

# Neoliberal Appetites

## A governance recipe in five easy pieces

### 1. You Are What You Swallow

I want to begin with a little anecdote. Having lived outside the US for fifteen years now, one of the things you wonder about when you come back is, what exactly am I gonna eat? The food system in Europe has not progressed to the degree of industrialization that's long been common in the US. Things aren't so uniformly processed, people sit down for lunch, cows still graze and they do let some chickens run around, though the situation is definitely changing. But in the US, it's really on another level. And if you know something about current conditions – if you read a book like *Fast Food Nation*, or if you hear that Bush appointed a former cattlemen's lobbyist as undersecretary of the FDA – then you really start to wonder what's in your burger. Which makes it harder to take that first bite.

Staying with friends in Williamsburg, I saw there was a health-food store right outside their door. What's more, it was open 24 hours. Fantastic, I thought, the USA's improving! So on a Sunday morning I availed myself and started picking out a few items. But what I discovered was new to me: rich people's food! 4 bucks for a half a pint of cream, \$3 if you only wanted a quart of milk, a small bag of granola was about \$6 and I passed on everything else.

Since then I've noticed that in Chicago, everyone teaching at the universities shops at a kind of modernized health-food supermarket called Whole Foods, and what's more, they call it Whole Paycheck. So this brings me to the question of the day. How does our society get us to swallow this two-tiered food system? And how does it get us to tolerate such massive inequalities, across the board, in practically every domain of social existence?

It's disconcerting to find that increasing levels of awareness and increasing ranges of choice become a factor, not of heightened perception, but of blindness to the overall conditions of the world around us. The blindness particularly concerns anything that would have to do with equality, even though equality remains one of the stated central values of democratic societies.

This kind of self-instituted blindness has become a mode of governance. By governance I mean, not the direct process of governing through legislation, public programs and enforcement of rules, but rather a more diffuse process. Governance describes the ways that individuals and organizations spontaneously adjust their behavior to each other, within a specific environment. The current neoliberal philosophy, which has been in effect for about 25 or 30 years now, stresses governance over government. It claims that civil society can take care of itself, with a minimum of regulation. One of its big selling points is that it shuns any ideology – that is, any totalizing explanation of the society, and above all, any attempt to guide to guide society in a specific direction. Instead, it claims that society is going precisely in the directions that *you* want it to. The specifically neoliberal conception of society constantly tries to convince the citizens that they are at the helm, making all the choices from which their lives concretely result.

Now, that claim is a very strong one. It even has a moral content – the notion of self-reliance, of responsibility for your own destiny – and that has given it a surprising power over people's hearts and minds. If you like, you can go as far as Michel Foucault does, and say that neoliberalism tends to install a new mindset or a new governmentality in our heads – in other words, a new common sense, a new rationality for dealing with all the decisions we have to make in a complex society.

## **2. Information Utopia**

Let's try to understand this new rationality. In its most basic form, neoliberal governmentality consists of two commandments and a promise. The first commandment: *Seek the best information available to you.* The second commandment: *Make the choice that corresponds best to your personal interests.* The promise: *Society will then reshape itself to fit your choice.*

Now, does that sound familiar? Is there a place where social relations work like that? I would say that theoretically at least, there is such a place. These two commandments and the promise connected to them are derived from a theory of the market, where the nature, quality, quantity and price of the goods for sale are said to vary according to the demands of the buyers. If you scratch the surface of this theory, you

will find some very curious things.

The first thing is that this theory conceives the buyer, or the subject of the marketplace, as being possessed of a sovereign self-interest, which is entirely unique, which cannot be determined in advance, and yet which varies across time. Sovereign self-interest is what motivates the subject of the marketplace; it's the prime mover of the entire market, it's the source of market dynamics.

From this concept of the buyer derive the two key questions of neoliberal theory: The first one claims to be scientific. It asks, how does a market optimally respond to the multiple and variable self-interest that characterizes its subjects? The second one has a prescriptive or normative intent. It asks, how can democratic pluralism work most efficiently, pragmatically, to satisfy the citizens' best interests?

The theory of neoliberal governance starts with the proposition that the market can only provide an optimal response to the desire of its subjects by permitting the clearest, most transparent and yet at the same time, most efficient circulation of information between the buyers and those other participants in the marketplace which are the sellers. It's interesting to realize the extent to which pure neoliberalism is bound up with information theory, as developed by Friedrich von Hayek in particular. The basic unit of information is the price. The buyer will seek the lowest possible price for each individual item; the seller will adjust both the availability of particular kinds of goods, and their price, in order to seek the highest possible margin of profit on the total volume of sales. The behavior of everyone in the marketplace, and therefore, the kinds and quantities of goods that will be available there, will ultimately be determined by the fluctuation of the prices; and the competition of a multiplicity of participants looking to find and to furnish the best prices will guarantee the efficiency of the system. Now, that model of market behavior will become the normative definition of democracy itself in the neoliberal theory of social relations.

