

## Identity, Identity Politics, and Neoliberalism

With the intensification of neoliberalism, it is useful to examine how some individuals might cope with the irrationality of the system. Neoliberalism cloaks the execution of the corporate agenda behind rhetorical manipulation that advocates for limited government. The corollary absence of government involvement on behalf of the citizenry writ large disarms the means of social redress for the individual. Democracy funded and fueled by corporate power thereby disenfranchises the individual, provoking some to search for empowerment through identity politics. The argument set forth suggests that individuals construct, reinforce, or escalate allegiance to identities as a coping mechanism, some of which manifest in violent identity politics.

Key words: identity, identity politics, neoliberalism, heterodox economics, agency

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As capitalism intensified, evolving in the latter part of twentieth century into neoliberalism, success became more firmly defined and tied to financial measures. Indeed, within neoliberalism, identity is not something that an individual can claim; identity is bestowed upon the individual – the financially successful individual is assigned identity and assured validity (Scott Sandage 2005). An individual is identified or labeled as defective if she specifically lacks the ambition or means of achieving financial success. It would then stand to reason that having been other-identified as a failure that an individual will seek another means of identity outside the scope or critical of the process and those deemed responsible for the marginalization or the pejorative label assigned to her. The extra-economic, potentially extra-social identity could connect the alienated individual to the external world or serve as a proxy for or as rebellion against the institutionally assigned neoliberal identity (Sandage 2005).

This research explores the idea that neoliberalism as an historical context in which the economy is disembedded and directs the other spheres of living, plays a fundamental role in the shaping of an individual's identity. The argument set forth is that within this context, a person's identity becomes so undermined by the system that she must adopt a social identity in order to create a sense of personal identity and connection with others since her problems remain unanswered within the neoliberal state, and her personal success is pre-determined by an economic system that associates financial shortcomings with a failed individual identity.

The first section provides a brief description of the concept of identity, its constituent parts, and the interaction between those parts, rooted primarily in the framework explicated by John B. Davis' work on the subject (2007, 2009, 2010). The next section takes Davis' framework and contextualizes it specifically within neoliberalism. The third section explores how identity politics are the logical consequence of identity historically located within

neoliberalism. The final section explores how identity politics help to perpetuate neoliberalism and the role of the social scientist therein.

### *1. Identity*

Identity is most easily understood using Davis' (2010, 2009) rubric of three distinct, interrelated components: "personal identities," which are self-ascribed; "collective social identities," which are other-assigned identities; and "relational social identities," which consist of voluntary self-identification with social groups, both formal and informal, with varying levels of loyalty to each social group. All individuals possess identity, and the overall identity of all individuals consists of these three essential pieces. Once we understand how these three pieces interact with one another, we can contextualize the concept of identity within a specific historical location in order to examine the impact of specific institutions, namely, the institutions of neoliberalism.

Personal identity is determined through self-reflection, consciousness, and evaluation of self. Personal identity is constructed through both collective and relational social identities, but is not reducible to simply the sum of those two parts and not in proportionate measure. Rather, personal identity might be more correctly framed as the consequence of collective and relational social identity, in conjunction with the individual's agency and mental models (see figure 1).

