

PIBCI - Monthly Perspective

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Title: Dear customer

Summary

The transformation from citizens to customers has a long history, and has a tragic end if it is permitted to continue to its logical conclusion.

For decades, the neoliberal order has force fed society with a staple diet of consumerism and competition whilst disregarding a healthy dose of cooperation and community. The driving force behind neoliberalism's need to consume and compete is the simple goal to generate profits through the market system regardless of the impact on the community, the environment, on culture and society. As neoliberalism promotes itself as a 'normal' way of life, it conversely has airbrushed the concept of citizenship out of our collective consciousness and replaced it with the title customer. How did we devolve from the status of citizens to customers? How can we return citizenship to its rightful status along with all of its associated rights and freedoms?

The neoliberal order

Like Covid 19, capitalism continues to morph from one strain into another, each more virulent than the last. The latest strain known as neoliberalism has been perpetuating itself for decades through a combination of ideas, ideology and networks that have gained sway across the major political parties. With the support of wealthy individuals, large corporations, influential think tanks and the corporate owned media, a neoliberal order has manifested itself by infecting society's key institutions. It has implanted itself within the economy, politics, education and culture. With over four decades of living under the neoliberal order, it is fast becoming difficult to imagine a way of life that does not operate without a market system that is fuelled by consumerism and competition.

Goodbye citizen, hello customer?

Neoliberalism mediates everything through the market system, which can be viewed as a giant arena of exchange where individuals attempt to maximise their advantages. This means that to operate effectively within a neoliberal society like ours, everyone needs to

buy and sell something. For example, you may need to buy a car or purchase this week's groceries for your family. You will also need to sell things such as products or services in your small business, or like most Australians sell your time and labour to an employer in exchange for a wage. Whether you are an owner of a West Australian mining corporation or a homeless person in suburban Melbourne, we all need to buy something whether it be a hot drink, shoes, electricity, education, a car or a swimming pool for that new large estate of yours. What the neoliberal order has successfully done on one hand has been to transform us all into customers, believing in a way of life underpinned by consumerism that is propelled to make a profit. On the other hand, it has eliminated our status as citizens along with the drive to support community, cooperation and social progress.

As customers in a neoliberal society, we are required to compete with one another in the market. We compete against each other in jobs market, the housing market, and our children compete in the education market. We also are expected to consume the wide array of products and services churned out by small and large businesses from across the world. As consumers we are encouraged to keep the economy running by eating and purchasing our way through shopping centres every weekend. Directed by the neoliberal ideology, the population's natural instincts of collaboration and community have been reengineered and replacing with the urge to consume. The world's largest tech giants utilise AI machine houses to monitor and analyse our internet searches, reactions and every key stroke. This surveillance data is sold and used by third parties to bombard our devices through sophisticated methods that specifically tailors advertising aimed at prompting us to consume. The science and technology behind such methods may be highly advanced, yet the aim to make us buy more stuff is not.

Over the past four decades, the neoliberal order has implanted in the public's collective consciousness the false narrative that society cannot operate without the means of production, distribution, communication and exchange being owned and operated by private individuals and corporate bodies. It has also reinforced the message that individuals and business must follow the dictates of demand and supply economics. The powerful proponents of the market system demand that government intervention must be kept to a minimum so the mystical market can work its magic. This has resulted in the major political parties being infected with the 'self-hating state syndrome.' Following an election, governments work tirelessly to abdicate their social responsibilities to the electorate by

selling off public assets and ‘partnering’ with corporations to deliver essential public services.

Behind the curtain

To support the market, the major political parties have implemented neoliberal policies to ensure the market system operates unhindered, and corporations largely function without restraint. As such, successive governments have worked hard to crush unions who they view as obstacles to the market system. Struggles for fair wages and decent working conditions through reform and regulations have been watered down or eliminated to ensure the unfettered functioning of the market that consistently feeds profits to corporations. The privatisation of public assets acts as neoliberalism’s lifeblood by transferring wealth from the public to the corporate sector thereby increasing profits. Despite economic woes and upheavals, the past forty years pays testament to the market system’s consistent ability to produce growing numbers of billionaires.

The market system is not an autonomous dynamic fuelled by magic dust that delivers wealth to all who have a go. The market is a giant arena of exchange filled with wealthy individuals and powerful corporations who have insider information, influential networks and the means to manipulate outcomes. Whilst such actors compete, crush or consume opposing players, they also have made an art of exploiting the rest of society. It is vital to understand that each and every day we buy and sell in the market system, we are in fact entering the giant arena of exchange with other parties that are of larger size, hold greater power and wield significant influence over both business and government. Like in the scene from the movie ‘Wizard of Oz’ once the drapes are drawn, we can see that the market system is not a level playing field which is governed by a beneficent mystical power. It is a system that is gamed by large corporations, wealthy individuals, and a succession of sympathetic governments hell-bent on privatising public assets and removing regulations that protect worker’s rights, fair wages and the environment.