It's important to note that the theory of the market requires a multiplicity of sellers, because of the multiple and changing nature of the demand, that is, of the buyer's self-interest. No single seller could possibly gather enough information to respond adequately to all the varieties of self-interest. The efficiency of the marketplace depends on the multiplicity of information-gathering sellers, just as the dynamics of the market

depends on the multiplicity of self-interested buyers.

So, if neoliberals talk about the market as being free, it is first of all because the market is supposed to both permit and reflect the free expression of the individual's self-interest. Goods are sold to satisfy this self-interest; competition exists to lend greater efficiency to this process of satisfying the buyer's self-interest. But the market is also considered free because it allows for the free flow of information. Prices are available to anyone; information about the quality of goods can be provided whenever the seller deems fit, and above all, whenever the buyer demands it; and information about the desires of the buyer can be gathered by any seller who wishes to improve efficiency and therefore, lower prices. The free flow of information allows the seller to address the free choice of the buyer, who always has the last word. That's the information society in a nutshell. That's one of the reasons for the tremendous expansion of the world-wide web, for instance. But what I want to show now is that the World-Wide-Wal-Mart, with its extraordinary information system and its incredible just-in-time restocking system, has really become the model of neoliberal democracy.

### **3. Citizen on the Market**

What has happened over the last 30 years, since the mid-70s, is that the model of the market has increasingly been applied to the governance of society. And this has brought a number of significant changes to the postwar social democracies.

Formerly, the citizen was considered as having responsibilities and increasingly, as having rights. The responsibilities were to respect the law, to work during adult life, and above all, to go to war if the nation called on you. The rights were to an expanding range of social services: education, housing, health care, unemployment insurance, retirement. These were considered as ways of making the formal claim to equality, which lies at the very basis of democracy, into something substantial. Elections were conceived as the arena in which the citizens exercised their political liberty, in the form of a choice over the proper balance between obligations and rights. This was the postwar welfare state.

Neoliberalism is basically a response to what was conceived as the excessive growth of the welfare state. What the neoliberal mode of governing has done to treat social services as a marketplace, by offering the citizen-client a choice of various options,

ranging from a minimum service which may be provided free by the government, all the way to a theoretically optimum service which will always be provided by the market, which in practice means the big corporations. A whole panoply of public-private deals have sprung up in between the state-run sector and the market. Private businesses are subcontracted to perform public services; private individuals can also be compensated with public money, or with tax breaks, when they go to a corporation to purchase what was formerly a public service. The citizen has fewer obligations; you are no longer called upon by universal conscription to go to war. Elections have become a kind of marketplace where, every few years, prices are compared with quality; or in other words, the proposed level of taxation is compared with the services rendered, and above all, with the performance of the private economy where most services are actually obtained. If taxes are low, streets are clean, growth is high and jobs are abundant, the party in power is voted back in.

It's the economy, stupid, as one of our great Democratic presidents learned to say. That's what neoliberal governance is all about.

The thing that's most important to understand here is that the citizen no longer has rights, but interests. Now in particular – and this is where we're eventually going to get back to what you eat – the citizen is supposed to have great interest in keeping him or herself healthy, educated and up-to-date, because this is the way to get the best price for oneself on the job market. The citizen, as a recipient of services in health and nourishment and education and insurance and entertainment, is now conceived as the entrepreneur of his or herself, making wise or unwise investments in his or her human capital, and selling the results for a more or less advantageous price. This is the theory of a guy named Gary Becker, who taught in Chicago and is the author of a book entitled *Human Capital*. What does that mean, not just to have but to *be* capital?

The person who must not only choose what they like on the marketplace, but also put their time up for sale on the marketplace, can only consider themselves, their own subjectivity, the quality of their own time, as a capital investment. Invest wisely in the capital of yourself. Gather the best information possible about quality and prices, and then make the best choice possible. But watch out: the wise investment will always be with a private service supplier, a supplier of health or education or leisure or insurance,

because the government is too big to handle information well and therefore can only provide an average, i.e. inferior service. And then when it comes to selling yourself, i.e. selling your health and education and capacity to entertain, the best price will always come from a private employer, for similar reasons. Only a private employer is flexible enough to get the best position for your particular skills and aptitudes on the great marketplace of life. Thus the only way for the government to address itself to the liberty of the citizen is by counseling the citizen to have recourse to the market, by counseling the citizen to buy and sell herself on the market.

