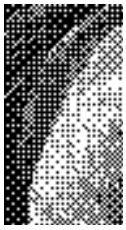
why don't we break free



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During the 1980s, nations already reeling from the debt crisis were coerced into enacting what came to be known as the "Washington Consensus". Under the banner of structural adjustment programs, privatization, trade liberalization, and austerity, developing countries found themselves effectively bound to a neoliberal doctrine. This was not a polite suggestion but a stark condition for receiving financial aid. From that moment on, neoliberalism spilled into every corner of daily life, shaping policy and academia alike, and tightening its grip on our institutions.

By the 1990s, the dominant departments of economics in universities across the globe had largely embraced neoliberalism as if it were the only credible worldview. In scholarly circles, discussions of market efficiency, rational choice theory, and quantitative precision drowned out the more humanist, social, and critical approaches. Private foundations, fiercely loyal to free-market ideals, churned out research, publications, and conferences that further entrenched the neoliberal perspective. In this climate, "the market" has become a sacred term, overshadowing the complexity of our societies.

This unwavering commitment to profit logic made non-market institutions increasingly vulnerable. Public financing for universities stagnated; in many cases, it was slashed outright. Turning to corporate donors, industry partnerships, and skyrocketing tuition fees became the new norm. With this shift, academic work began bending to the will of the marketplace; cost-benefit analysis, corporate-driven projects, and managerial oversight became the ultimate yardsticks. No longer do universities function primarily as guardians of knowledge for its own sake. Instead, they serve a neoliberal deity, compelled to demonstrate "market impact" at every turn. Government research funds often favor projects that promote the neoliberal development agenda, leaving radical critiques and social theory to languish in obscurity.

Yet, let us be clear, this is not a singular condemnation of universities. They are but one example among many of how deeply neoliberal imperatives have embedded themselves into our lives. Even our most rebellious literature and activism are stunted by the free-market mindset. How can we speak of emancipation when our every step is circumscribed by the very system we seek to dismantle?

The spread of neoliberalism since the 1980s stands as one of the most decisive transformations of our age. We see its traces everywhere. I highlight universities, ostensibly the vanguard of critical thought, to illustrate a painful irony: the very institutions that should foster liberatory ideas have, by and large, become engines of market conformity.

All of this begs the question:

"Why don't we break free?"

Many of us share the desire to escape this suffocating free-market vocabulary and reclaim the revolutionary potential that once thrived in the academic realm. The ascendancy of neoliberalism, in my view, strangles the emergence of new literature that might dare to imagine life beyond capitalist oppression. Indeed, neoliberal ideology serves as the intellectual shield of capitalist profiteering, enabling the plunder of resources and labor from the working class. It hastens reckless economic growth and corrodes the quality of our collective lives.

Why, then, if this system is so plainly harmful, do we not rise up in collective rebellion and unseat it once and for all? The answer lies in the all-encompassing ideological prison that late-stage capitalism has constructed- so complete is this enclosure that many remain unaware of their shackles.

At this juncture, three fundamental concepts illuminate how and why so many of us become entangled in our own subjugation, even when the system at hand undermines our interests. Each concept, rooted in the works of Gramsci, Foucault, and Baudrillard, exposes in a different dimension of power's silent march revealing how domination seeps into our minds and everyday actions.

First, consider Gramsci's notion of hegemony. Gramsci argued that a ruling class does more than enforce its will by force; it manufactures the very "common sense" that pervades society. In our neoliberal era, the idea that the free market is the most efficient and fair organizer of human affairs has become an article of faith. Mass media, school curricula, think tanks, and daily conversations all reinforce the idea that this model is not merely a policy choice but the natural order of things. Those who raise doubts are brushed aside as out of touch or radical, and even people who suffer from these policies often cling to the logic they are steeped in. This is cultural hegemony in action, an almost unconscious acceptance of the market imperative that renders alternatives invisible.

