overarching strength. And possibly,

by inviting us to face the reality and heaviness of the neoliberal monster, this critique can encourage us to acknowledge our own condition of subjection and sowing the seeds of a new imagination capable to project itself beyond neoliberalism.

In the rest of this section, I wish to advance a contending argument. While graphically evocative and conceptually vivid, the figure of the monster may unwittingly encourage an understanding of neoliberalism as an almost autonomous force that can evolve and mutate irrespectively of our will, wishes, and actions. Hence, the risk is establishing neoliberalism as an entity that is ontologically separate from us, with the effect of dissimulating our responsibility in the reproduction of the neoliberal order. To explore this limitation – which, I should stress, is not a critique of the above critiques of neoliberalism but of the monstrous figures they evoke – we need to return to Reich's argument.

While the responsibility of Trump, Musk, and Bankman-Fried in feeding, nurturing, and reproducing the neoliberal monster is incomparably greater than that of 'ordinary people', it is nonetheless the case that many ordinary people voted (and would 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. By projecting neoliberalism onto the monster rather than taking responsibility for it, the risk is to disguise how our acts of consumption, logics of investment, practices of socialization, political behaviours, ignorance, silence, and supine acceptance of neoliberal rationalities, as well as our fictitious resistance and opposition to them, contribute to sustain neoliberalism's reproduction.

My argument, to be sure, is not that we are all *equally* responsible for neoliberalism but that we all partake, in very different degrees, in neoliberalism's reproduction, because neoliberalism has no outside and 'nothing is untouched by a neoliberal mode of reason and valuation' (Brown, 2019, p. 8; see also Fisher, 2009; Peck et al., 2009; Mavelli, 2022). Precarious workers and victims of austerity are unlikely to buy Tesla cars or shares and invest in cryptocurrencies but may vote for Trump or other populist leaders and use X/Twitter and other social media. Likewise, numerous studies have highlighted how undocumented migrants (at the receiving end of neoliberal exploitation and violence) heavily rely on social media (Dekker et al., 2018) and digital financial services (Bhagat & Roderick, 2020) – expressions of the 'surveillance capitalism' (Zuboff, 2019) and 'parasitic finance' (Hudson, 2015) denounced by critics of neoliberalism. Albeit with very different – and almost incommensurable – responsibilities, *we are all neoliberal subjects*, not just in the sense that we are 'constructed and interpellated' by neoliberal rationalities (Chandler & Reid, 2016, p. 9), but that we are also their very condition of possibility.

Hence, to denounce neoliberalism as a 'monster' runs the risk of becoming an act of projection that sanitizes our conscience with the effect that – in Kundera's terms but reversing his argument – we unburden ourselves and become less real, 'half-real', 'lighter than air' vis-à-vis neoliberalism. This view should convey the outmost condemnation of the disruptiveness of neoliberalism, the indictment of its totalizing economization, the magnitude of its oppressive cast. And yet, the very scale and nature of the monster, its unbearable heaviness, its totalizing might, ultimately might conceal our own agency and responsibility, dissimulating that 'we' are not just victims as 'we', individually and collectively, albeit in different degrees, court, feed, and sustain the monster and enable its economization of all domains of existence. The narrative of the neoliberal monster can thus become a way of unburdening ourselves of the heaviness for being responsible of partaking in its reproduction. In this process, we seemingly perform an act of resistance as we denounce neoliberalism in the worst possible terms (monster, parasite, Frankenstein, virus), yet we also reinforce the idea that neoliberalism is beyond our reach and grasp, and acts beyond our consent.

To escape the limitations of this perspective, to be 'real' vis-à-vis neoliberalism, our gaze needs to look beyond the heaviness of the monster and confront the lightness of the ghost; that is, we need to

understand the power of neoliberalism also as an expression of ghostly lightness. Neoliberalism is as much a monster as it is a ghost: it exercises power not just *over* but also *through* us, who are the very condition of possibility of the monster. From this perspective, neoliberalism is a ghost that does not have a body and can only act by possessing us, by haunting us. It is a regime of regulations and controls which are enacted through suggestions, illusions, persuasions, courtship, incentives, rather than merely compulsion. The ghostly lightness of neoliberalism lies in its promise of rewards, amelioration, success, consumption, enhancement, happiness, and wealth.

