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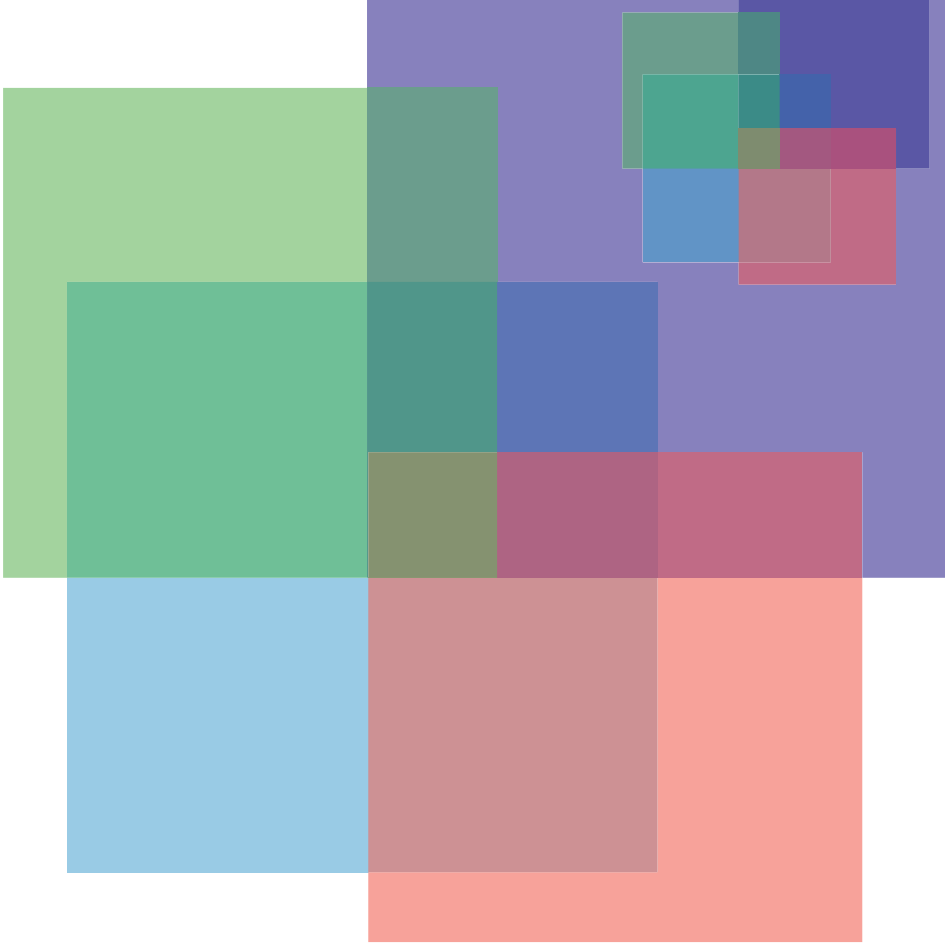

CHAPTER 7

Ruling human dignity: on the (de)construction and legitimacy of neoliberal rationality

Mónica Soares[*]

The normative reign of homo oeconomicus *in every sphere means that there are no motivations, drives, or aspirations apart from economic ones, that there is nothing to be human apart from 'mere life'. Neoliberalism is the rationality through which capitalism finally swallows humanity — not only with its machinery of compulsory commodification and profit-driven expansion, but by is form of valuation.*
Wendy Brown (2015)

Introduction

Neoliberalism has been discussed by several authors from different yet related perspectives, ranging from understandings intended to debate the history of neoliberal political theories, philosophies and ideological foundations (Harvey, 2005; Howard and King, 2008), the economic policies and financial engineering practices (Mirowski, 2013; Zabkowicz and Czech, 2015), and also the social implications (Wacquant, 2001; 2009) which can be covered by the neoliberal umbrella. Since it is an omnibus and underground word often deployed in a pejorative sense, naming neoliberalism does not make it a more consistent, clear-cut and well-articulated ground of analysis. In fact, its specific existence is arguable since some authors reject the term or

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prefer to do not define it (Chossudovsky, 2003; Satz, 2010; Wolin, 2008) even if engaging in similar contestations developed by *self-identified* neoliberal critics. One the one hand, the above perspectives tend to translate different contributions that are focusing and discussing different *smithereens* of what we may call neoliberal rationality.[1] Throughout this chapter, these approaches will be used to portray and provide a more comprehensive analysis of neoliberalism's foundations.

