



The Neoliberal Death: Why Neoliberalism Is Killing American Democracy and How It Can Be Fixed

Matthew Klinger, Muhlenberg College

Political-economic thought has evolved significantly over the past 300 hundred years, from when the US was first founded until now. The newest shift in political-economic thought has been to neoliberalism, a system of thought that first became prevalent in the 1970s and has only continued to grow. Yet, despite neoliberalism promising unprecedented economic growth and a new expansion of freedom, those promises have fallen well short of their expectations. Instead, the country has been plagued with inequality and a government ill-equipped to deal with the problems of the modern era. Perhaps most concerning, however, has been the effect that neoliberalism has had on democracy. Despite promising the expansion of freedom and American democracy, democratic citizenship has eroded, leaving the country vulnerable. To show this, a brief history of political-economic thought will be examined: The ideas of Adam Smith and Karl Marx will be traced through to American political-economic thought in the early to mid-20th century and the subsequent rise of neoliberalism. Then, a philosophical critique of both neoliberal and Marxist ideology will be presented on the grounds that they are incompatible with the ideals written in the Constitution. Lastly, an alternative to modern neoliberal political-economic thought will be laid out that examines the best way to structure the government's role in the economy in order for America's Constitutional ideals to be realized. Ultimately, that analysis will demonstrate that in order to fully expand American democracy, a middle-road solution has to be implemented that uses the ideals of the US Constitution to ensure a thriving democracy.

II: A Brief History of political-economic Thought and Policy

In the 1700s, Britain had the mercantilism system where it was believed that the wealth of a country was directly tied to the amount of gold and silver it had. Therefore, the British government heavily regulated imports and exports in order to maximize the profits coming from Britain's colonies. As a result, many laws were passed that sought to incentivize exporting goods to other countries while simultaneously restricting imports. These policies caused a number of problems for the consumer as the government appointed various trade companies to be in charge of the exports and imports, with most if not all transactions of goods flowing through those companies. In effect, the British government had created legal monopolies where prices were fixed by a single domineering company; consumers had no choice but to buy their goods from companies who had no incentive to lower prices or maintain a high quality of goods. As a result, the economy became an inefficient means to allocate resources, hurting the consumer and ultimately preventing free enterprise from being exercised.

It was in this economic environment that Adam Smith wrote his book, the *Wealth of Nations*. Seeing the deficiencies of the mercantilist system, with its encouragement of monopolies and the heavy hand of the government in enforcing those monopolies, Smith advocated for a new and revolutionary form of economic exchange: the free market. In this system, rather than relying on

a government-appointed trade company to sell products, manufacturers could sell their products directly to consumers without a middleman. There would be no restrictions on imports or exports, allowing countries to specialize. For Smith, this was the most efficient way to handle exchange; removing a government-controlled distributor allowed both consumers and sellers to negotiate their prices directly, lowering costs and eliminating the high tariffs that discouraged international trade.

Smith's ideas fully hinged on the premise that people were naturally selfish, and that given the opportunity to negotiate prices directly, they would seek first their own gain. Smith, therefore, saw the free market as a means to use people's selfish desires for the good of society. Indeed, Smith saw the market as an institution that would naturally guide individual selfish gain for the common good when he writes that, "...by directing that industry in such a manner as its produce may be of the greatest value, he intends only his own gain, and he is in this, as in many other cases, led by an invisible hand to promote an end which was no part of his intention. Nor is it always the worse for the society that it was no part of it. By pursuing his own interest he frequently promotes that of the society more effectively than when he really intends to promote it."¹ For Smith, the market not only helps provide for the common good but as a by-product does a better job of achieving it than when it was set as a goal under the mercantile system. Where the mercantile system emphasized domestic production, which, due to inefficiencies, would end up with higher prices and worse quality, people pursuing their own selfish gain on the free market could ensure that people not only have lower prices but that the quality of the goods they buy are better too. But for Smith, the common good was not just quality goods for low prices, though that was certainly one aspect. Rather, Smith saw the individual as desiring safety and a good government first and recognized that government-sanctioned monopolies not only made the government inefficient but prone to corruption as well². Therefore, Smith saw the problems that arose due to a lack of competition and devised a system that allowed for free enterprise apart from the government—helping achieve a more efficient state that could better ensure the safety of its citizens.

Despite Smith's objections to a government-run mercantile system, he still believed that the government had a real and important role to play in society and the economy. Smith lays out three main duties of the sovereign: defending against other countries, protecting citizens against oppression and injustice, and establishing and maintaining public works and basic welfare³. Thus, despite Smith being the father of modern capitalism, he is not the father of laissez-faire; while the government was to reduce the barriers to free trade and stop orchestrating every facet of trade and the economy, it still had an active role in regulating the free market and making up for its deficiencies when it failed to effectively utilize self-interest for the common good. While the idea of government remedying for the free market might seem contradictory to Smith's claim that the market promotes the common good more efficiently than the government, Smith never promised that the market would be a perfect solution or substitute for the deficiencies of the mercantile system; he simply claimed that it would be an improvement—that does not preclude the possibility of shortcomings.

The industrial revolution saw an enormous growth in capitalism, with it bringing a host of problems. Where Smith tried to remedy the problems of the mercantile system by establishing capitalism and the free market, Marx tried to remedy the problems with the capitalist system through his development of the communist system. The chief problem, for Marx, was worker

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exploitation. According to Marx, exploitation was more than just factory owners cutting costs for their own benefit by paying workers poorly and maintaining unsafe working conditions. Instead, Marx saw the capitalist wage system itself as exploitative, regardless of wage or condition. In the wage system, the worker had to sell his labor in order to live. As a result, all the worker was left with was their wage while the owners got to keep all of the product to do with it as they pleased. Moreover, the capitalist was then able to keep whatever surplus they had from selling the product, while the worker saw little of it. And, because the workers had to sell themselves for a wage in order to survive, they had no option other than to continue to work in the factory, alienated from their work, and removed from the profits of their labor. In other words, the capitalist system used the inequality inherent within it to ensure its continued existence; it reproduced itself. Thus, capitalism and the wage system, in Marx's eyes, had become like a "sorcerer who is no longer able to control the powers of the nether world whom he has called up by his spells."⁴ Instead of the invisible hand effortlessly guiding self-interest in a manner that benefited everyone, it had become a cursed hand that orchestrated inequality amidst selfish pursuit. The promise of mutual benefit from individual pursuits outlined in Smith's *Wealth of Nations* had, according to Marx, become an uncontrollable force leading to inequality rather than mutual benefit. The capitalist system, with its mechanisms of self-interest, inherently neglected the common good, and thus could never achieve the purpose for which it had been created.

Marx, in his *Communist Manifesto*, writes that "the theory of the Communists may be summed up in the single sentence: Abolition of private property."⁵ In essence, the communist system was a radical way to achieve equality; with the abolition of private ownership over the means of production, there could be no exploitative wage system where the worker was alienated from the work he produced, gaining only his wage while the owner walked away with a valuable product that the worker had labored hard to make. The capitalist system ultimately demeaned and de-incentivized labor for the worker. Marx furthers his argument for the publicization of the means of production when responding to critics of his plan to abolish private property by saying "do you mean the property of the petty artisan and of the small peasant, a form of property that preceded the bourgeois form? There is no need to abolish that; the development of industry has to a great extent already destroyed it, and is still destroying it daily."⁶ For Marx, capitalism already destroyed the old forms of small property ownership, much like a Walmart putting local shops out of business; capitalism, when left unchecked, naturally leads to monopolies. Thus, capitalism did not actually guide selfish ambition for good through the promotion of free enterprise but instead created monopolies of big corporations that, despite pursuing their own self-interest, did not lead to the common good. Additionally, Marx saw the communist system as a means to provide for the common good through an expansion of freedom. Where capitalism had allowed business owners to prey on their workers for their own gain, a system where everything was publicly owned meant that no one person could make a decision. Instead, workers could control their own means of production through democratic meetings to ensure equality. Thus, Marx saw the communist system as one that could expand freedom by promoting democracy in all spheres of life, not just the government.