This is not to deny the violent, oppressive, and coercive character of neoliberalism and how it fosters subjugation, enslavement, inequality, debasement, dispossession, and poverty. It is to emphasize how, at least in the Global North, neoliberalism has often been able to establish itself more through consent than intimidation. Neoliberalism is not just a monster that oppresses and constrains, but a ghost that courts and seduces; it is not just the 'end of the world' heaviness denounced by Jameson, but mundane and consumerist lightness, as I shall discuss in the rest of the paper focusing on the case of Mercato Mayfair as a neoliberal infrastructure.

#### 4. *Text-in-context: The lightness of the neoliberal ghost*

In this section, I first introduce Mercato Mayfair as a case of economization and illustration of the ghostly lightness of neoliberalism and then deepen the analysis by theorizing it as a neoliberal infrastructure. Mercato Mayfair is a glamorous community market located in the affluent Mayfair district in central London and housed in a former early-19th century Anglican church, St Mark's. Regarded as one the finest example of neo-classical design – with a pillared portico, Romanesque Victorian interiors, and stained glasses – in the 1960s the church progressively lost its centrality in the life of the community. As the number of worshippers decreased, the church was eventually deconsecrated in 1974. It remained emptied for about twenty years and then used for ten years by a small charismatic church to carry out outreach programmes including support for the homeless, help for elderly people, and anti-knife crime for teenagers.

In 2006, an attempt was made to turn the church into a wellness centre, yet this plan was met with the fierce opposition of the local community. Some of its prominent members, including actor Ray Emmet Brown and Lady Sainsbury (wife of the co-founder of the second largest supermarket chain the UK), openly voiced their opposition to the financial rapacity of the project: 'The church is a massive benefit for this community' which keeps its 'spirit alive' as it brings 'people together without looking for financial reward' (Evening Standard, 2008). 'We are thoroughly opposed to any commercial vulturism', the co-ordinator of the Save St Mark's Action Group stated, 'It's appalling that the finest church of its kind in the country is being sold to a businessman' (Evening Standard, 2008).

However, when in 2015 the first project was laid out for St Mark's to become Mercato Mayfair, the proposal was met with the support of the local community. The Grosvenor-Mayfair Residents' Association raised some practical concerns related to 'transport issues, the community space, basement acoustics, waste and recycling collections and potential noise', but quickly withdrew them upon receiving assurances regarding their satisfactory resolution (City of Westminster, 2019, p. 19). The Residents' Association considered that the conversion would enable to preserve not just the architectural features of the building, but also its very furnishings including the altar, the pulpit, and the baptismal font, which would be embedded into the market. As the market would be accessible to all and retain the physical memories of the past, it was considered that the requalification would allow the building to retain its function of community hub, as the property developers proposing the conversion also emphasized. Eventually, Mayfair would attract not just the few interested in worshipping and social outreach programs, but the many interested in enjoying 'a wide range of good, accessible, clean,

ready-to-eat food, ...grocery products' and drinks from 'different countries, cultures and traditions' (Mercato Mayfair, nd; Mercato Metropolitano, nd).

Following a £5 million restoration, Mercato Mayfair began operations in November 2019 and is now open seven days a week. Entrance is free (unlike many churches nowadays) and its visitors can enjoy the unique experience of sipping a beer while losing themselves in the beautiful stained glasses depicting the life of Jesus, appreciating a cocktail beneath the gaze of the four evangelists in the polyptych, nursing a glass of wine leaning on the altar, indulging in a true Italian ice-cream next to the baptismal font, satisfying their craving for pizza under the pulpit, savouring noodles, steak, or seafood from the high galleries, or venturing down into the crypt where a selection of gin is waiting to be found. Mercato Mayfair has been successfully economized: its existence has been shifted from the domain of faith to that of profit and consumption.