A history lesson

The global financial crisis (GFC) of 2008 laid to bare the manifold failures of neoliberalism. The collapse of financial markets, the cascade of bank closures, tumbling stocks and the financial devastation of individuals and communities through no fault of their own clearly highlighted that neoliberalism is a spent force. Through its command of key institutions and support within government and corporations, the neoliberal order had undermined

alternative economic and political systems. As nations sifted through the wreckage of the GFC, governments did not have a viable alternative system to replace the discredited neoliberal approach. Therefore, the cold corpse of neoliberalism was kept functioning despite its death in 2008 - 2009. Failing banks and large corporations deemed 'too big to fail' were able to keep operating via a stream of public funds intravenously fed into their coffers courtesy of governments fearing system collapse. The neoliberal preposition that the market system needs to operate unhindered by state intervention, and function without restraint was proven to be false. State intervention in the form of public funding has kept the neoliberal zombie functioning. Years after the GFC, it continues to feed on public assets. This is in spite of rising living costs, stagnant wages and inflation. Meanwhile, our largest corporations continue to make larger and larger profits, and the number of billionaires continues to grow.

Democracy Vs neoliberalism

Neoliberalism promotes itself as a staunch supporter of freedom and democracy. Yet, the kind of freedom and democracy it encourages needs to be analysed. Through the narrow neoliberal lens, it defines freedom on the basis of trade, movement (people and finance), freedom of communication and freedom to make a profit. By controlling the means of production, distribution, communication and exchange, neoliberal freedoms have provided those in power with the ability to exploit people, communities and the environment via the market system. The types of freedom that neoliberalism does not support include freedom from hunger, freedom from homelessness, freedom from pollution, exploitation and freedom from inequality.

At its heart, the neoliberal order supports the rich and powerful by enhancing freedoms for international and homegrown oligarchs and corporations so they may increase their wealth at the expense of the rest of society. Having embedded itself in society's key institutions, neoliberalism has spread within the shell of democracy, protected by the perception that it supports the very system it seeks to undermine. For decades, neoliberal policies have facilitated the shift from 'power of the people' to the 'power of money'. It has shifted power out of parliament and into the boardrooms of large corporations free of 'democratic constraints.' It has worked against the majority by supporting the wealthy 1% who continue to minimise paying taxes and increase their profits in the comfort of a climate marked by stagnant wages and failing social services.

Without strong public opposition based on social, economic and political alternatives, the neoliberal order continues to be fully supported by the ALP and LNP duopoly. The continued partnering and sale of public assets to the private sector further promotes the situation where big businesses have become 'too big to fail.' The undermining of the public service further proves that governments have limited interest in having a hand in the nation's future. This has set us on the course of disaster in which neoliberal policies have helped to accelerate the present crisis. It is little wonder that we are experiencing a conflagration of catastrophes that include the pandemic, climate emergency, economic downturn and an escalating conflict that threatens nuclear annihilation.

Back to the future

Rejecting the title 'customer' is a vital first step towards rolling back the neoliberal order and strengthening our democracy based on active citizenship. Unlike the term customer which merely affords us the right to whinge and complain, the title citizen is built on a meaningful platform of expectations and duties. A citizen is expected to exercise agency by actively questioning those in power and holding them accountable for their actions. For far too long Australians have fallen under the neoliberal spell holding onto the belief that we can find wealth and prosperity through consumption and competition. Today, we are living the neoliberal 'dream' that has delivered multiple challenges for both our nation and the international community. The formula of competing, consuming and making a profit regardless of the social and environmental impact is no longer a viable option. The multiple disasters created and accelerated by neoliberalism cannot be fixed by neoliberalism. Its core tenets of free trade, free movement of people, free movement of finance and communications all are being challenged or reversed.

For several years, free trade has been under growing threat as nations are shoring up their turf by establishing trade barriers and heightening levels of protectionism. Today's global climate is witnessing economic blocs honing their trade barriers as tensions ratchet upwards across the major powers.

The free movement of people has been curtailed by many nations which Australia has been a key player. Prompted by the perpetual cascade of conflicts across the globe, migrants and refugees from across the world have faced the imposition of stricter laws and physical barriers by nations placing a halt on the entry of people from other countries. The rising tensions between the major powers, the raging conflict in eastern Europe and the global

economic downturn is set to place further barriers on the movement of people around the world.

In relation to the free movement of finance, the West's imposition of financial sanctions on nations across the world is lengthy. China, Cuba, Iran, Venezuela, Afghanistan, Iraq, Nicaragua, Yemen, Central African Republic, Sudan, Ethiopia and most recently Russia and but some of the nations on the West's long list. The growing list severely undermines neoliberalism's basis for the unrestricted movement of finance across the globe. With tensions continuing to rise between western nations and the economic powerhouse that is China, it is likely that further restrictions on financial transactions will further undermine a core neoliberal pillar.

In terms of free communications, it is evident that the dreams of a world connected by one system are rapidly diminishing. Over the past 20 years, tech giants have rapidly taken over the primary internet platforms. Western concerns over China and the proxy war in Ukraine have accelerated the restrictions and closure of communications via the internet. Given the current circumstances, the world is moving towards the development of alternative platforms for multiple parts of the world.

The upshot of the manifold crisis, reactions and developments all threaten the fundamental tenets of the neoliberal order, flagging that neoliberalism has peaked and is in a state of rapid decay. It has delivered a casualised workforce, mass surveillance, perpetual conflict, a rising number of oligarchs, powerful corporations with trillions in assets and spiralling inequality. This set of circumstances is no longer sustainable. It is time to unplug ourselves from the self-serving ideology that is neoliberalism and take control of the political and social agenda.

Help grow a viable alternative social and political movement by joining PIBCI today.

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