Marx, like Smith, also had a vision for what role the government was to play in his new system. However, unlike Smith who saw the role of the government increasing as capitalism grew, Marx saw the need for government decrease as the communist system established itself. The end goal of Marx's system was for the government to become obsolete; as ownership became public rather than private, society would be compelled to care for each other, and the need for a central

entity to police the system would diminish. However, in order to get to that phase, heavy government intervention was initially needed.

For Marx, the government would initially take control of the means of production previously held by individuals and corporations. It would then be put in the hands of the public, with the government consisting of the most advanced members of the working class. In addition, since it would be unlikely that wealthy owners would voluntarily give up their factories, the need for force would be necessary. The government could provide that force, either in the form of taxation or other more violent approaches. Then, after the government had seized the means of production, it would be in charge of running the businesses and industries that had formerly been owned by private individuals. Rather than the market dictating what was made and for how much it sold as it had in a capitalist system, the government and the workers would be the ones in charge of production and pricing. However, this level of government intervention was supposed to be temporary. Over time, as decisions on production were made publicly, the need for a central authority to oversee those decisions would fade until the system was more or less running itself. There have been numerous experiments with the communist system, the most notable being the USSR in the 20th century. And, while communist ideology never came to power in the United States, elements of Marx's thoughts did come to light in the US.

Marx heavily advocated for the working class, taking note of their oppression and exploitation, and then proposing solutions to those problems. America during the progressive era in the late 19th and early 20th century, while it did not push for a Marxist revolution, did see the same problems that Marx wrote about and sought to rectify them. The 1900s to the 1960s saw numerous changes in political-economic thought in the US, largely in response to the inequality that arose from the laissez-faire policies of the late 19th century. The progressive era challenged the notion that the free market left alone would deliver the most efficient allocation of resources. Relaxed regulations in the 1800s led to the development of numerous monopolies that hurt consumers and ultimately rendered the free market system ineffective. Presidents such as Teddy Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson wanted government oversight over the economy to increase, at least temporarily, until the free market was under control. This was epitomized by the nationalization of industry during WWI when free enterprise ceased to exist. Thus, the early 1900s and the progressive era saw the development of the welfare state. And, while subsequent presidents would seek to roll back many of the welfare-state ideas, the sentiment of government oversight being needed remained.

Herbert Hoover, while often attributed as a laissez-faire president, was a progressive at heart. He saw the role of the government as one that needed to be active, advocating for a state that helped people help themselves; in essence, Hoover believed that people ought to "pull themselves up by their bootstraps," but recognized that not all people had them. Thus, by helping people help themselves, Hoover's goal was to give people the resources they needed in order to work their way into a better life. By helping people help themselves, Hoover sought to respect classical economics and the free market while also acknowledging the inequalities that arose with the industrial state. Ultimately, the great depression made it difficult for his economic policies to gain ground, paving the way for FDR and the New Deal era.

FDR and his New Deal was a major turning point in American political-economic thought, expanding the welfare state and changing the notion of what true freedom was. Prior to the New

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Deal, there was a general consensus that there was an inverse relationship between individual liberty and the power of the state. However, the flourishing of democracy amidst an increase in government during the New Deal era challenged that belief. In addition, the New Deal marked a switch from an idea of rugged individualism to collective need. Where before welfare was seen as something to help only certain people struggling in poverty, the New Deal opened the idea of everyone needing to have access to welfare, and everyone benefiting from it. While following the conclusion of WWII, more conservative presidents began to reduce the amount of welfare established during the New Deal era, the recognition of the government's role in providing a robust safety net with corporate oversight and regulation remained up until the 1970s. Thus, the progressive era and its policies of government oversight set the tone for the policies adopted for the majority of the 20th century.

Where the first sixty years of the 1900s saw a shift to more interventionist economic policies with stricter labor policies and larger welfare programs, the 1970s and 1980s brought the emergence of neoliberalism, a set of economic theories developed and propagated by Friedrich Hayek and Milton Friedman. While at its core, neoliberal ideas were based on a belief in market superiority, they also responded to the political climate of the day—anti-communist Cold War sentiments. Daniel Stedman Jones, in his book *Masters of the Universe*, writes that neoliberalism “was defined by an emphasis on what these thinkers saw as the crucial relationship between economic and political liberty, a relationship that also placed neoliberal ideas at the center of both civil rights and Cold War debates about the nature of freedom.”⁷ Thus, by linking political and economic freedom together, neoliberalism added a sense of urgency to the idea that markets had to be left unregulated by the government. For Friedman, it was either free markets or communism, with little in between. Yet, to achieve his neoliberal goals, Friedman first had to dismantle the economic ideologies that developed in the first part of the 1900s, and his first victim was labor laws.

For Friedman, the corporation was a passive bystander responding only to market forces; it was an innocent agent of the capitalist system. According to his economic theories, “the only market actor accused of misusing power was the trade union, which was uniformly treated as illegitimate, whereas any other instance of market power, as in the case of monopoly or oligopoly, was either treated as harmless and temporary or attributed to some nefarious state policy.”⁸ This reveals the core tenets of neoliberalism: the corporation—the foundation of the free market—was put first and on a pedestal, to be revered and protected at all costs. Labor unions demanding fair wages and working conditions were seen as a disruption to the free market while corporations involved in fraudulent schemes to gain wealth at the expense of the worker were excused. Thus, according to neoliberal thought, as long as the entity was part of the free market, it could do nothing wrong. In that way, Friedman's ideas were in direct opposition to Marxism which declared that greedy capitalist corporations were to blame for the mistreatment of workers amidst their selfish pursuits. In addition, Friedman's ideas ran contrary to much of the discourse in the late 19th and early 20th centuries that emphasized labor protections and trade unions that improved working environments and raised pay. In this way, neoliberalism seemingly sought to undo much of the policies and economic theories developed just a half-century earlier.

However, neoliberalism's idea that ultimate freedom was found in economic freedom did not just manifest itself in the dismantling of labor protection. Instead, neoliberal theorists sought to bring

the ideas of the market into all facets of life. The Chicago School of Economics—the place from which neoliberal ideas originated—argued that “free market analyses should occupy new fiefdoms, such as law, regulation, the family, welfare, and sex, that had previously been considered outside the realm of markets.”⁹ Thus, another premise of neoliberalism is seen: the market, because of its superiority, should be extended to all spheres of life and society because it will increase efficiency and make all things profitable. Quite literally, neoliberalism reduces all things to the “bottom line”. The ultimate goal of neoliberalism was for the state and its purposes and priorities to become indistinguishable from that of modern firms. And they succeeded.¹⁰ For neoliberals, if the corporation could do no wrong, then it was the perfect entity after which to model the government. And, observing what neoliberalism viewed the role of the government to be, that was exactly the case.

Jones writes that “[Friedman] presented a vision of a state that played a central role in the establishment and maintenance of the free market.”¹¹ In that way, neoliberalism was not merely a return to laissez-faire capitalism. Wendy Brown expands on this, writing that “neoliberalism is not about the state leaving the economy alone. Rather, neoliberalism activates the state on behalf of the economy, not to undertake economic functions or to intervene in economic effects, but rather to facilitate economic competition and growth to... ‘regulate society by market.’”¹² In that sense, neoliberalism viewed the role of the government to be an entity that governed *for* the economy. Its primary role was not to defend the country, prevent injustice, or maintain public works and welfare. It was not a government for the people but for the economy and the corporation. And, in a system of thought that saw political freedom as wholly dependent on economic freedom, fully freeing the private sector was seen as the best way to ensure freedom for the rest of society. The idolization of free market principles led to the government structuring itself in such a way as to reflect those values. The chief value that became reflected in society was the superiority of competition, something that became reflected in the governing policies of Ronald Reagan.