This economization is a product of the ghostly lightness of neoliberalism, which succeeded there where its monstrous heaviness – the attempt to turn St Mark's into a wellness centre – failed. The 'vultured' rapacity of the wellness centre (as described by the local residents who opposed its development) was perceived as an undue imposition onto the will of the community; as a monstrous and forceful act of occupation and eradication. Conversely, the ghostly alluring of a community market was seen as an effective way of rescuing the church from oblivion while enabling it to perform its role of community hub where people could 'socialise, exercise, learn, meet, greet' (Mercato Metropolitano, nd), albeit no longer through the fading community in God but through the bustling, vibrant, and possibly even more inclusive (because not confined to Christians) community in consumption. Neoliberalism succeeded in inscribing St Mark's in the rationalities of profit and the market because its ghostly spirit acted *through* the Grosvenor-Mayfair Residents' Association, rather than *over* it. It persuaded the local community that this was the best course of action and successfully woos its visitors by offering what is perceived as an inimitable food and drinking experience, as witnessed by the excellent ratings on TripAdvisor and other online review platforms.

Mercato Mayfair is not a neoliberal 'monster' created by the few that, like Frankenstein's creature, has a will of its own. It is not a 'parasite', a 'mutant', or a 'virus' because it is not ontological separate from the subjects – members of the local community that supported the requalification and visitors that flock to its premises – which gave and give it life. And certainly, it is not a 'zombie' because it managed to bring life – neoliberal life – there where the spiritual life of Christianity was fading.

This, to be sure, does not mean that neoliberalism cannot be monstrous heaviness. Compare the case of Mercato Mayfair with the 2013 attempt of the Turkish government to demolish a green space in central Istanbul and replace it with a shopping mall. Regarded as an illustration of prime minister Erdoğan 'authoritarian neoliberalism' (Bilgiç, 2018), the planned conversion prompted widespread opposition, the so-called Gezi Park Protests, which at the cost of several deaths, eventually forced the Turkish government to backtrack on its plan. As Emel Akçalı and Umut Korkut (2015, pp. 76, 78) have discussed in this journal, strategies of urban restructuring and processes of spatial transformation have become 'the "privileged instruments" of neoliberal governmentality' in 'the semiperiphery of the advanced capitalist world'. Focusing on the cases of Istanbul and Budapest, they regard neoliberal urban governance as a distinctive form of neoliberal governmentality mired in 'neo-authoritarianism' (Akçalı & Korkut, 2015).

My contention, therefore, is not that we should ignore neoliberalism's monstrous heaviness as manifested by its neo-authoritarian manifestations but that to fully understand neoliberalism's complexity and be real vis-à-vis neoliberalism, we should pay attention also to its ghostly lightness. Indeed, the very protests that succeeded in halting the 'monstrous' reconversion of Gezi Park into a shopping mall were also made possible by an implicit recognition of neoliberalism not just as a mighty monster but also as ghostly lightness, that is, as a rationality that,

while not relying on courtship and persuasion in this case, nonetheless grows and expands through our own participation, whether in the form of active support or passive acquiescence – the acquiescence that the Gezi Park protestors chose not to embrace.

In the case of Mayfair, the ghost of neoliberalism found no resistance but support. It 'haunted' the members of the local community – persuading them that the market would be in continuity with the past – and 'haunts' the thousands of visitors that every year cross the pillared portico of this church-turned-market for a 'unique' and 'immersive' experience. What does it mean, then, to conceptualize neoliberalism as a ghost? And how does confronting the lightness of neoliberalism change our understanding of it as a spatial formation and enables us to appreciate its infrastructural manifestations? To answer these questions, I first introduce the concept of *hauntology* and then develop it in framework the *poetics of infrastructure*.

Hauntology is a portmanteau of 'haunt[ing]' and 'ontology', originally coined by French philosopher Jacques Derrida (1994) in 1993 to challenge the euphoric climate following the demise of the Soviet Union and the triumph of liberal democracy and of the capitalist market order. Building on his previous work on *differance*, Derrida further radicalizes the idea that nothing has stable, positive, affirmative, and self-sustaining ontological foundations. As Fisher (2014: 18) explains, in hauntology '[e]verything that exists is possible only on the basis of a whole series of absences, which precede and surround it, allowing it to possess such consistency and intelligibility that it does'. This means that every ontological entity – be it a concept, a people, a place – is *haunted* in the sense that its very existence is made possible by that which is not physically and, most of all, temporally there. For Derrida, hauntology is a disruptive force that questions the ontological stability of the present and its seemingly unquestionable market order; it is the 'spectre of Marx' that, albeit hastily proclaimed dead, continues to haunt contemporary neoliberal society with its demand for greater equality and justice, thus rendering 'impossible the "end of history," or the definitive triumph of the market' (Shapiro, 2006).