On the other hand, this unclear and uneven nature is the hallmark of neoliberal rationality, a distinctive feature which can to some extent explain the difficulty of defining and materialising it. As I discuss later, this invisible and volatile character is one of the powerful key elements of this rationality, granting the power needed to create and universalise a model of normative reasoning or discursivity (cf. Brown, 2006; 2015; Foucault, 2008) constantly and eclectically redrafted in context-specific ways (Anderson, 2015; Brenner, Peck and Theodore, 2010; Peck, 2010; Ong, 2006; 2007).[2] In other words, the policies, practices, ideologies and effects ascribed

[1] In this chapter, the notion of neoliberalism is often replaced by *neoliberal rationality* because it captures neoliberal's focus as a cognitive scheme (i.e., a mode of reason) or, following a phenomenological approach, as a narrative grid. It is beyond the scope of this chapter to provide an avenue to discuss the differences between these particular approaches and metaphors, used in manifold (although fragmented) contributions which see neoliberalism as a rationality and/or as a frame (for a more detailed discussion see Anderson, 2015). Even so, the distinctive character of the approaches relying on metaphors of 'reasoning' and 'discursivity' must be acknowledged because they translate two irreducible and different epistemological ways of understanding subjectivity and living experience. In general terms, reasoning is typically connected with terms such as 'cognitive processes', 'schemes of thought' and other information-process metaphors. Discursivity is more deeply associated with terms such as meaning structures, discourses, and signifying-subjectifying, and similar constructivist metaphors. Unless driven by the previous contributions of specific authors, this work will favour a discursivity based-approach, as the concept of 'phenomenological roaming' exemplifies.

[2] Note that even rationality can undergo changes over time, like the transition from a productive to an increasingly financialised economy shows (Brown, 2015). Also, other authors have recently highlighted the impure, incomplete and hybrid nature of neoliberalism by advancing conceptualisations such as *neoliberalism as a mobile technology* (cf. Ong, 2006; 2007), *cohabitation* (Clarke, 2008) or *neoliberalisation* (cf. Brenner, Peck and Theodore, 2010; Harvey, 2005; Peck, 2010). For different reasons, I will clarify and return to these conceptions later in this chapter.

to neoliberalism can be multiple — they can even contradict the original and conventional political philosophies attached to it — because they assume different formats depending on the context they are developed in. At the same time, what they have in common is that they obey a market paradigm able to create and to reinforce specific subjectivities and regimes of truth ascertaining what can be spoken and intelligible. Aspiring currently to be a revolutionary, omnipresent and dominant international regime of truth, neoliberal rationality faces the challenge of prompting a governable market rationality within never-ending worlds.

Following these ideas, my argument in this chapter is that neoliberal rationality is modifying and ruling (at least, from a global north perspective) the contemporary views of human dignity by underlining and gradually disseminating a subtle market-mimicking framework for coping with human suffering and social problems. Within this framework, rights serve to provide the minimum standards needed to enter market places. Likewise, human rights can also be developed as *businesses* and caring for others is a corporate social responsibility thanks to increased market value. But this framework goes further than institutional practices; it is founded on and echoed in different micro-discourses of everyday life as people regularly tend to accept and accommodate a specific conception of a dignified human being as they live in accordance to these institutions, ideologies and systems of power spearheading neoliberal rationality. At the end of this work, I briefly emphasise the importance of liberation psychology as a framework to deconstruct neoliberal rationality.

1 Neoliberalisms and histories to tell: An economic medicine? An unexpected and drifted journey?

Historically, neoliberalism is not a mere rediscovery of classical liberal philosophies and economics, generally characterised

by individualism, the naturalisation of the markets, voluntary contracting, minimal government and rule of law (Howard and King, 2008). It is generally rooted from the mid-1970s onwards in countries like United States, the United Kingdom and Chile after an enduring stage of contention in processes like marketization and commodification through various global and national regulatory arrangements (e.g., the Bretton Woods system, welfare systems) (Brenner, Peck and Theodore, 2010; Harvey, 2005). But a closer look at the neoliberal thinking shows that it has been a major global north project since the 1920s:

> Identifiable (and even explicitly self-identifying) forms of neoliberal thinking have existed on both sides of the Atlantic at least since the 1920s, with ordoliberalism in Germany, the reconstruction of Austrian economics, and the first 'Chicago School' around Henry Simons [...] These contrarian moves, it must be remembered, occurred against the backdrop of an almost implacably hostile ideological terrain [...] its journey from the margins to the mainstream was not guided by some secret formula or determinant blueprint; its zigzagging course was improvised and more often than not enabled by crisis. Perplexingly, its success as an ideological project reflects its deeply contractor nature, as a combination of dogmatism and adaptability, strategic intent and opportunistic exploitation, principles and hypocrisy. (Peck, 2010: 10)