Ronald Reagan came to power in the 1980s during a period of economic strife. A combination of slow economic growth and high inflation—stagflation—left Americans disenchanted with the welfare state of New Deal liberalism and open to a new way of running the economy. Reagan filled that desire. Promising to revive the economy, Reagan quickly reduced taxes while simultaneously cutting various government welfare programs implemented by FDR, Johnson, and others. In its place, Reagan envisioned a new approach to fighting poverty—one centered on the market. For Reagan, “the problem of how to help disadvantaged people and poor communities was to be addressed through incentives, deregulation, and the creation and stimulation of opportunities in the private market.”¹³ Where before, the role of providing affordable housing and alleviating poverty fell on the government, Reagan argued that it was a problem best solved by the private market. This thinking was in line with neoliberal thought; “in the neoliberal view... the state was unnecessary to the delivery of the “good life” because the market left alone would do it better.”¹⁴ The result was a government policy that was largely hands-off in providing housing for the poor. Instead, they loosened regulations surrounding low-income housing in order to incentivize private developers to build cheap housing they could then rent at affordable prices. For Reagan, by encouraging competition, the free market would find ways to cut costs in places the government could not, thus finding innovative ways to reduce the cost of housing. Yet, while this may have reduced building costs, it also left it up to the market to

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determine how much to charge the poor for housing, ultimately leaving those most disadvantaged and hurt by the market system at its mercy once again.

Reagan also embodied neoliberal thought when it came to labor protection laws. In 1981, air traffic controllers went on strike after negotiations between the government and the union over pay and working conditions failed to reach a conclusion. Reagan, undeterred by the strike, ordered that air traffic controllers had forty-eight hours to report to work unless they wanted to be fired. When the union refused to budge, Reagan fired every worker that failed to show up, and then wrote into law that they could not be rehired for the rest of their lives. Reagan's firing of over 11,000 non-compliant air traffic control workers signified the shift in economic policies from earlier in the century. Gone was the power of the union that demanded fair wages. Instead, the union was seen as an enemy of the neoliberal system, and thus fully expendable. When the new priority was an uninterrupted free market, the government had every right to protect the interests of the private sector. Since the air traffic control strike hurt airlines—who were private corporations—it was the government's duty to end the strike, even if that came at the expense of the workers. Reagan's policies, both for low-income housing and for labor, fully reflected the neoliberal ideals of market superiority, and a government role shifted from one that governed *for* the economy and not *because* of the economy.

III: A Critique of Marxist and Neoliberal political-economic Policies

Twelve years after the Declaration of Independence was signed, and five years after the Revolutionary War ended, the US signed and ratified the Constitution, a document that still stands to this day. The Constitution was established as the guiding document for the construction of a new democratic government, laying out the purposes and roles of the new government. This is best seen in the preamble to the Constitution, which states “we the people of the United States, in Order to form a more perfect Union, establish Justice, insure domestic Tranquility, provide for the common defense, promote the general Welfare, and secure the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our Posterity, do ordain and establish this Constitution for the United States of America.”¹⁵ In the preamble, the founders of the US clearly state the main goals and purposes for the new government: establish a just society, insure domestic peace, defend the country, promote general well-being, and secure freedom for all citizens. All those goals were established to help create and sustain a thriving democracy. And, while these goals are meant to guide the laws and the governing system of the US, it is evident that the US has failed to achieve the goals it set out for itself, in turn hurting American democracy. Although Neoliberalism has not helped achieve those goals, Marxist ideas of communism are equally incompatible. However, to fully understand why, it is first necessary to gain a better understanding of what each of those goals mean, as well as what the foundations of democracy are.

The first goal established in the preamble is to establish justice. This meant creating a nation built on sound moral principles and allowing every citizen to have a fair trial. Doing so helped establish democracy by demonstrating the equal protection that a democratic system of governance was meant to provide. The second goal the framers of the constitution created was to insure domestic tranquility. This meant having a society that sought to minimize disunity and discontentment among citizens to prevent uprisings or rebellions against the government. This was key: if society was extremely polarized, and citizens were deeply divided, then it would be difficult to establish policies that benefited the whole country rather than those with the strongest

voices. The third goal set forth in the Constitution is to provide for the common defense. Doing so means mobilizing, training, and maintaining a strong military capable of defending the country against others wanting to harm the US. This goal is key to the establishment of democracy; the US can only remain a democracy as long as it remains a free and independent country. The fourth goal that was written in the preamble was to promote the general welfare. This meant that it was the duty of the federal government to ensure that people's basic needs such as access to food, shelter, and clothing were met. Some basic level of welfare was needed to ensure a civically engaged society; if society were to become greatly unequal with many failing to meet their basic needs, then it would not only discourage those struggling to vote to be active politically, but it would also leave the US susceptible to violent uprisings against those more affluent in society, directly threatening domestic tranquility. The last goal set out in the Constitution was to secure the Blessings of liberty. This meant protecting the freedoms of US citizens, both political, social, and economic. Democracy is built on the notion of freedom, and if liberty could not be ensured in the country, then neither could democracy. Understanding each of the goals established in the constitution is key to understanding the deficiencies of both neoliberalism and communism. However, to fully grasp the extent to which neoliberal and communist thought not only fail to achieve those ideals but also threaten the very democracy they were meant to support, it is necessary to understand what the key parts of a democratic system are.

The bedrock of democracy is civic engagement. Democracy is built on the idea of participation, where everyone has their voice heard equally. When that civic engagement starts to erode, then so does the quality of democracy. In addition, that civic engagement has to come from citizens' reasoned debates and critical thinking, where they decide for themselves what is best for the country, without outside influence. Brown points out that "if voters have the ultimate influence, but corporations seek to persuade them via super PACS... voters are but a medium through which corporations wield their political influence."¹⁶ In describing how democracy is being eroded, Brown demonstrates another foundation of democracy: democracy is built on the principle of rule by the people, and thus all decisions, political, economic, and social, have to be made by the citizens. Stephen Metcalf, in his article in *The Guardian*, summarizes this idea well, stating that "the use of one's individual reflective powers is reason; the collective use of these reflective powers is public reason; the use of public reason to make law and policy is democracy. When we provide reasons for our actions and beliefs, we bring ourselves into being: individually and collectively, we decide who and what we are."¹⁷ If a corporation is allowed to spend millions of dollars persuading constituents through a series of ads to vote for the candidate that best serves the company's interests, then it no longer becomes rule by and for the people through collective reason, but rather by the corporation and for the corporation. Rousseau takes it one step further, stating that "as soon as public service ceases to be the chief business of the citizens, and they would rather serve with their money than their persons, the state is not far from its fall... in a country that is truly free, citizens do everything with their own arms and nothing by means of money."¹⁸ Here, another founding principle of democracy is seen: not only does democracy require civic engagement, but it also requires a degree of patriotism; those two ideas go hand-in-hand. Without a sense of devotion to the nation, there is little incentive to participate in elections, run for office, or even defend the country. If the only thing that binds citizens to America is money, then the US becomes nothing more than a land of mercenaries rather than a nation of citizens. Thus, it is seen that in order for democracy to work, citizens need to be civically

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engaged, and that engagement needs to come as a result of national pride and patriotism rather than external financial motives.