Although Derrida does not frame the capitalist market order as monster, his view nonetheless rests on approaching neoliberalism as 'heaviness'. Against those who in the early 1990s celebrated the achievements of 'liberal democracy and of the capitalist market', he remarked that 'never have violence, inequality, exclusion, famine, and thus economic oppression affected as many human beings in the history of the earth and of humanity ... [and] that never before, in absolute figures, have so many men, women and children been subjugated, starved or exterminated on the earth' (Derrida, 1994, p. 106). Hence, Derrida questions the ontological solidity, density, impenetrability, and self-sufficiency of neoliberalism as it continues to be haunted by the spirit of critique, even if the latter has seemingly disappeared from public view, buried by the successes of liberal capitalism. For Derrida, and in the terms of this article, neoliberalism is a monster haunted by a ghost, namely, the 'spectre of Marx'.

While Derrida's argument opens a crack in the solidity of the neoliberal monster, it remains wedded to a critique of its heaviness which makes it difficult to appreciate neoliberalism's lightness. It struggles to approach Mercato Mayfair as an expression of the consumerist, ghostly lightness of neoliberalism as it implicitly endorses a view of neoliberalism as ontologically separate from us, thus concealing, behind the image of the haunted monster of capitalism, the fact that, as Fisher (2014, p. 25) remarks, 'the capitalist dystopia of 21st-century culture is not something that was simply imposed on us – it was built out of our captured desires'. If this is correct, does it mean that it is not neoliberalism to be haunted, but we are? What if neoliberalism is not a monster but a ghost that haunts, courts, thrills, and seduces us? And if the spectre 'has no being in itself' (Häggglund, 2008, p. 82, cited in Fisher, 2014, p. 18), are not 'we' the only ones who can enable and enact it?

According to Fisher (2014, p. 18, emphasis in original), a different way of approaching hauntology is to think of it 'as *the agency of the*

virtual, with the spectre understood not as anything supernatural, but as that which acts without (physically) existing'. Fisher (2014, p. 200) regards '[t]he late capitalist world, governed by the abstractions of finance' as a clear indication of 'a world in which virtualities are effective'. Yet, these 'virtualities' can only operate through flesh-and-blood human beings, from the big Wall Street investors to the pensioners looking to secure their retirement funds, to the migrants using fintech to send remittances home. If hauntology is the 'agency of the virtual', then, does not this imply that neoliberalism needs us to act, that neoliberalism only exists through our agency? And if this is the case, how is this agency enacted, performed, and exercised? The hypothesis I wish to explore in the remainder of this section is that Mercato Mayfair should be regarded as an infrastructure that vehiculates the hauntology – the virtual agency – of neoliberalism.

Over the last few years, from social anthropology to human and political geography, there has been a growing attention and emphasis on the significance of infrastructures in shaping social, economic, political, cultural, and affective dynamics. In a seminal review of the 'infrastructural turn', Brian Larkin (2013, p. 327) defines infrastructures as the 'material forms that allow for the possibility of exchange over space. They are the physical networks through which goods, ideas, waste, power, people, and finance are trafficked'. Yet, Larkin emphasizes, beyond their material component, infrastructures are also political rationalities, regimes of governmentality, and emotional/affective formations that shape and are shaped by social relations, cultural and political practices, aesthetic sensibilities, and economic logics. This understanding of infrastructure has been taken up and further developed by Lauren Berlant (2016, p. 393), who argues that 'infrastructure is defined by the movement or patterning of social form. It is the living mediation of what organizes life: the lifeworld of structure. Roads, bridges, schools, food chains, finance systems, prisons, families, districts, norms all the systems that link ongoing proximity to being in a world-sustaining relation'.