An expansionist project was not at first targeted by neoliberal proponents; in fact, it was an embryonic and *counterhegemonic project* living at the margins. But neoliberalism has opportunistically escalated worldwide by emerging in diverse geopolitical and geo-economic conditions as a reaction to different failures and problems (Brenner, Peck and Theodore, 2010), usually fostered through external policies regulated by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank (WB) (Chossudovsky, 2003). Because it has progressively become a hegemonic and market-disciplinary

economic rule, neoliberalism has cemented an apparent interconnected world economy full of promises but also of dissonances, inconsistencies and betrayals.

In political economy, neoliberalism tends to be distinguished by proclaiming markets[3] efficiency wherein market-driven solutions are safeguarding individual freedoms (Harvey, 2005). Everything can be virtually marketable or commodified. Even when recognising possible market failures, proponents of neoliberalism tend to see these as collateral damage (Satz, 2010) or as governable flaws (Peck, 2010). In contrast to classic liberal theories, neoliberalism does not perceive markets and competition as naturalised or granted realms. In fact, neoliberalism tends to be misunderstood as a deregulation-seeking model; rather, it is about a self-contradictory form of regulation-in-denial (Peck, 2010). In order to be operative, markets need to be defined and constrained by regulatory forces like states and the rule of law. Rather than restraining or removing markets' power, national and international, legal and non-legal, public and private regulations serve to preserve and to reinforce it. Rights provisions and procedures, banking and taxation systems are mobilised for different purposes such as jurisdiction, resolution of conflicts or organisation of collective goods like education and justice (Satz, 2010).

Neoliberalism is, then, targeting economics, states and the rule of law alike. Deflected from any kind of democratic commitments, state sovereignty is repeatedly endangered by neoliberal rationality and its economisation code (Brown, 2015). This narrowing process towards the state's regulatory and democratic expectations relies more on soft power than on hard power (Brown, 2015). This means that market-driven policies and practices are not market-imposing

[3] Supported by different social institutions, markets can be defined as the social relations and transactions of certain goods, products or assets. Markets should be differentiated from the market economy. The latter is an abstraction referring to the links and coordination among different markets in time and space (Satz, 2010).

but rather market-disciplinary. Gradual, tactical and insidious recalibrations are vital to develop commodified forms of social life (Peck, 2010).

In this scenario, neoliberalism is entrenched within an international and globalised mission of market-disciplinary policies and practices. Inter-jurisdictional policy transfer and transnational rule-regimes are crucial to the ongoing journey of neoliberal rationality (Brenner, Peck and Theodore, 2010). Economists like Michel Chossudovsky (2003) show how international macroeconomic restructuring — rooted in the core of the neoliberal project — is a form of *economic medicine* engaging routinely in the depreciation of local economies, the usurpation of local resources through privatisation, the escalation of national taxations, the opening up of international fares, and other actions. These external policies are thus underlined as doctrines, pure top-down, strict practices led by the IMF and the WB worldwide. Exercised in the name of structural adjustment, local development, humanitarianism and poverty reduction, debt management and austerity measures are the double-bind of this expansion.

But this strict view of the internationalisation of a world economy is not consensual among neoliberal critics. Some authors (Brenner, Peck and Theodore, 2010; Peck, 2010) focused on *neoliberalisation* as a more appropriate and encompassing conceptualisation. Rather than imagining some prototypical form of neoliberalism, vernacularisation emerges as a grid of analysis, stressing its variegated character (i.e., it produces geo-institutional differences across places, territories and scales) and path-dependent character (i.e., it will inexorably collide with diverse regulatory landscapes, yet they are going to be assimilated in heterogeneous ways). To some extent, both perspectives reflect the evolution, the re-shaping and the paradoxes associated with the expansion and enunciation of the *neoliberalisms*. Firstly, Chossudovsky's work seems to be more aligned with the initial experiments during the neoliberal

dawning in the end of the last century. His work clearly set out to take a broader picture of the emerging project that still did not appear to be everywhere. But a growing academic interest in neoliberalism made it even more invisible. The vernacularised-concept of neoliberalisation is developed within this context when neoliberalism has already been documented and is considered to be in expansion. The *economic medicine* was targeted, but it has come to be unpredictable, volatile and imprecise. In this regard, neoliberalisation tries to make sense of the various practices and implications related to the market-disciplinary roaming in order to geographically undertake neoliberalism as a traveller, a dynamic and invisible compound.