Neoliberalism, with its focus on economizing everything, has eroded those two key democratic principles, leaving American democracy vulnerable and, in many ways, failing to live up to the goals that the founding fathers set for the nation in the constitution. However, to understand how neoliberalism has failed America, it is first necessary to understand why neoliberals believed it was what would save American democracy, and how they came to and supported those conclusions by misunderstanding Adam Smith. Jones writes that a “need for a recognizable history led neoliberals to appeal to the authority of Smith...because it lent intellectual heft to theories that contradicted the political assumptions of the postwar period. The supposed seamless line from Smith to Hayek and Friedman thus became a rhetorical strategy as much as a belief in the heritage itself.”¹⁹ It is true that Smith’s ideas for a market-based economy are the core tenet of neoliberalism, but neoliberal thinkers took Adam Smith’s ideas out of context and thus used them in ways that they were never intended to be used. It is undeniable that *Wealth of Nations* is adamant about the supremacy of the market; Warren Samuels, in his book *Erasing the Invisible Hand*, says “let there be no mistake about acknowledging the obvious: Adam Smith most distinctively stood for private enterprise, private property, self-interest, voluntary exchange, the limited state, and the market.”²⁰ However, Smith’s advocacy for the free market was in comparison to the government-heavy approach of the mercantile system, and Smith’s critique of government intervention and his advocacy for market supremacy was only meant to be interpreted in that context. On its own, it would appear that neoliberal thinkers were not entirely far off appealing to the authority of Adam Smith in *Wealth of Nations*. However, when Smith’s ideas in *Wealth of Nations* are read within the context of Smith’s other book, *Theories of Moral Sentiments*, it becomes clear that the neoliberal appeal to Adam Smith was misguided at best. Jones writes that “Smith’s conception of the moral individual, essential to his thought, Friedman avoided altogether. Smith was concerned that people’s “disposition to admire the rich and the great, and to despise or neglect persons of poor and mean condition,” led to “the corruption of our moral sentiments.”²¹ Focusing exclusively on gaining a competitive edge in the marketplace and venerating market ideals was dangerous in Smith’s eyes. It might have been the most efficient way of conducting business, but that did not mean the system was without fault. Neoliberal theorists appealed to the idea propagated in Smith’s work because it conveniently fit their narrative of government intervention being evil, the market being superior, and competition being the best organizer of society—all three being necessary presumptions to support their claims that total economic freedom is needed to achieve political freedom. Yet, taking the ideas from *Wealth of Nations* out of context only meant that neoliberal ideas were built on faulty premises, dooming what was supposed to be a revolutionary mechanism for obtaining new levels of freedom from the very start.

The most important idea that neoliberals took from Adam Smith was his metaphor of the invisible hand. For neoliberals, it became the key piece of evidence against government regulations, and the chief reason for allowing the market to run itself with no government to police the system except, perhaps, for preventing the formation of monopolies. Indeed, Jones writes that “the implication of Smith’s invisible hand, in the neoliberal view, was that the state was unnecessary to the delivery of the “good life” because the market left alone would do it better.” However, to interpret the invisible hand metaphor in that way is false. As Metcalf states in his article, “Smith was, until the end of his life, an 18th-century moralist. He thought the

market could be justified only in light of individual virtue, and he was anxious that a society governed by nothing but transactional self-interest was no society at all.”²² Samuels clarifies this further, saying that “In Smith, we have both self-interested behavior and the control of self-interest by moral and legal rules. Self-interest exists only within social control.”²³ It is thus clear that, contrary to neoliberal interpretations of the *Wealth of Nations*, Smith never intended the market to be a stand-alone institution. He saw it as a way, when combined with the government, to use selfish desires in a way that benefits everyone. Thus, to reduce the invisible hand to nothing more than a stand-alone mechanism that magically transformed selfish ambition into collective good was a false interpretation and one that makes clear why neoliberal ideas have ultimately not fulfilled their promise. Samuels succinctly summarizes the neoliberal misinterpretation by stating that “Smith is quite obviously pro-market but not in a way that deems market solutions optimal per se. He does not propose, let alone establish, the exclusive or a priori presumptive optimality of market solutions. Rather, he articulates the role of the market as a regulatory system that performs either well or not, depending on the role of institutions and other forces of social control.”²⁴ Neoliberal thought was not entirely wrong for using Smith as the basis for their arguments and policies. However, they forgot the most important caveat in Smith’s work: the free market works, but only to the extent that the guardrails keeping it in check do. That oversight, combined with the neoliberal belief that economic and political freedom go hand-in-hand, has wreaked havoc on the US democratic system, not only causing it to fail to live up to the standards it set for itself in the constitution, but also undermining the very principles that are most crucial to democracy today.

The biggest problem with neoliberalism is its over-economization of everything. Brown writes that “neoliberal rationality disseminates the model of the market to all dominions and activities—even where money is not at issue—and configures human beings exhaustively as market actors.”²⁵ It was the goal of the architects of neoliberal thought to bring the ideas of free market analysis to all areas of life, not just those traditionally associated with the free market. And, looking back fifty years later, that goal has been accomplished. However, that goal has come at a cost. Over-economizing everything has hurt American democracy in five specific ways, both by eroding the key foundations of democracy and by preventing the goals outlined in the constitution from being fulfilled. Those five things are a state no longer working for the people, the transformation of the citizen from one defined by patriotic duty to one defined by economic productivity, the failure to promote the general welfare, the loss of justice, and a lack of liberty. Each of those will now be explored in turn.

First, neoliberalism and the economization of everything have led to the state no longer working for the people. Because of the development of neoliberalism, Brown writes that “the state’s table of purposes and priorities has become indistinguishable from that of modern firms... for firms and the state alike, competitive positioning and stock or credit rating are primary.”²⁶ Jones, when describing the rise of neoliberalism, states that for neoliberal writers, “politics and government formed an arena in which the same principles and incentives applied as those that were relevant to the market and the wider economy.”²⁷ The goal of the corporation is to make money for its investors and stockholders, and doing so often means cutting costs to increase profit margins. It also means that companies are constantly in competition with one another to gain influence in the marketplace, attract new customers, and increase investment in the company. However, true to Adam Smith’s idea of the free market, this is all done for selfish gain rather than the good of the employees or even for the consumer. All that matters is the bottom line, and success means

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increasing efficiency, output, and profit. Thus, for the state to become indistinguishable from modern firms and adopt the same principles as the free market demonstrates a government that is no longer created to serve the citizens. Neoliberalism has made it so the government is more concerned with the bottom line and making a profit than actually fulfilling its duties of working for the people. Brown notes that “for Aristotle... governing must always tend to the good of the governed, and wealth is never to become its own end.”²⁸ In neoliberalism, this idea is flipped. The goal of the state is no longer to tend for the good of the governed. Rather, wealth and efficiency have *become* the end, and the state must do everything it can to support and encourage that end. Creating a state that rules for the economy rather than as a result of it ultimately erodes what it means to be a citizen. Because of this, democratic citizenry is no longer defined by civic engagement driven by patriotic duty, but rather as an instrument for the state to grow its economy.