This focus on infrastructures as 'lifeworlds' (Berlant, 2016) that govern time, memories, desires, fantasies, imaginations and mobilize affects and desires, pride and frustration (Larkin, 2013, p. 333) has spurred a mounting interest in the 'poetics of infrastructure', namely, how infrastructures are 'semiotic objects' (Larkin, 2013, p. 329) and 'material-semiotic containers' (Dawney, 2021, p. 407) that embody meanings, memories, values, ideas, desires, and narratives beyond their functional purpose. The poetics of infrastructure thus investigates how infrastructures are experienced and understood by individuals and communities, how they shape identities, behaviours, emotions, and subjectivities, and how they establish new logics of connectivity through symbolic representations, evocative imagery, and cultural references. To focus on the poetics of infrastructure means to consider 'the material and cultural as hyphenated' (Amin, 2014, p. 137) and privilege a focus on 'the signifier' and 'the palpability of the sign' rather than on their 'referential meaning' and 'technical function' (Larkin, 2013, p. 334). For example, Larkin (2013, p. 335) considers the case of communist factories as illustrated by historian Vladimir Todorov: 'factories are not built to produce commodities [but] symbolic meanings ... They result in a deficit of goods but an overproduction of symbolic meanings'.

As Leila Dawney (2021, p. 409) has recently discussed, a focus on the sign, 'aesthetic and figural force of charismatic infrastructure' beyond their functional materiality enables us to consider infrastructures as 'open-ended experimental systems that generate emergent practical ontologies' (Jensen & Morita, 2017, p. 620, cited in Dawney, 2021, p. 410). Dawney investigates the case of the nuclear infrastructure of the atomic city of Visaginas, Lithuania. With its decommissioning in the early 2000s, the nuclear infrastructure which kept the community together by providing jobs, schools, houses, incomes, and a social environment, has not ceased to perform its role as a 'gathering of human and non-human' that governs and organizes life 'through materiality, affect, and the imagination' (Dawney, 2021, p. 407). Orphan of the dream of an atomic future, the nuclear infrastructure has acquired new

ontological forms – 'as safety net, training ground, place of respite and workshop for thriving in a pan-European, precarious, labour market' – through which it continues to 'tie together bodies, reactors, pipes, apartments, playgrounds, hopes, fears and solidarities' (Dawney (2021, p. 419).

Central to Dawney's analysis is Berlant's expanded understanding of infrastructure 'in response to the question of what holds a place together in the face of infrastructural decline, deindustrialisation and the shrinking of the welfare state' (Dawney, 2021, p. 409). As Dawney (2021, p. 409) remarks, Berlant 'invites us to view infrastructures through scenes of corporeal proximity that highlight participation in a shared world; a generative common that stands in for the loss of previous forms of life'.

These considerations are very relevant for the case of Mercato Mayfair and the hauntology of neoliberalism. Mercato Mayfair is the 'generative common that stands in for the loss of previous forms of life' (Dawney, 2021, p. 409); it is the neoliberal communion in consumption that replaces the declining and decommissioned communion in God; it is the 'corporeal proximity' enacted by an exciting variety of food and drink that replaces the bread and the wine of the Eucharist; it is the spiritual union through the vapours of gin that replaces, in the crypt, the scent of incense and the spiritual union with the dead; it is the body and blood of capital that replaces the body and blood of Christ. This replacement is not an eradication of the Christian past (as it would have been had St Mark's been converted in a wellness centre) but its incorporation in the neoliberal present.

Mercato Mayfair is a neoliberal infrastructure that through its pillared portico, stained glasses, images of the life of Jesus, wooden polyptych, marble altar, engraved baptismal font, and panoramic high galleries brings memories of a distant and yet relatable religious past; a fascination with the sacred, the simple, the austere, the monastic, that from the perspective of the secular becomes glamorous evocation, fashionable setting, stylish environment that elevates the ritual of consumption. With its remarkable displacement and reconfiguration of space and time, Mercato Mayfair is a lived space that, to return to Bachelard, is in us as much as we are in it, and through this presence establishes new forms of connectivity mired in neoliberal aspirations. It is an infrastructure that vehiculates the hauntology – the virtual agency, the unbearable lightness – of neoliberalism.

Unlike the nuclear power plant of Visaginas, the memories mobilized by Mercato Mayfair are not of a 'lost future', of modernist fantasies betrayed by the crisis of modernity and of a glorious past that will no longer be. From the perspective of the ghostly lightness of neoliberalism, the memories of Mayfair are the continuation of the past in the present. They evoke the natural exhaustion of the religious phase and the capacity of the neoliberal present to inject it with new life – a life beyond rigour, doctrine, and restraint that celebrates abundance, freedom, indulgence, and consumption. To understand Visaginas, we need to confront the lightness of the sign, aesthetic, and figural force – rather the function – of the derelict material infrastructure, yet we must remain mindful of the *heaviness* that engendered its ontological transformation. In the case of Mercato Mayfair, the heaviness is almost entirely removed as there is no generative crisis. The natural exhaustion of Christianity is replaced by the triumphant affirmation of neoliberalism, the austerity of the church is replaced by the opulence of the market, the seduction of the commodity, our desire to interact differently with old objects – an altar, a pulpit, a church – and give them new meanings mired in consumerism. What is distinctive of Mayfair compared to Visaginas is that its transformation was primarily driven by desire rather than necessity and crisis.