Broadly speaking, some additional practices and implications are: an ever-growing corporate influence on governments, the increase of discrepancies between different countries around the world; the elimination of *dependency cultures* through the reform of taxation systems and introduction of social policies oriented to protect people in more vulnerable situations; the intensification of social inequality; cyclical financial meltdowns; the tremendous environmental impact; the commodification of every human need, and, finally, the financialisation of everyday life (Chossudovsky, 2003; Brown, 2015; Howard and King, 2008; Klein, 2015).

However, a different outlook on neoliberalism's multiple offshoots and fluctuating meanings counted up so far suggests that, although it functions as their cradle, neoliberalism goes far beyond economics, finances, ideologies and politics. Borrowing the ideas of Michel Foucault (2008), Aihwa Ong (2006, 2007), Cornelissen (2015) and Wendy Brown (2006, 2015), I see neoliberalism first and foremost as an order of normative reason, one that is a rationality comprising a different scheme of valuation which creates new specific subjectivities and regimes of truth. This perspective entails comprehending neoliberalism as a biopolitical, discursive and migratory technology of governance.

2 The Neoliberal Order of Normative Reason: How did we come to be *homo oeconomicus*?

The commonplace of neoliberalism as being everywhere can be described through a colonial rationality, a dominant and still-emerging paradigm travelling not only on geographical scales but also in mind-sets or narratives. By portraying neoliberalism as rationality working as a distinct paradigm or a grid of intelligibility I am not rejecting the historical, ideological, theoretical and practical considerations embodying neoliberalism. Instead, I am stressing the scattered schemes of reason (using a cognitive metaphor) or grids of discourse (using a narrative metaphor) guided by economic values and metrics (cf. Brown, 2015; Foucault, 2008). These are binding the creation of subjectivities and regimes of truth within our everyday contemporary discourses. As Wendy Brown (2015: 30) points out, neoliberalism as a rationality accounts for its ascendant character that "takes shape as a governing rationality extending a specific formulation of economic values, practices and metrics to every dimension of human life". Neoliberal rationality thus features a high permeability in order to turn "human beings exhaustedly as market actors, always, only, and everywhere as 'homo oeconomicus'" (Brown, 2015*:* 31).

The translation of neoliberal rationality into mind-sets or narratives should not be seen as a rigid and imposed process. The creation of subjectivities goes with a dynamic and complex process of negotiation (Moane, 2003): individuals are not self-defined, expected to be passive recipients either of power's instituted realities or of oppression. Individuality is created in a pluralistic and heteroglossic space where competing knowledge and other social forces are ever-present. Within this imaginary space, not every scheme of thought or narrative matrix has the same power to reify subjectivity and determine what counts as reality. To a large extent, *homo oeconomicus* — as a distinctive subjectivity and as a

by-product of neoliberal rationality — is turning out to be hegemonic through a semantic ability to cohabit by displacing, subordinating and accommodating principles of justice, cultures, citizenship and other imaginaries (Brown, 2015; Clarke, 2008). *Homo oeconomicus* refers then to the ascendant and preliminary character of a rational and measurable creation of the human being extended and strengthened into previously isolated realms of life (Brenner, Peck and Theodore, 2010; Boltanski and Chiapello, 2005; Peck, 2010). In order to study or to work everyone has to be *homo oeconomicus* since neoliberal rationality is ingrained in settings like education and workplaces and, more recently, seeded in everyday life:

> [neoliberal rationality] is more often enacted through specific techniques of governance, through best practices and legal tweaks [...] [it] governs as [a] sophisticated common sense, a reality principle remaking institutions and human beings everywhere it settles, nestles, and gains affirmation [...] [it] is more termite-like that lion-like… its mode of reason boring in capillary fashion into the trunks and branches of workplaces, schools, public agencies, social and political discourse, and above all, the subject. (Brown, 2015: 35–36)

Nowadays other features of neoliberal rationality should be acknowledged, in particular its universalised (rather than universal) nature and human capital focus (Brown, 2015). The first concerns the non-homogenous, non-imposing and disguised translations of neoliberal rationality across the globe, coalescing its geographical (global/local scales) and phenomenological roaming (audiences and subjects). This observation is important to avoid a totalising and rigid account on how neoliberal rationality is translated and phenomenologically absorbed in different times and spaces (Anderson, 2015). Hence it is compatible with the analysis fostered by conceptualizations like neoliberalisation (Brenner, Peck and Theodore, 2010; Peck, 2010) or neoliberalism as a mobile technology (Ong, 2006, 2007).