The redefinition of the democratic citizen as one driven by profit instead of a love for the country further threatens democracy. Brown, when defining neoliberalism, describes it as not only an economic theory, “but as a governing rationality that disseminates market values and metrics to every sphere of life and construes the human itself exclusively as *homo oeconomicus*... it formulates everything, everywhere, in terms of capital investment and appreciation, including and especially humans themselves.”²⁹ The term “*homo oeconomicus*” is used to describe US citizens as the economic man, focused on profit and efficiency. This term contrasts “*homo politicus*,” a term that means the political man, focused on civic engagement. By disseminating market values not only to sectors outside the private market but also to humans directly, neoliberalism causes an identity shift from one focused on the collective good to one interested in selfish gain. This becomes especially damaging when that identity shift is legislated and implemented by the government itself. The result is a state that pushes citizens to be producers first and citizens second, making it so that “politics and the provision of public services [are] increasingly seen in terms of market processes rather than in terms of citizenship rights.”³⁰ This hyper-economization becomes particularly dangerous when considering Rousseau's theory that once citizens become interested in the country's affairs not out of patriotic duty but out of a desire for money, the nation comes close to collapse. Citizens seeing politics and public services not through a lens of a Constitutional right but through the lens of a market economy appears to be perilously close to what Rousseau warns against. In addition, by casting every actor and activity in market terms, the political meaning of citizenship is vanquished, erasing the crucial distinction between economic and political orders essential to popular sovereignty.³¹ Thus, by making citizenship a devotion to profit over the country, the want to be politically active is erased, undermining the very principle that makes democracy and popular sovereignty possible. Neoliberalism, with its remaking of Americans into market actors rather than democratic citizens, ultimately hurts democracy, the very thing it was meant to protect.

Because neoliberalism makes the state work for the economy instead of the people, the ability of the US to achieve the goals set out in the constitution is also hampered, and this is first seen in the government's failure to promote the general welfare. Adam Smith wrote that “wherever there is great property, there is great inequality...the necessity of civil government gradually grows up with the acquisition of valuable property.”³² Here, Smith realizes that as the overall wealth of a country grows, that wealth is not created equally. Inevitably there will be some who prosper because of that increase in wealth, and others who will be worse off. Subsequently, Smith understands that it is the role of the government to protect those who fall behind, and thus as the

economy grows, so must the government in order to protect the general welfare. This is where neoliberalism fails again. Neoliberalism seeks to diminish the size of the government while simultaneously cutting taxes and incentivizing corporations to create economic growth. On paper, this seems like a good idea, though in practice it does not work. Because of the neoliberal commitment to government deregulation, the problem of how to help disadvantaged people and poor communities was addressed through incentives, deregulation, and the creation and stimulation of opportunities in the private market.³³ Thus, it can immediately be seen why the government fails to promote the general welfare: neoliberalism takes away the inability of the government to take care of inequality by putting its solution in the hands of the private sector. And, to make matters worse, the private sector does a poor job of providing a solution. Jones writes that Reagan's neoliberal policies to fix the affordable housing crises "had not been solved by the turn to the private sector. In fact, the opposite had occurred."³⁴ Not only did neoliberalism fail to provide a solution to the problems of inequality, but it ultimately made the issue worse. This makes sense. It was the market that had caused the affordability crisis in the first place, and therefore unlikely that using the same practices that created the problem to solve the problem would be effective. Thus, by reducing the size of the government and replacing it with the private sector, neoliberalism prevented the government from being able to promote the general welfare.

Neoliberalism has also led to a loss of justice, primarily seen in the way that the government now creates and passes laws in Congress, as well as rulings in the Supreme Court. In many ways, the *Citizens United v FEC* case was the epitome of neoliberal thought. The case cemented an extended definition of a citizen to include a corporation, unequivocally giving them the same first amendment rights as an individual. Brown notes that "neoliberal rationality constitutes the hermeneutics through which constitutional principles are read and applied in *Citizens United* and in this way enacts the economization of politics through law."³⁵ *Citizens United* is the epitome of neoliberal reason because it takes the constitution—the guiding principles of our nation—and uses it to advance its economic agenda of privatization and the dissolution of the independent public sector. Doing so is dangerous; it indicates that neoliberalism has seeped into our reading of the constitution, causing us to interpret the law and our guiding principles in a way they were never meant to. *Citizens United* also marked the elevation of corporate rights over the assurance of democratic principles. By declaring that a corporation has the same power as a person, our democracy does not come out of a fulfillment of a contract between individual and state but state and corporation. Doing so erodes justice because it transforms the justice system from one built to protect citizens against injustice to one that empowers corporations to act in ways that not only subvert democracy but hurt citizens. This is especially true when it comes to legislation. Following the financial crash of 2008, a series of economic regulations were passed by Congress. Shockingly, the new finance regulation was largely written by the very corporations that had caused the crash. However, in the neoliberal era, this was not seen as bending public interests to private interests.³⁶ Thus, by declaring that corporations and people were equal while simultaneously degrading the value of a government apart from the economy, neoliberalism creates a political environment where market players controlling legislation is no longer corruption: it is expected. Legislation should be created to protect the rights of individuals and expand democracy. Yet, because of neoliberalism, justice is bent toward providing protection for the private sector and large corporations at the expense of the individual. If the state exists as an outside force to administer justice, what does it mean for the future of the country if the government and its institutions are instead used as a means to advance selfish agendas rather

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than the collective good? Neoliberalism's embrace of the corporation above the citizen threatens democracy, and as a result, puts at stake the freedom that democratic rule brings.

The last goal outlined in the constitution that neoliberalism has prevented from being achieved is securing the blessings of liberty. This has happened in two ways. First, by elevating the rights of the corporation over the rights of the citizen, neoliberalism has tied people to the inequalities of the free market. Secondly, by economizing everything, neoliberalism has enslaved people to their own selfish desires. Michael Sandel, in his book *Justice*, writes that "the free market is not all that free. Consider an extreme case: A homeless person sleeping under a bridge may have chosen, in some sense, to do so; but we would not necessarily consider his choice to be a free one."³⁷ Ever-rising housing costs and business practices that emphasize profit over ethics often leave those most vulnerable at the mercy of market fluctuations, and thus while the free market may provide freedom from a tyrannical government, the market still, in many ways, dictates people's decisions in ways that they otherwise would not have wanted. A homeless individual might have had a choice in where they wanted to sleep—whether it was under a bridge, on a park bench, or perhaps in a shelter. However, they likely did not have a choice in whether or not they wanted to be homeless. Therefore, even someone who works hard and lives responsibly, through no fault of their own, may end up on the streets. Neoliberalism, with its emphasis on the free market, either overlooks this possibility or labels it a necessary evil in order to gain political freedom. Yet, if neoliberal freedom comes from economic freedom, it raises the question of whether someone whose life is tied completely to an external financial system is actually experiencing freedom or simply oppression under another form of tyranny. However, being completely dictated by the market is not the only way that neoliberal capitalism has enslaved people. Isaiah Berlin argued that while freedom can be considered having no outside force acting on an individual, it can also be defined as being free from passions that prevent one from fulfilling their destiny or living their best life. Therefore, Berlin believed that one role of the government was to help its citizens be free from their own desires and barriers to achieving their best selves.³⁸ Similarly, Rousseau argued that "humans are the only creatures capable of generating complex orders of domination from their needs, of enslaving themselves by giving free rein to [economic desires], by letting it overtake their personalities, social relations, and politics."³⁹ Both Berlin and Rousseau reinforce the idea that neoliberalism does not make people freer but less free because it allows them to become entangled in their drive for success; in order for people to flourish, boundaries and limits are needed. Instead, by reducing people to solely their abilities to gain profit, neoliberalism fully gives people away to their selfish desires, exchanging oppression from the government for oppression from the self. Therefore, neoliberalism also fails to secure the blessings of liberty it promised, leaving America well short of achieving the goals that it laid out for itself in the Constitution.

Given how neoliberalism threatens US democracy and prevents it from achieving the goals that the writers of the Constitution set out for the nation by putting the corporation on a pedestal and orienting everything in terms of profit, some may argue that the best way for America to achieve its ideals would be to abolish the free market and instead change to a collectivist society modeled after Marxist principles. However, a Marxist system is equally unable to help the US achieve its ideals, as it too fails to promote justice and secure the blessings of liberty. In addition, in order to reach the ultimate goals of a communist state, some level of authoritarianism is necessary, which is completely antithetical to the government as the founding fathers envisioned it.