The neoliberalism at play in Mayfair is not that of a monster but of a ghost that through our agency has turned a series of decaying and lifeless objects into a new lifeworld. This means that neoliberal infrastructures like Mercato Mayfair are not solely 'rooted in non-living material systems and structures' but comprise 'social, cultural and peopled dimensions' (Truelove & Ruszczyk, 2022, p. 1). Neoliberal infrastructures



are 'peopled', and people are [neoliberal] infrastructure (Simone, 2004; Truelove & Ruszczyk, 2022). In these lived spaces encompassing bodies, materials, symbols, histories, affects, and desires, people are the agency of neoliberalism and while neoliberalism can be the monster ontologically separate from us, it is often the ghost within us, the ghost that we enable, to which we give life and meaning through our interaction with infrastructures like Mercato Mayfair.

This lifeworld has not been the product of a monstrous imposition upon the local community and the thousands that each day visit its premises to eat, drink, chat, laugh, cry, bond, love, forget, imagine, and dream under Jesus' compassionate gaze – a gaze that no longer oversees a community in God, but a community in consumption. Jesus himself no longer embodies the heaviness of our human condition, but its neoliberal lightness – the lightness of consumer capitalism. This lightness that may be unbearable though, as it cannot escape the fact that 'we' – and not some external monster – enacted the spatial transformation from church to market and turned Jesus into a commodity among the other commodities that animate the ghostly lifeworld of the neoliberal infrastructure.

### 5. Counter-text: A monster disguised as a ghost?

In this final section before the conclusion, I wish to discuss and address a potential critique that could be raised against my argument: Is it *really* the case that Mercato Mayfair was *not* born out of a crisis, that it *does not* embody a crisis of community and connectivity, and that it *was not* a monstrous imposition? The idea of neoliberalism as a ghostly and haunting presence, it could be argued, gives the *illusion* that Mercato Mayfair sustains a new regime of social attachments and supports secular forms of communion that stand in continuity with the past, as witnessed by the incorporation of religious symbols in its infrastructure and its purported role as a community hub. *In reality*, the Christian values of solidarity, spirituality, and humility that should be conveyed by the religious signs – the crucifix, the altar, the pulpit, the baptismal font – are radically negated by the capitalist values they communicate – consumerism, individualism, and materialism. The church and its furnishing have been degraded to fashionable background for the multiplication of a myriad of individual acts of consumption which sustain the illusion of a new social bond.

Accordingly, it could be concluded, although Mercato Mayfair was not forced upon the local community and its visitors with violence, it was nonetheless imposed by a neoliberal regime of knowledge that restricts the horizon of meaning to the point that community, sociality, and connection can no longer be thought separately and independently from consumption. It follows that to focus on the ghostly lightness of neoliberalism and emphasize 'our' role in neoliberalism's reproduction would mean to overestimate our agency and neglect how neoliberalism is a way of 'governing from a distance' by managing the 'conduct of conducts' (Foucault, 1994; see also Gordon, 1991, p. 2), that is, by establishing frameworks that govern people's lives. Hence, only by confronting the heaviness of neoliberalism, whether in the form of crises, exploitation, or regimes of power and knowledge that are thrust upon us, it is possible to confront its ghostly-disguised monstrosity.

This critique, I contend, rests on a materialist reading that can limit our capacity to fully appreciate the poetics of infrastructure – how the sign can become detached from the referential meanings and technical functions – and how the separation on which it rests can be generative of ghostly regimes of power that work *through* us, and not just *over* us. As Larkin (2018, p. 178) observes, from the perspective of this 'new materialism' (as opposed to 'older forms of historical materialism'), infrastructures are 'frequently seen to be a primary technology upon which form is constructed' to the effect that 'they are thought to possess a vital force operating at a level prior to or below consciousness'. This idea can be observed in the literature on redundant churches and the distinction it draws between the buildings and the furnishings.