Inflected in a Foucauldian and vernacularised-conception of planetary regulation, this latter notion posits the dynamic set of migratory logics of government (Neoliberalism *with a big N*) responsive to contingencies, grammars and strategic entanglements (neoliberalism *with a little n*). Neoliberalism (*with a big N*) is a hegemonic conception of governing which paradoxically needs to be translated (neoliberalism *with a little n*). As Clarke (2008) posits, neoliberalism's most remarkable achievement lies in a double dynamic of translation: different repertories are decoded in the light of neoliberal rationality and then reassembled for audiences and subjects.

This is also the point made by Ben Anderson (2015), with, however a particular interest in *neoliberalism affects* as mediators in this process of translation. In his view, neoliberalism represents an ongoing and unfinished interplay of *feelings of existence* in which "particular neoliberalisms emerge as logics actualized in diverse forms of 'neoliberal reason' [...] reordering government and/or life through market (in the form of competition) via styles of thinking-feeling" (Anderson, 2015: 7). Anderson believes this complex process of affective translation represents a balance between affective atmospheres (i.e., energising the neoliberal reason as it travels and changes) and is accompanied by structures of feeling, these being particularly and puzzlingly translated into concrete policies and projects.

Second, human capital emphasises that neoliberal rationality is not just about wealth generation. *Homo oeconomicus* is not only a figure of production and exchange, it is also a project in itself, a portfolio of value and credit rating (Brown, 2015). Put simply, neoliberal expansionism turned human beings into complete living and breathing assets measured by competitive market value. Self-governable assets in a Foucauldian sense: it is not just what we make and how we are developed in accordance with an economic code, rather that our own sense of being human is always

(and possibly) exposed to self-evaluation and self-regulation in any time and space. Every subject becomes "an entrepreneur, an entrepreneur of himself" (Foucault, 2008: 226).

But in the end, is *homo oeconomicus* no longer about profit-expansion, speculative markets and capital accumulation? It is, certainly, but many failures have been proven in different parts of the world and it has been resisted by other repertories, even though these have been later disregarded, co-opted or accommodated. Neoliberal rationality is always on the move, ready for experimenting and still searching for a suitable place so that it can be everywhere. In this regard, *homo oeconomicus* is as yet the most successful place. Too big to capture, a depoliticised and chameleonic structure of (self)-governmentality, a heteroglossic wordplay that bends the biopolitics of power that helped to create it. To sum up, neoliberalism can be understood as an enmeshment of two major stories. A history of emergence related to birth, representing an exit from the margins and the initial experiments, and an enunciation history embedded in expansionistic market-disciplinary scales and market-mimicking languages and consciousness.

3 The Neoliberal Rule over Human Dignity: What *homo oeconomicus* is worthy of?

The creation of new subjectivities and regimes of truth brings resonance to the discourses about human dignity. Yet there is a sinuous and poorly-articulated connection between neoliberal rationality — as previously defined — and human dignity, depending on neoliberalism's interconnection with different meanings of human dignity. Indeed the ensuing analysis is a general critical exercise about the smithereens of neoliberal rationality which are narrowing and walling in our contemporary conceptions of human dignity, but without problematising human dignity's meanings themselves. In fact, human dignity is an unfixed concept subject to multiple

temporal and spatial circumstances, as well as to different historical, cultural or political-economic forces. Even so, some ontological and outlining features can be pointed out such as the autonomy (i.e., self-determination), the intrinsic value (i.e., human beings as having worth by virtue of existing) and the social value of the human person (i.e., the shared ideals about a *good life*) (cf. McCrudden, 2008; Barroso, 2010). Thus, human dignity is here taken as a broad category comprising the ways in which a *good existence* or a *good life* will be constructed. The ultimate organizing question is: what is *homo oeconomicus* worthy of? The possible answers are mainly absorbed by a global north perspective and they are pointing to institutional (human rights included) and to everyday discourses.

In a more pragmatic perspective, the neoliberal rule over human dignity initially acknowledges the severe impact of markets, corporate capital and financial risk activities on human dignity. Framed in a human rights discourse, in recent years several reports (Caliari *et al*., 2010; Roca and Manta, 2010; Way and Shire, 2009) have converged to the point that financial meltdowns, corporate capital investment and speculative finances are assaulting human rights, especially socioeconomic ones. This process can be grasped in the collusion between corporate investment and business ventures that damages the rights of communities, local workers and individuals (and groups).