As stated earlier, the end goal of the Marxist state was the elimination of the government through its obsolescence. However, in the places where communism was tried, the end result was a government that got progressively bigger and more oppressive rather than smaller. The best example of this is in the USSR. Many of the wealthy industrialists in both Russia and its satellite states were angry that their property had been taken from them and publicized. And, because they had not technically broken laws by owning property, they were justified in demanding to get their property back. However, rather than using the justice system as a means of legal recourse to obtain their property or clear their names, the justice system was weaponized against them. In the Czech Republic, the newly elected communist officials began holding sham trials such as the Slansky trial that accused those who opposed the state of crimes they did not commit. They then convicted them based on fabricated or faulty evidence in trials that had been predetermined rather than decided by an unbiased jury of their fellow citizens.⁴⁰ When citizens complained against an increasing surveillance state, a series of laws were implemented that further delegitimized the legal system, turning it into a political tool to gain control rather than pursue equal protection under the law. While it is true that the redistribution of wealth and the publicization of the means of production may have created greater economic equality, political equality was significantly decreased. Therefore, while Marxist ideas by themselves may not result in the corruption of justice, the practical implementations of Marxist ideals by past communist regimes necessitated a heavy-handed government for at least some period of time, and that increase in government oversight often result in the justice system being manipulated in order to achieve the stated goals of equality.

In addition to neglecting the establishment of justice through the use of sham trials, the way that communism has been implemented has also failed to secure the blessings of liberty through the abandonment of democracy. When the communist party assumed power in the Czech Republic in the late 1940s, they immediately moved to ban all opposition parties and make the country a one-party state. In addition, when elections were held, people were handed ballots that had been pre-filled, and any who changed their ballot were arrested. All of those measures were done in the name of economic freedom and equality in an effort to maintain better conditions for the working class and prevent their exploitation. However, the means used to achieve those goals were ultimately not justified. Rather, it just meant that everyone, whether a factory worker or someone that had previously owned the means of production, was equally oppressed, except this time by the political system rather than the economic system. This led to the emergence of the slogan “we pretend to work and they pretend to pay us.”⁴¹ In a communist system where the state ran the economy, it was generally not the business that paid workers but the state. Thus, that slogan demonstrates that the government often failed to pay its workers, leaving them without pay for long periods of time. And, because of the one-party system, citizens could not advocate for change at the ballot box, and those who tried to were punished. Democracy cannot thrive on a one-party system, much less one with predetermined elections; it is built on the principle that the people can freely elect their representatives by casting their vote for whoever they think will do the best job advocating for their interests. Therefore, the way that communism was implemented in the USSR and its satellite states like the Czech Republic shows that the communist system, because of the necessity of a strong central government to achieve its end goals, would not be a compatible solution to achieve the ideals laid out in the constitution. Not only does away with the liberty that is idealized in the document, but does away with democracy—the very way that liberty was to be achieved.

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However, in addition to not being compatible with the Constitution and its ideals, a communist system also would not work for reasons of practicality, both in terms of its historical success and its compatibility with human nature. An examination of both reveals that implementing a communist system in the US would not be a viable replacement for the current neoliberal system, and would instead do more harm than good. First, the historical success of the communist system will be looked at.

The most notable countries that have tried to implement communism have been the USSR and its satellite states, China, Vietnam, and North Korea. The USSR lasted for about 70 years, but during the time the communist party was in power, economic strife was common, and political freedom was largely nonexistent. Eventually, those problems were too large for the government and the communist system to overcome, leading to the communist government collapsing and giving way to the capitalist system that now exists in Russia and other formerly communist countries aligned with the USSR. Both China and Vietnam, while still in name communist countries with state-planned economies, have undergone major economic changes since their communist systems have come into place. Facing stagnant economic growth and the growing reality that their state-planned economies were quickly falling behind those of Western capitalist nations, both China and Vietnam decided to open up their economies to better facilitate trade and economic growth. The result is that both countries now have what is called a socialist-oriented market economy where the economy operates on a market mechanism but the state sector plays a prominent role.⁴² Thus, the two most prominent and successful communist states—Vietnam and China—out of a need for economic growth have had to abandon a fully communist economic system for one that uses free market principles. The last communist country, North Korea, still officially has a communist government and economic system. However, it is also regarded as one of the poorest countries in the world with very few political freedoms. While not much is known about the country because the government keeps the country closed to outsiders, it is speculated that many in the country experience famine and other strife due to the stagnant economy. Therefore, when looking at the practicality of implementing a communist system in the US based on historical precedent, it does not appear to be a viable solution to replace the current neoliberal structure.

The implementation of a communist system is also shown to not be a viable solution to the neoliberal problem when examining human nature. Thomas Hobbes, in his book *Leviathan*, describes humans as selfish and society, without government, as a “war of all against all.”⁴³ For Hobbes, people are wholly self-interested with little ability to sympathize with others or wish for the good of other people above their own. Similarly, Smith built his idea for a capitalist system on the premise that people are naturally selfish, and that it was better to try to use it for the common good rather than try to eliminate it.⁴⁴ If humans are selfish and only look out for their own good, it would seem unlikely that a system built on equality and peaceful coexistence would succeed. Furthermore, Hobbes’s idea that humans without the government are in a state of perpetual war completely contradicts Marx’s view that it is possible for the government to become obsolete. Given communism’s historic failures, it would be reasonable to conclude that Hobbes and Smith’s view of humanity, while disheartening, is true. It is without dispute that the capitalist system, if not well-regulated, inevitably results in inequality. However, the communist system has historically failed to deliver acceptable democratic solutions to inequality which threatened its effectiveness in promoting the general welfare in its own ways. Therefore, by examining both history and Hobbes’s and Smith’s views of human nature, it is evident that the

communist system, while attractive on paper, is ultimately not sustainable because it is antithetical to human nature and how people operate on a daily basis.

Neoliberalism and its focus on the corporation has eroded American democracy and prevented the ideals outlined in the constitution from being achieved. Yet, doing away with the market system altogether had not, in practice, promoted democratic ideals but hurt them. Thus, it is evident that there needs to be a middle-ground solution that remedies the issues presented by neoliberal capitalism while not undoing the free market altogether. That issue is what the last part of this paper will address.

IV: The Vision of a System to Achieve Constitutional Ideals and Improve Democracy

When writing the Constitution and establishing the new nation, the founding fathers sought to create a thriving democracy built on the rule of the people. As stated earlier, in order to achieve a thriving democracy, they outlined a number of goals for the government to fulfill. However, neoliberalism has undermined many of those goals, making the modern US democracy vulnerable and weak. It is necessary to create a new system—one that keeps the free market but also uses government spending to make up for the deficiencies of the market. Furthermore, using government funds to make up for market deficiencies will not hurt economic growth, but will ultimately save the US economy money in the long run. In doing so, the US will be able to create justice, promote the general welfare, and secure the blessings of liberty, ultimately creating an economic and political ecosystem that allows democracy to thrive.

In order to establish justice, neoliberal court rulings placing the value of the corporation above that of the citizen must be reversed. Those rulings created a precedent that both the law of the land and the Constitution work for corporate interests first and the interests of the people second. Rulings promoting corporate interests have negated what Metcalf has said “is most distinctive about us. That is, it assigns what is most human about human beings—our minds and our volition—to algorithms and markets, leaving us to mimic, zombie-like, the shrunken idealisations of economic models.”⁴⁵ Neoliberalism argues that our economic potential is all we are, enslaving us to the various mechanisms employed by corporations to maximize profit. When the lines between the government and the private sector become blurred, it leaves the citizens with no escape from the view that humans are but market actors. The effects of this have been that corporations are now using citizens as pawns to get their way politically, economically, and socially. That is why repealing the rulings such as *Citizens United v FEC* are so important: they remove the legal argument for such actions. *Citizens United v FEC* opened the door to corporations donating massive amounts of money to political organizations that could run ads persuading voters to vote for the politicians that were in the best interest of the corporation rather than the citizens. As a result, the legislation passed in Congress does not represent laws directed by the consent of the governed.