As Nicholas Lynch (2016, p. 856) remarks, '[t]he construction of

church lofts speaks to the ways in which consumption unmoors religious items from their "sacredness", repositioning them as commodities that fit secular aesthetic menus'. Highlighting religious features and iconographies, 'accentuat[ing] vestigial spaces like altars or naves' is instrumental to create 'a sense of uniqueness and authenticity', a feeling of 'heritage' and an 'aura of a selective past' that increases the value of the property (Lynch, 2016, pp. 860, 867). This 'secularization' of churches, however, concerns the walls, the environments, and the spaces, but requires the careful 'removal of all church furnishings' to eliminate 'all traces of the original function' (Velthuis & Spennemann, 2007, p. 61). This means that the furnishings are seen as the embodiment of the true religious function – as the matter 'possess[ing] a vital force operating at a level prior to or below consciousness' – and therefore cannot be secularized.

From this materialist perspective, the incorporation of the religious furnishings of St Mark's in Mercato Mayfair is a monstrous profanation, namely, a violation of their sacredness by forcefully inscribing in the domain of the secular that which cannot be secularized. This perversion of their original meaning through their treatment as 'thoroughly instrumentalized matter' (Larkin, 2018, p. 178) seeks to create the illusion of community – the idea that Mercato Mayfair stands in continuation with St Mark's – which in turns feeds the illusion that by choosing the conversion of St Mark's in Mercato Mayfair, people have chosen a new form of community hub, while in reality they have just decreed the crisis of community and the triumph of the market.

If we take the poetics of infrastructure seriously, however, this view must be challenged. The new materialist idea of infrastructure rests on a separation between 'authentic' and 'instrumentalized' matter which mirrors that of the scholarship on redundant churches between church furnishing – as the embodiment of the sacred, which cannot be secularized but only profaned – and church buildings – which can be secularized. This distinction is problematic because it conceals a more fundamental dynamic. As philosopher Giorgio Agamben (2007, p. 81) observes, capitalism behaves like a religion: whereas religion 'removes things, places, animals, or people from common use and transfers them to a separate [sacred] sphere', capitalism forces these objects into the domain of the market (Agamben, 2007, p. 74). The key dimension of this process is not whether what is transferred is used (secularized) or abused (profaned) but how this totalizing transfer of forces, ideas, people, and things is ultimately a consecration of the market form as it decrees that nothing escapes its governing logics.

This argument questions and blurs the separation between secularization and profanation in the conversion of churches to secular use. Read from the perspective of the poetics of infrastructure, which challenges the divide between 'authentic' and 'instrumentalized' matter, it questions the idea that infrastructures possess an identity 'prior to or below consciousness' to the effect that their instrumental manipulation may be regarded as a form of profanation that supports regimes of false consciousness and illusion. Hence, the idea that the transformation of St Mark's in Mercato Mayfair is a profanation that feeds the illusion of community must be rejected: there is no illusion here because there is no profanation because there is no original identity of the infrastructure, as witnessed by the fact that, if anything, St Mark's has not been profaned but consecrated to the market.

This consecration has not been decreed from without but from within: infrastructures are lived spaces and lifeworlds that activate, mobilize, and vehiculate desires, emotions, imaginations, aspirations, fantasies, and memories well beyond their supposedly inherent material determinations, technical functions, and instrumental purposes. This means that the infrastructure of Mercato Mayfair is not overdetermined by its material qualities and technical functions. Its meanings, significations, and practical implications – and, accordingly, its economization – are crucially activated by our thoughts and actions. This argument does not deny that our capacity to act may be significantly curtailed, circumscribed, and governed by neoliberalism's 'monstrous' compulsion, whether forced upon us through authoritarianism and surveillance

or through regimes that govern us ‘from a distance’. It suggests though that neoliberalism may not always be solely or primarily a monster or a monster disguised as a ghost, but a ghost that requires our choices to exist – in the same way that, as has been recently argued (Newman, 2022), the successful government of the ‘conduct of conduct’ inevitably requires a degree of ‘voluntary servitude’, that is, people’s willing submission to its power.