A second type of link between finances and human rights arises when we acknowledge how current financial instruments and principles are changing macroeconomic dynamics. Several countries have become more and more dependent on bond investors to carry out social programmes and public services. For instance, the *roll-over risk*, which is the risk that bond investors will refuse to keep buying public debt, holds states to ransom, diverting more of a nation's resources to repay bonds than to use on social expenditure (Dowell-Jones and Kinley, 2011). Remarkably, these criticisms provide visibility to the link between markets and different

social problems, and to the limitations of individualistic and traditional human rights approaches to dealing with socioeconomic entitlements.

However, to fully capture the nature of neoliberal rationality and discuss its rule over human dignity we have to go further. The neoliberal rule over human dignity is also about the creation of phenomenological grids, a bending game of words wherein a market model expansionism arises to deal with social problems and human suffering. Subsequently, it is found in the languages which institutions use to face the problems created by the market rule but without breaking with the neoliberal mode of reason. Languages such as *corporate social responsibility*, *social entrepreneurship* and *human rights businesses* are then vulgarised and uncritically established. Firstly — as I also explore in this chapter with several examples — these languages are often translated into interconnected individual (i.e., personal justifications for self-involvement) and general ideological justifications (i.e., justifications about the common good) for oppressive economic structures (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2005).

Secondly, these languages also meet each other in concrete roamings of neoliberal rationality. Let's take the above-mentioned ideas: *human rights*, *social entrepreneurship* and *corporate social responsibility*. One derived concept of corporate social responsibility is (corporate) social risk. Usually evoked by corporations and other powerful economic actors (e.g., World Bank) this concept serves to endorse the role of corporations in so-called social risk management, that it is the corporations' mission to intervene in an *individualised social risk* by providing minimum guarantees to the most vulnerable subjects (Acselrad and Pinto, 2009). Nonetheless, this idea enhances the ideal of neoliberal subject as a social entrepreneur for himself. As Acselrad and Pinto (2009) discuss later in their paper, social risk management seeks to stimulate in those same individuals the acceptance and self-management of social

risks by adopting a *social entrepreneurship* conduct as the way to deal with individualised social problems. What these languages seem to foster at once is precisely a way for corporations to deal with the unwelcome effects of social problems on their own success and profit-driven interests. The public legitimacy and common-sense backdrop of this process is frequently given by means of an appealing *human rights* discursivity: social risk management embodies corporations' concerns with a compensatory politics for the more fragile individuals and communities.

But corporations, states and institutions and so forth are not safeguarding civic, social or economic entitlements like the social contract or the welfare theorists have designed them. For example, Brown (2015) argues that under neoliberal rationality no minimal guarantee of security, protection or survival can be taken for granted. *Homo oeconomicus* holds no established security; he has to manage his own hazardous existence differently from the old archetypes of social security. Notwithstanding minimal guarantees, language plays an important role in the construction of neoliberal rationality for human dignity. It appears as a sanitized language conforming to market rules and fostering an illusion of equality that paradoxically fortifies and normalises inequality. For instance, looking at the work of Löic Wacquant (1999, 2001, 2009), this minimal rationality seems to be present in the continuous dismantling of the welfare-state in countries of the global north.

Taking the specific case of the United States of America, Wacquant shows that what remains of the welfare-state can be characterised as a *charitable state*. In other words, the social programmes aimed at helping vulnerable people have proved to be inadequate and fragmented after the establishment of neoliberal governmentality. The aim is not to reinforce social bonds or to fight social inequality. These social programmes are just mitigating blatant poverty, making it less visible to public view and demonstrating

the moral compassion society feels for those of its members with less market value, albeit knowing that they deserve this position.

Social insecurity measured by market value is no longer just about the ones pushed to the bottom of the social and economic hierarchies in a classicist sense. As Cornelissen (2015: 16) points out, neoliberal rationality could perhaps turn every human being into an entrepreneur that can be alienated from the structural problems affecting their life, or subject to debt and punishment to different extents, but always insecure:

> We should not make the mistake of thinking that neoliberalism only punishes the unlucky few; because even those who are not sacrificed on the neoliberal altar of the market's divine will be left unsatisfied, depressed, overworked or mentally ill. The neoliberal subject, in sum, is more or less ignorant, more or less indebted, and more or less exposed to abjection and punishment; but always insecure, always submitted to anonymous forces. (Cornelissen, 2015: 16)

The metric model, then, recasts human dignity in a different idiom: there is a certain *amount of dignity* which an individual seems to deserve according to his/her market value or competitive position. An investment metaphor is used to translate the calculation of a *subject of value* (Smith, 1997 *apud* Clarke, 2008). *Homo oeconomicus* is now worthy of a measurable dignity but he himself is not completely able to calculate and grasp it at a given time and place. Therefore he has to take responsibility for a possible precarious or impoverished existence, and also for the failures of the structural arrangements guided by market principles, like the differential access to health care or housing shortages (Lazzarato, 2011).