Yet, a future where cases like *Citizens United v FEC* are overturned creates a country full of promise and a flourishing democracy. If instead of corporations holding a large political sway, the citizens actually have their voices heard, it is realistic that there could be new regulations that curb the power of companies in favor of individual rights. As it stands, corporations have a large

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say in what the government can and cannot do. Because of this conflict of interest, the biggest companies also get the largest tax breaks, with middle-class families paying more money in taxes than some corporations with up to hundreds of billions in revenue every year. Placing a larger tax burden on families than the most successful corporations is certainly not promoting justice; instead, it undermines what the country can provide for its citizens, leaving the poorest citizens at the mercy of the market rather than having their basic needs met. Overturning cases such as *Citizens United v FEC* allows the government to have oversight over the corporations that currently have a significant amount of say in creating legislation. Doing so creates the possibility of increasing government tax revenue, providing valuable and necessary resources that promote the general welfare.

It is true that to effectively promote the general welfare, more taxes will likely be needed. However, advocating for an increase in corporate taxes is not equivalent to advocating for the end of the free market; rather, it is a view that is in line with the father of modern capitalism, Adam Smith. Smith argued, in his book *Wealth of Nations*, that “the subjects of every state ought to contribute towards the support of the government, as nearly as possible, in proportion to their respective abilities.”⁴⁶ In saying that tax rates should be proportional to ability, Smith argues that taxes should be proportional to income—the amount that someone is *able* to pay. Smith then goes on to argue that the failure to do so creates inequality and leads to unfair tax practices.⁴⁷ In addition, advocating that the government takes on a larger role in providing for the general welfare is not to argue that the government should *replace* the free market. Instead, it is only to say that areas concerning the public good should not be held in private hands, but in the hands of the public. The private sector’s motive is ultimately to get a profit, and thus it has no real regard for the public good. By putting services such as welfare and education into the hands of the government, it can be entrusted to an institution that has no motive for profit, and can therefore wholly focus on providing for the common good.

The primary way that the government’s role should change in regard to promoting the general welfare is that the private sector should no longer be used as a means to solve poverty and issues of inequality. As stated earlier, neoliberals believed that “the problem of how to help disadvantaged people and poor communities was to be addressed through incentives, deregulation, and the creation and stimulation of opportunities in the private market.”⁴⁸ Yet, this view is entirely antithetical to the view held by Adam Smith, which was that it was the duty of the government to create and maintain public institutions that, although highly advantageous to society, were such that they could never provide a profit to repay the cost; thus, it could not be expected of the private sector to provide such services.⁴⁹ Considering Smith’s beliefs, it is reasonable to infer that the reason neoliberalism failed to reduce inequality and poverty by looking to the private sector is that the private sector’s sole motivator is profit. If the sole motivation of the private sector is to make money, then it is incentivized to maintain profitable prices, even if it means failing to create solutions to the very problems it is tasked with solving. In addition, looking to the private sector puts social programs at the mercy of market fluctuations, which means the social safety net is least able to provide assistance when it is needed most—times of recession. Instead, a new system of welfare must be devised that puts the responsibility of fighting poverty back in the hands of the government.

Ronald Reagan’s affordable housing plan—one built on neoliberal principles—was to promote “fiscal responsibility and monetary stability in the economy, encourage free and deregulated

housing markets, [and] rely on the private sector.”⁵⁰ However, as previously stated, his plan was a complete failure and failed to make any significant difference in housing costs. Years later, a study was conducted at MIT that examined the ineffectiveness of Reagan’s housing plans. The study concluded that “any national Housing Policy that effectively copes with the nation’s major housing problems—especially those of low-income households—will require large-scale government subsidies of both new housing construction and the incomes of poor households. There are no inexpensive ways to solve the nation’s housing problems.”⁵¹ The outcome of Reagan’s housing plan ultimately proves Adam Smith right: tackling issues such as low-income housing are not problems easily solved via cheap fixes on the free market. Instead, as the study concluded, it would be better to use government funds to subsidize the construction of affordable housing.

Using government funds to build affordable housing might not only be beneficial to those that receive affordable housing but for the overall economy as well. When building new housing developments, the government could incur a large initial cost by hiring the poor and those who might require affordable housing to build it. This has two benefits for those individuals: First, government jobs are usually more secure than those in the private sector, providing a stable source of income. Second, hiring the homeless and those in need of affordable housing would allow the government to train those individuals with valuable skills they could then use to find steady employment elsewhere. In doing so, the initial investment would pay off, as empowering those individuals to get new jobs would allow them to be financially independent, not only reducing welfare costs, but also creating additional tax revenue; this would ultimately save money long-term. Seeing citizens as people first and economic tools second empowers individuals, whereas seeing citizens as profit first and people second results in corners being cut that ultimately do not lead them out of poverty, only leading to additional costs being incurred.

In addition to using government funds to solve the housing crisis instead of turning to the private sector, government funds also need to be used to ensure that every student has access to quality education. The reason for this is twofold. Firstly, encouraging equal access to education helps to fight inequalities, especially as they pertain to the opportunity gap. Thus, by improving education, students will have an equal opportunity to succeed in the US, ultimately improving the general welfare of everyone in the country. Secondly, education is necessary to have an informed citizenry—it is otherwise impossible to have a strong and thriving democracy. Therefore, increasing government expenditure for schooling not only helps the US achieve its goal of promoting general welfare—which as a by-product also has some financial benefits, but it also helps bolster American democracy.

Yet again, increasing government spending for schooling does not go against a capitalist system; education was one of the areas that Adam Smith believed the government should pay for. In his book, *Wealth of Nations*, Smith wrote that “the institutions for the education of the youth may, in the same manner, furnish a revenue sufficient for defraying their own expenses.”⁵² Smith saw the education system as one whose goal should not be to inherently gain a profit, but rather aim to break even. Thus, due to its unprofitability, it was to be maintained by the government. However, neoliberalism nonetheless sought to reduce the burden on the government for needing to pay for schooling, instead looking to a voucher system that would allow parents to choose which school they wanted to send their children to. On paper, this might seem like an attractive option, but the reality is that doing so makes it difficult for school districts to estimate the number of students

enrolled in a given year, creating challenges when it comes to budgeting appropriately.⁵³ In addition, the voucher system only pulls money away from the districts that need it most, ultimately hurting low-income students rather than helping them. This comes to a front given that the US has traditionally seen education as a means to equalize opportunity rather than using traditional welfare programs used by other countries.⁵⁴ Therefore, a better option would be to increase the amount of money spent by the government, both at state and federal levels, to equalize spending. Rather than using government money to create vouchers that emphasized private schooling, government funding should be diverted to public school districts directly. Doing so would allow low-income families to be able to send their children to schools with similar educational quality as high-income families.