#### **4. Choose Your Poison!**

What this means is that by addressing itself to the liberty and free choice of the individual, neoliberal management produces democratic consent to the privatization of everything. If you ever wondered why welfare has disappeared, the answer is very simple. The logic of the marketplace has made government appear extremely inefficient in satisfying the self-interest of the individual. On the contrary, the same logic makes private enterprise appear inherently favorable to individual free choice – even when the development of the two, private enterprise and free choice, leads to ecological catastrophes, war, Wal-Mart, and the degradation of everyday living conditions for the collectivity, as it is doing today.

Now, I think we all know that the idea of governance without government is a myth. But this myth is very important for our ruling class to protect. What neoliberal government does to protect this myth of an unregulated society, is simply to avoid, as far as possible, setting up laws that directly restrict you from doing things. You're not ostensibly forced to swallow anything, in fact. You can do what you please, as long as you can afford it. What government will do is to exert its direct influence, not on the individual players, but on the rules of the social game. At the behest of enormous industrial lobbies, it will create a very complex subsidy system for American farmers, essentially in order to encourage them to purchase ever more expensive equipment allowing them to farm ever larger parcels of land and produce ever greater quantities of perfectly awful chemicalized food which can be profitably packed and distributed by a few highly industrialized companies; and then market forces will naturally produce relatively

cheap precooked food which is a great thing to have, after all, in cities like New York or Chicago where so many people are working on flextime schedules for subminimum wages. And at the same time, if it becomes apparent that certain people would like to eat much better food, that information will circulate and the market will provide for that, at a higher price level of course. But God forbid that the government should provide for infrastructure like transportation, cooperative storage rooms and coolers, free use of public property and other such arrangements that would make it possible for local organic farmers to supply New York and Chicago residents with something decent to eat. Because that would mean interfering with the magic of the marketplace and restricting your freedom of choice.

Now why do people accept what has really become a disastrous food system in the USA? Why do people accept a health-care system that is tremendously expensive and tremendously unequal when it comes to providing services for the entire population? Why do people accept to trade an expensive public school system for an equally expensive public prison system? One of the answers to this question is that the relentless individualization of every issue inhibits any attempt to look at the big picture, the whole society, the entire population. You can't see the forest for the trees – or the wide world for the web. And this is one of the reasons for trying to map out the system, trying to study the infrastructure that neoliberal globalization is really based on. But another answer, closer to home, is that people accept all these things because the system always offers a better alternative for the individual who is dissatisfied. In other words, the system has successfully justified itself by offering freedom of choice. And that justification is at the very heart of neoliberal governmentality.

To see this neoliberal governmentality in action, just take yourself down to a store like Whole Foods. Look at all the good stuff they have to eat down there. Consider how much better you would feel if you weren't all burnt out on junk food, and how much better you would look if you ate some of those organic vegetables. Aren't you starting to get somewhere in life? Doesn't someone like yourself deserve a better diet? Don't you want to forget about all those depressing products like Twinkies and Frosties and Taco Bell and Chicken McNuggets and all that crap that was fed to you when you were growing up in the suburbs? Why not take a little better care of yourself? Won't you be able to

concentrate better on your job? Couldn't you make more money if you were just a little healthier?

By focusing the attention of the most active sectors of the national population on the constantly offered opportunity to satisfy their sovereign self-interest, and, by so doing, improve their human capital and advance in the social hierarchy, neoliberal governance has succeeded in maintaining a kind of self-instituted blindness to the increasing degradation of the conditions under which we live together.

## **5. The Question of Taste**

It then becomes possible to see that a revolt against neoliberalism takes place whenever people organize themselves in a way that is not directed and structured by the primary motivation of an interest that can be satisfied by a market. In other words, the subjects of a revolt against neoliberalism cannot be self-interested individuals, and they cannot evaluate their decisions according to monetary information, that is to say, according to the prices of things. Instead, they have to adjust their relations to each other in another way and on another basis.

Who, then, can be the subject of a revolt against neoliberalism? What are the motivations of subjects in revolt? How do they organize themselves? On what basis do they evaluate their efforts? Toward what ends do they work? Why and how are they able to oppose the system that places them within the extremely unequal class-structure of neoliberalism?

I think these questions are worth asking whenever you set out on a cultural or political project these days. Because the those two kinds of projects are actually inseparable. Our tastes – our appetites – are one of the ways we fit into society. You can have a taste for different qualities of social relations, you can have various understandings of what it means to be yourself, what it implies, what consequences it has for others. Neoliberal governmentality works at exactly this level. So the notion, and even more, the *sensation* of sovereign self-interest is something that one can play with. It's at stake, for instance, in a cultural and political project about food, how it's produced, how it's distributed, what its economy is and what its ecology could be. The point is not one of moralism, of self-abnegation, it's not the idea that you should sacrifice yourself because



it's the only right thing to do. It's more a matter of what you want to buy into. What you want to swallow. And also how it tastes. It's a matter of the taste for the kind of society you might want to live in.