In everyday life, *homo oeconomicus* is often translated into the ideological keystones used to justify unequal and market driven systems (cf. Jost, Blout, Pfeffer and Hunyady, 2003; Laurin, Gaucher and Kay, 2013). Below, I will also look at some psychosocial thoughts

and dynamics which can help to understand the content and translations of neoliberal rationality in everyday discourses on what it means to be a dignified human. These concepts alone do not account for neoliberal rationality, but they can help to comprehend it and to foster a psychosocial perspective focused on this analysis (Bay-Cheng *et al*., 2015). This discussion is organised around two central contradictions of the *human capital mind-set*: progressive freedom and the (un)equal subject.

3.1 The illusion of progressive freedom and sacrifice: 'real human suffering is something from the past'

In neoliberal rationality, subjectivity is constructed based on pure choice and decision sustained by a complex connection between notions of negative and positive freedom (Satz, 2010). Freedom from interference and hierarchies (negative freedom) in particular is nurtured in order to guarantee that any individual is in control of their own life, a space of (self-)governmentality (positive freedom). Clearly, this argument endorsing neoliberal rationality puts forward an abstract notion of freedom stripped of the pernicious effects of what happens when individuals are left with few social entitlements (Satz, 2010). But in addition, neoliberal rationality also incorporates a tacit notion of progressive freedom. An historical assumption rooted in the eighteenth-century Enlightenment, when, for the first time in recorded history it was possible for human beings to shape their future, which means being free from enslavement and suffering (Wolin, 2008). A simple and fragile promise: to be unconstrained and autonomous individuals. But more often than not, neoliberal subjects are caught up in a scramble of unintelligible forces which are constitutive of the market and restrictive of their own reality. The same market forces which are heuristically and historically deemed as liberators and therefore ought to be safeguarded. An untold version of this history remains undermined,

however. One of the most powerful mechanisms of capitalist ideals is the use of "already-existing" devices or values (Boltanski and Chiapello. 2005: 20) such as liberty and autonomy. Accordingly, these values — their emergence and endorsement — are usually discussed as by-products of the economic development achieved by neoliberal policies and practices. By doing so, liberty and autonomy are withdrawn from the specific reading brought to them by neoliberal rationality. Instead, these are seen as consequences of the success and expansion of a ruling economic order.

By recalling Hayek's work on individualism and economic order, Cornelissen (2015) has emphasised the importance of an *attitude of humility* raised by neoliberal rationality, a moral injunction whereby individuals are grateful for the wisdom and development promoted by the market economy. Driven by the recognition that injustices and biases are things from the past, neoliberal subjects recognised that other systems of social organisation have not operated as equitably as the current self-interested ones. Progressive freedom is thus a project of joint responsibility to be defended. It is a space of promises and commitments constructed in a post-industrial, globalised, post-prejudice and meritocratic world (Bay-Cheng *et al*., 2015).

To certain extent, this can explain the everyday legitimacy of the supposed social sacrifices needed to preserve a system in which we can self-affirm ourselves as free subjects. Market dependency is then visible even when the system is under threat because people feel dependent on the system, so they are more motivated to defend and justify it, being more vulnerable to the idea that their outcomes depend on the system's success (Kay and Zanna, 2009). Interestingly, some authors (e.g., Cornelissen, 2015; Lazzarato, 2011) have expressed this system-dependency in the *debtor subject* which is reinforced as the financialisation of everyday life gets more and more prevalent. This does not concern only money debts but moral debts, too. *Homo oeconomicus* has to refund behaviours,

plans, and subjective commitments. As the Media implicitly tends to portray, markets are trusting us; we have to repay the *mere existence* which markets are gifting us. Whoever feels like a *debtor* is more easily controlled, and surely this requires an "[...] 'ethic-political' constitution in order to transform every individual into an indebted economic subject" (Lazzarato, 2011: 52).