From this perspective, Mercato Mayfair is not the monstrous profanation of a church against our will or through the deception of our will. It is the ghostly consecration and celebration of the commodity and market form made possible by our desires. In Mercato Mayfair, the ‘Christ nailed to the cross’ described by Kundera is not the embodiment of the heaviness of things, the burden of being real. It is the expression of the unbearable lightness of neoliberalism: unbearable because its recognition comes with the inescapable acknowledgement that neoliberalism is not solely *beyond* us, but *within* us; an unbearable lightness that we need to confront if we want to unravel its ghostly enchantment and if we want to keep alive the hope that our lives may be ‘more real and truthful’ vis-à-vis neoliberalism.

## 6. Conclusion

This article has brought together two distinct areas of research, the political critique of neoliberalism and the poetics of infrastructure, to advance the concept of neoliberal infrastructures as the ghostly carriers of the unbearable lightness of neoliberalism. Reversing Kundera’s famous argument that to be real we need to confront the heaviness of things, it has argued that confronting neoliberalism solely as violence, coercion, and crisis risks establishing neoliberalism as a ‘monstrous’ and autonomous entity, ontologically separate from us, thus concealing our involvement in its existence and reproduction. Building on hauntology and the poetics of infrastructure, I have developed a complementary perspective that, by interrogating the lightness of neoliberalism in the conversion of spaces not traditionally regarded as infrastructures, such as churches and markets, approaches it as a ghostly presence that haunts us, rather than an oppressive monster.

Focusing on the case of Mercato Mayfair, I theorized neoliberal infrastructures as lived spaces that vehiculate the ghostly agency of neoliberalism through the actions, passions, and desires of flesh-and-blood human beings. I suggested that to be real vis-à-vis neoliberalism, we need to recognize and confront its unbearable lightness – its capacity to court, seduce, and generate desire – because neoliberalism may not necessarily or solely be a monster beyond us, but a ghost within us. As discussed, the conversion of St Mark’s into the neoliberal infrastructure of Mercato Mayfair would have not been possible without the support of the local community and of its visitors, who should therefore be regarded as an essential component of the neoliberal infrastructure: a lived space that, to recall Bachelard (1994, pp. xxxiii), is in us as much as we are in it, and a lifeworld that, to paraphrase Berlant (2016, p. 394), binds us to neoliberalism in movement and keeps neoliberalism bound to itself.

Following Harvey, it can be suggested that the question of what kind of infrastructures we have and would like to have, ‘cannot be divorced from that of what kind of social ties, relationship to nature, lifestyles, technologies and aesthetic values we desire’ (Harvey, 2008, p. 23). Neoliberal infrastructures can be motorways, power plants, shopping centres, skyscrapers – ‘monsters’ which are imposed from the above upon communities, that destroy ecosystems, and that undermine forms of life. Yet, they can also be ghosts – like Mercato Mayfair – that allure and seduce, that incorporate rather than erase, that establish what many will perceive as a spatial continuity with the past, and that give life to people’s imagination and desires. For us to be able to recognize these infrastructures and be ‘real’ vis-à-vis neoliberalism, we need to confront its ghostly lightness – its capacity to act *through* us – and not just its monstrous heaviness – its capacity to act *over* us. Acknowledging our involvement in the reproduction of neoliberalism, whether through

consent or acquiescence, means asserting our capacity to oppose and resist it.

This article has endeavoured to articulate a conceptual framework that, by connecting neoliberalism and infrastructure through a poetic perspective beyond materialist accounts, may enable future research in political geography to explore dynamics of consent, acquiescence, and resistance in spatial transformations beyond Mercato Mayfair. By engaging with ‘the geographical and spatial dimensions of politics’ (Menga et al., 2024, p. 1) and ‘the political dimensions of space’ (Mountz, 2018, p. 765), I have outlined how an interdisciplinary dialogue between the political critique of neoliberalism and the poetics of infrastructure can shed light on the mutual co-constitution of subjectivity and space and advance a novel perspective for critique. The concept of neoliberal infrastructure that has emerged from this investigation suggests that the lightness of neoliberalism can only become *unbearable* if we become aware of its ghostly enchantment and of the fact that the infrastructures we have and would like to have are crucially connected to who we are and would like to be.

## CRedit authorship contribution statement

**Luca Mavelli:** Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

## Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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