The government should also create more equitable funding policies for different types of education. Sandel points out that the country “woefully underinvest[s] in vocational and technical training and -apprenticeships. The US spends \$164bn helping people go to university and \$1bn supporting people who pursue the vocational path.”⁵⁵ We have been so hyper-focused on the neoliberal idea that we need to achieve the most money possible in order to increase GDP and individual income that we have completely neglected those that may not have a passion for higher education. However, being hyper-focused on increasing GDP has actually made it so that the economy has missed out on a key part of the labor force in terms of technical jobs such as plumbing and electricity. Thus, increasing the amount of spending on traditional and vocational education not only helps close opportunity gaps between the poorest and richest children, but it also helps grow the economy, providing a financial incentive as well. New evidence suggests that making the public sector responsible for the administration and payment of welfare programs would actually decrease costs for the country long-term by being substantially more effective than traditional neoliberal policies grounded in the free market. Moreover, creating better outcomes for the poor ultimately increases tax revenue, allowing the programs to pay for themselves over time.

Kimberly Jenkins Robinson has conducted research on the cost-saving measures of increasing public funding to improve education outcomes. She found that the current drop-out rate results in a forfeiture of \$156 billion in tax revenue and an increase in \$133 billion spent on healthcare over the life of those that do not graduate. Furthermore, increasing graduation could save the country \$10.8 billion per year in welfare programs like housing and food assistance.⁵⁶ Robert Putnam has found similar results in his book *Our Kids*. He notes that child poverty in total costs the nation \$500 billion per year, reduces economic output by 1.2% of the total GDP (around \$125 billion), and increases crime and health costs by the same amount. In addition, working to eliminate poverty raises the economic growth rate for the whole nation, and not just the poor.⁵⁷ Therefore, it is clear that even if looking at poverty from a neoliberal perspective where everything is in terms of the economy, it does not make sense to look to the private sector for solutions. Increasing high school graduation and alleviating child poverty would save the country on average almost a trillion dollars per year at \$890 billion annually. That is equal to about 4% of the nation’s GDP. Here the hypocrisy of the neoliberal argument is fully on display: it claims to be in the best interest of the economy and democratic freedom to orient everything in terms of the private sector, but in reality, as Brown claims, it “tears up freedom’s grounding in sovereignty for states and subjects alike”⁵⁸ while simultaneously failing to be economically efficient. It is therefore clear that it is in the best interests of not only the economy but the nation

as a whole to abandon the neoliberal system, as it allows for the general welfare to be promoted as the founding fathers had intended it to, alleviating poverty and improving democracy as well.

In addition to promoting the general welfare and, as a result, saving the country money, promoting the general welfare, especially in terms of education, is also essential to promoting American democracy, and therefore securing the blessings of liberty. Having well-developed critical thinking skills, the ability to weigh evidence and arguments, and being able to communicate with other people are all crucial skills to be able to understand the effect of a politician's policies, decide if they are beneficial for the country, and vote for them. Those skills are often taught and developed in school. Thus, when students are no longer able to complete their schooling, they lose the ability to have those skills, undermining key democratic principles. This is especially true given the effects of neoliberalism. Metcalf writes that “society reconceived as a giant market leads to a public life lost to bickering over mere opinions; until the public turns, finally, in frustration to a strongman as a last resort for solving its otherwise intractable problems.”⁵⁹ The lack of a strong education system leads to deficiencies in communication and critical thinking, which creates the perfect environment for extremist leaders to seize control. As Metcalf notes, the lack of communication leads to bickering that creates frustration. Simultaneously, the lack of critical thinking makes it difficult for citizens to realize the false promises of a strongman hungry for power and the danger they pose. Thus, when the population is no longer able to be well-educated as a citizen, not only is it hard to develop good leaders, but it is also difficult for citizens to recognize the dangers of bad ones. By ensuring that every citizen is able to get a quality education, the country will be able to elect the most capable and effective leaders with policies that create a positive impact for the country as a whole. In addition, by ensuring equal access to education, every voice can be heard so that American democracy is truly representative. Currently, those that are least likely to vote are poor and uneducated minorities. Therefore, by increasing equal access education, those individuals will not only be lifted out of poverty, but also be able to be active participants in American democracy, making it stronger.

In addition to education improving American democracy, mandating that citizens be given paid time to vote is also crucial to improving the quality of democracy. Neoliberalism, with its push for profit, has made it so that staying as a productive worker on the clock is more important than taking the time to vote and be an engaged citizen. As Brown notes, the “neoliberal man comes to the market... for being himself his own capital.”⁶⁰ By being our own capital, our identity shifts to one of being defined by production, and thus to take time to vote is to go against a deeply ingrained belief about who we are and what defines us. This goes hand-in-hand with the transformation of the individual being interested in civic duties out of a love for the country rather than a want for profit. With everything being tied to profit, there is little incentive to be an engaged participant in democracy outside of a financial reward even though the democratic process allows citizens to have a direct say in the laws that govern them. It is therefore imperative that the areas of life that were considered separate from market principles prior to the emergence of neoliberalism once again become separate. Only then will homo oeconomicus once again be transformed into homo politicus, eager to engage with democracy. A system that puts democracy and active citizenship at the forefront and economic productivity second improves democracy. Those that work low-income shift jobs are often those who are least able to vote. Given the time that polls open and close and the nature of shift-based jobs, low-income workers are simply not able to find time to vote. In addition, many of those shift workers are

minorities, meaning that democracy in the US is not truly representative of the population as a whole. Therefore, if it was mandated that every citizen be given time to vote and receive full-time pay to do so, then people who are historically disenfranchised from voting can be empowered to be active citizens instead. Ever since neoliberal policies began being implemented in the 1970s and 1980s, voter turnout has fallen by as much as 10% from where it was before.⁶¹ While the 2020 election reversed that trend, it remains to be seen whether or not that was an outlier or an indicator of electoral change in the US. However, one thing is for sure: voting is the key to having a healthy democracy, and until policies are put in place that emphasize being civically engaged over economically profitable, American democracy will continue to remain threatened.

V. Conclusion

Neoliberalism has worked tirelessly to economize everything in society, including democracy itself. The results have been subpar at best, and better summarized as damaging. A recent report from the International Monetary Fund (IMF)—an organization that used to advocate strongly for the implementation of neoliberal policies—recently reported that there is “statistical evidence for the spread of neoliberal policies since 1980, and their correlation with anemic growth, boom-and-bust cycles and inequality.”⁶² The failure to create an efficient market system while simultaneously shrinking the public sector has expanded income inequality at an unprecedented rate, all while resulting in one of the biggest financial crashes in history with the 2008 recession. Yet, the most damaging aspect of neoliberalism is not its economic failures, but rather the effect it has had on the US and its democracy. Neoliberalism has slowly chipped away at the public sector, causing the government to offload some of its duties into the private sector, particularly as it pertains to welfare. However, this has not improved life for citizens. Instead, it has defined people by their ability to make money over their other qualities such as their civic engagement, ability to reason, or even their personhood. Subsequently, the keys to democracy outlined in the Constitution have not been realized, leaving American democracy vulnerable.

It is thus necessary to overhaul the US political-economic system—removing neoliberal principles in exchange for ones that enhance democracy, not destroy it. Marxism and communism are not viable solutions; they might help create equality, but in order to achieve that equality, democracy is sacrificed. Therefore, a middle-ground solution is needed that advocates for the free market while keeping the public and private sectors separate. This solution is grounded in the principles of Adam Smith and presents the idea that capitalism can create a just and prosperous society as long as the government is able to make up for its deficiencies. Thus, an approach where the government creates a robust welfare net to assist poor but hardworking individuals overcomes the deficiencies of the free market while still allowing for political and economic freedom. In this way, the US can achieve the goals set out in the Constitution, allowing democracy to expand as the government is able to establish justice, provide for the general welfare of the state, and secure the blessings of liberty. The task at hand is no easy one; after fifty years of neoliberalization, the country has been profoundly shaped and scarred by poor policies. However, by exercising the democratic rights guaranteed in the Constitution, change can be achieved to create a country that truly embodies its call to provide liberty and justice for all.

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VII. Notes

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