3.2 The (un)equal subject and the normalisation of social inequality: 'everyone is getting what they deserve'

Progressive freedom is coupled with a lack of social obligation, thus overtly and paradoxically legitimising social inequality:

> The conception of freedom is linked with a normatively diminished conception of the person. [...] Neoliberal theory deals with private subjects who 'do and permit they will' according to their own preferences and value orientations [...] they are thus not equipped with any moral sense of social obligation. The legally requisite respect for private liberties that all competitors are equally entitled to is something very different from the equal respect for human worth of each individual. (Habermas, 2001: 94)

Neoliberalism is founded on a putative ideological basis that everyone is equal without any kind of privilege being assigned for gender, race or status. But firstly, individuals are equal inasmuch as they are willing to strive and pursue resources, opportunities and success in a self-interested system of recompenses (Bay-Cheng *et al*., 2015). Secondly, individuals being equally entitled to *minimum guarantees* does not mean they are of equal worth, as Habermas (2001) observes. The illusion of equality remains. Still composed of breathing human assets, social inequality thus becomes a vulgar feature of the world.

In political psychology, the "belief in a just world" (Lerner, 1980) tends to be used to explain why people vindicate and reinforce

systems of inequality. Believing in a just world means that the world is a fair place where people do not simply get what they deserve, they also deserve what they get. An internal locus of control is postulated to explain failures and problems, blaming individuals for the conditions they live in. This is also the argument of meritocracy: we are left free to pursue our goals with effort. Apart from that, we should not expect anything. In this scenario, even minimal public assistance tends to be seen as an advantage taken by the more vulnerable, living at society's expense, and who should be made responsible for their own poor management (Lazzarato, 2011).

Conclusion: Contesting the neoliberal rule over human dignity and the role of psychology

What exists beyond the invisible and clichéd neoliberalism? How can we promote and bolster discourses still not colonialised by neoliberal rationality? If it is too big to capture and too powerful to *just leave*, how can we contest and break this paradigm within our everyday lives? How can we question a rationality which legitimises unequal systems on which we see ourselves so dependent? How can psychology as a self-understood science promoting subjective change reinforce new insights, new discourses, and better metaphors in an age of economic metrics?

The most important figure in liberation psychology, Ignácio Martin-Baró (1994; 1996) would start by stating the importance of building and reinventing realities by changing the way people communicate and act. Born in the 1960s, and spread throughout all Latin America during the 1970s, liberation philosophies have sprouted in the arts, academia, pedagogies, theologies, social and popular movements, and in other areas. Within psychology, one of the most remarkable insights of liberation philosophies is the politicisation of psychology in itself, in particular by using psychological knowledge with political ends to break with dominant and

oppressive socio-economic relations. For liberation psychology, this exercise happens not only in intersubjective or political realms, but also the subject's construction, languages and consciousness.

In his best-known book — *Writings for a Liberation Psychology* — Martin-Baró (1994) contends that new ways of applying psychology to social problems can be developed. He believes that psychology largely serves the interests of the *status quo* because it does not fully addresses social transformation as a whole process requiring changes and the reinvention of discourses (see also Moane, 2003; Montero, 2007). Founded on principles like de-ideologisation (the construction and deconstruction of the ideological underpinnings that sustain oppression), liberalised praxis (the destitution of the binary theory-practice or academia-grassroots) and consciousness, liberation is also an ongoing and unfinished project, but it has a non-colonial, transparent, critical, and participative rationality. Opening up new horizons and new possibilities for action requires a critical pedagogy and a decoding dialogue that go hand-in-hand with the de-ideologisation of everyday experience:

> We know that knowledge is a social construction. Our countries live burdened by the lie of a prevailing discourse that denies, ignores, or disguises essential aspects of reality [construction]. [...] To de-ideologise means to retrieve the original experience of groups and persons and return it to them as objective data. [...] This process of de-ideologising common sense must be realized as much as possible through critical participation in the life of the poorer people, a participation that represents a certain departure from the predominant forms of research and analysis. (Martin-Baró, 1996: 31)

With very little expression outside Latin America, today the praxis of liberation psychology is reduced and underestimated in the global north (Burton and Kagan, 2009). Even so, liberation approaches, methodologies and practices may play an important role

in the contestation of neoliberal rationality because it recognises the problem of subjectification (Teo, 2015) coupled with the intent of social transformation. To push neoliberalism outside its invisible world is to change the way we speak about ourselves as individuals, denaturalising and questioning the thinned and hegemonic visions about what it means to be human. Yet a critical approach to mobilising liberation psychology to deal with the neoliberal rule over human dignity is still needed. Thus far, we should keep in mind its principles and praxis of consciousness-in-action which are central to the contestation of hegemonic versions of human dignity.

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