Next, there is Foucault's exploration of disciplinary power. In his work on the Panopticon, Foucault described how modern society polices itself through surveillance, measurement, and the fear of being judged. In our neoliberal context, the metrics we use to gauge success, performance reviews, productivity charts,and social media validation, become instruments of self-discipline. The possibility of failing to meet these metrics hovers over us like an ever-watchful eye. We obey not because someone holds a whip, but because we internalize the standards of success and strive to meet them without question. The weight of constant assessment restricts our capacity for independent thought and, by extension, our potential to imagine a life untethered from market constraints.

Finally, Baudrillard's concept of hyperreality speaks to the loss of any reliable distinction between the world and its representations. From consumer ads to reality TV, we are surrounded by simulacra, images that refer only to other images, leaving us adrift from tangible reality. Symbols like the 'perfect job', the 'ideal body', or the 'successful life' can overwhelm genuine human experiences. The spectacle of success often eclipses the harsher truths of economic inequality and social stratification. As a result, the neoliberal narrative becomes woven into our fantasies and desires, making the quest for profit and perpetual consumption appear to us as normal, even virtuous.

These three concepts explain, in more ways than we could ever imagine, how neoliberalism and the free-market imperative sustain capitalism's machinery, not merely by exploiting our labor or dominating physical spaces, but by lodging themselves deep in our minds. Under the neoliberal doctrine, capitalism rationalizes its own existence, quietly infiltrating our imagination so thoroughly that many of us no longer dare, or even wish, to conceive a future beyond what we have now. Mark Fisher observed that it has become easier to imagine the end of the world than to imagine an alternative to capitalism. That observation points to the near-total success of neoliberalism in embedding itself as the sole unquestionable reality.

From our thoughts and actions to our subconscious drives, nearly every dimension of our being can be harnessed to serve the tyranny of capital. The overwhelming pressure to internalize and unconsciously consent to our own subjugation is a stark indicator of late-stage capitalism. Having exhausted so much in the way of material resources, the system now seeks to colonize the abstract realms of the human psyche. While I have highlighted higher education as a tragic example, originally a foundry of free thought and knowledge, now often reduced to a market appendage, this is not a call for total despair.

Sometimes, the most potent revolutionary act resides in the quiet realization that we are, in many respects, steamrolled by the system. This shall not be a cry of resignation, but rather a call to awareness, an unadorned view of just how deeply entrenched our subjugation has become. By coming face to face with this harsh truth, we begin to dismantle the internal barriers that keep us acquiescent. The unspoken yet powerful desire for freedom, like the dream of liberation flickering within an enslaved mind, becomes the bedrock of resistance. Recognizing the full scale of our predicament is what nourishes our capacity to act; it reclaims space for our imagination, that crucial spark capable of guiding our hands to tear down the chains that hold us.

To rebel is to think, to question, and to long for liberation in a world that often discourages all three. It means cultivating the curiosity to see beyond the horizon that capitalism has set for us and reclaiming the audacity to believe in other possibilities. Breaking from passivity in this way is, in itself, an act of resistance, reminding us that our minds, our desires, and our collective will are not the systems to possess.

As for the notion that capitalism may be nearing its terminal crisis, I do not necessarily share the optimism of certain social critics. Capitalism has proven adept at reinventing itself, contorting to new forms that prolong its reign. Each reinvention, however, introduces contradictions that can become ever more glaring. Perhaps it will not end in one grand, cataclysmic collapse, but the fractures are there for all to see, and they only widen with time.

The true invitation, then, is not to sit idly by in hopes of an inevitable downfall. Rather, it is to confront reality with unwavering clarity, to think critically, to question the very foundations of the system, and to dare to envision a new kind of freedom, one that transcends the stifling confines of a reality defined by endless profit-seeking. There is no promise that such a vision will be easily attained, but without it, we remain perpetual servants to a machine that shows no signs of stopping on its own. In daring to imagine something else, we seize the courage to shape it.

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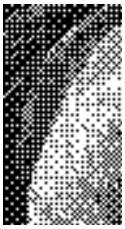
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