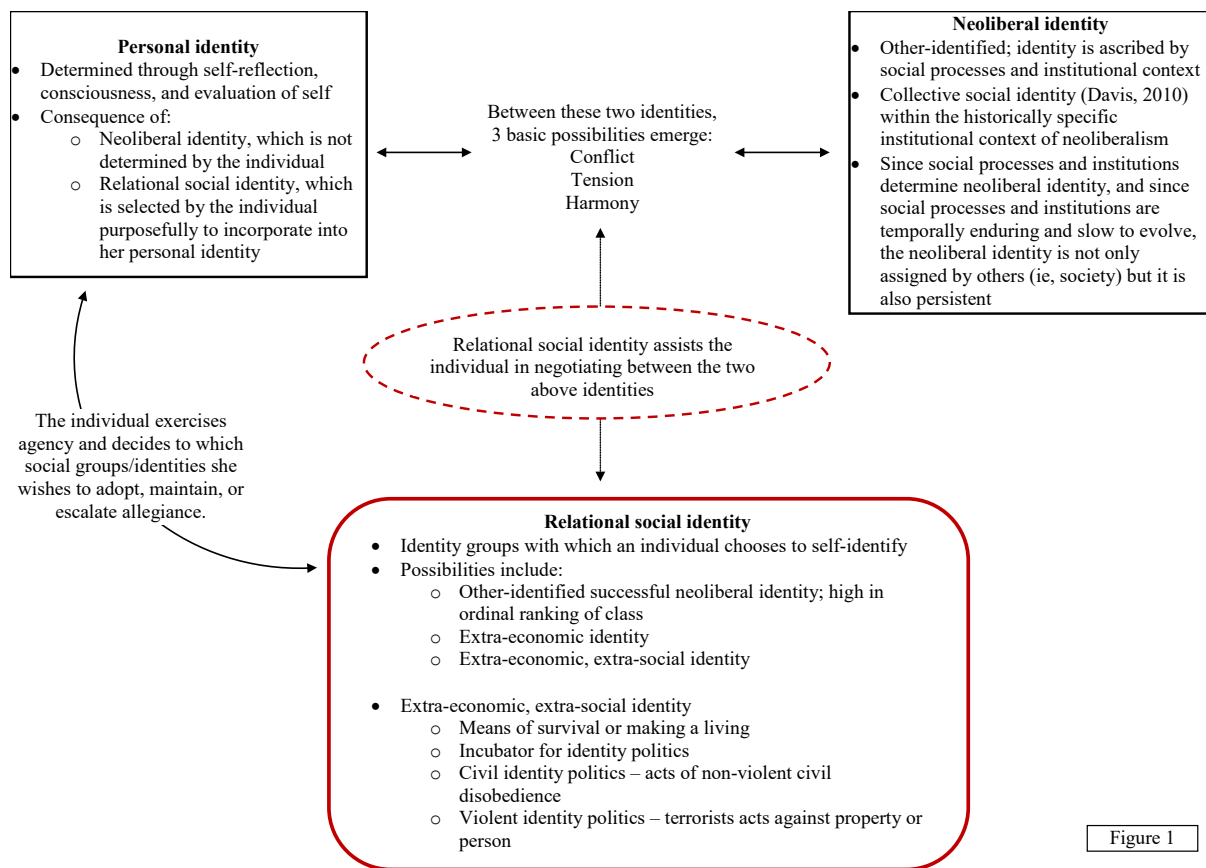


Figure 1

The individual agent has no control over collective social identity; it is other-assigned by the surrounding institutional context and may be based on biological characteristics, such as race or gender, and social attributes, such as income class or identifications with socially constructed meanings. Collective social identity actively shapes personal identity through formal tools employed by the state such as social security, national insurance, or tax identification numbers, fingerprint or retina identification, CCTV surveillance of public spaces, or records kept by state institutions such as schools or prisons, (Davis 2010) as well as through informal mechanisms which work to communicate any given culture's tacit metrics, for example, of attractiveness or intelligence. According to Davis, these other-assigned identities are stable throughout time since the point of such identification processes by social institutions is to track the individual over time, and since social/cultural institutions are slow to evolve (2009). As Nancy Folbre describes, collective social identity consists of

inclusion into “given groups,” while relational social identity consists of identification with “chosen groups;” whereby the individual agent does not have the choice of belonging or commitment to the former, but does to the latter (1994, pp. 50-51; Davis 2002).

Personal identity and collective social identity do not seamlessly integrate; while harmony between the individual’s awareness and aspirations of self and the institutionally defined self might exist, so does conflict and tension (Davis 2009, 2010). Relational social identity is selected by the individual purposefully to incorporate into her personal identity and assists the individual in negotiating between personal and collective social identities (Davis 2009; 2010). The individual exercises agency and decides to which social groups/identities to which she wants to belong, as well as how committed she is to each respective social group. These relational social groups may represent cultural or counter-cultural ideals and may be based on any type of shared social norms: religious, political, ethnic, etc. Relational social identity is thus the result of the individual agent’s personal identity interacting with the surrounding institutional structure and the other-assigned, collective-social identity (Davis 2007). In this way, individuals ‘co-construct’ their relational social identity (Davis 2010). Relational social identity may also be characterized as representative of the individual agent’s struggle to reconcile her personal identity and her other-assigned, collective social identity; the larger the perceived incongruence between the latter two, the more important relational social identity becomes to the individual agent. It is through this struggle that we might come closer to understanding the nature and cause of identity politics, particularly within the framework of neoliberalism.

## ***2. Neoliberalism and Identity***

### **2.1. The Neoliberal Narrative**

Neoliberalism embodies a return to the mental models of the mid-nineteenth century which advocated free trade and small government (2003). A comparison of the mid-nineteenth century to current Western economies reveals similarities: both are marked historically as technologically innovative periods, both experienced exponential growth in globalized markets, and both contained dogmatic advocates who assured the public that its doctrine represented the one true way to progress and growth (Eric Helleiner 2003). Neoliberalism is thus not new; it represents the post-WWII renewal of capital's attempts to empower its position in society and fortify its accumulative drive by aligning its interests with that of individuals immediately below on the economic hierarchy (Gerard Dumenil and Dominique Levy 2011). As such, neoliberalism represents a historically specific variant of a tendency of the capitalist system as opposed to a historically specific policy agenda (Nasser, 2003). Neoliberalism embodies the ideological shift in the purpose of the state from one that has a responsibility to insure full employment and protect its citizens against the exigencies of the market to one that has a responsibility to insure individual responsibility and protection of the market itself.

As capitalism unfolds and this neoliberal phase of capitalism escalates, continual technological advance in combination with the relentless accumulation imperative serves to amplify material progress. The expanding economic sphere begins to pervade the everyday lives and thinking of the individual (Howard Stein 2012). The institutionalization of the market fundamentally changes the structures of society and the socialization process, which becomes increasingly accommodating to the intensifying market place, while the transference of knowledge, tradition, and culture via the social structure all become increasingly tinged by and assimilated into the values of the market (J. O. Appleby 1978). The increasing

momentum of market intensification catalyzes the extraction of the market from the other spheres of social life, essentially disembedding the economic sphere. In following the logic of its own momentum, the economic sphere enlarges, eventually encompassing the entirety of social life, subordinating the other spheres of livelihood to support its purpose and further intensification (J. R. Stanfield 1996). Economic activities are exalted and prioritized above socially integrative activities (Brent McClintock 1998). Moreover, intensification of the marketplace creates a vacuum in the lives of individuals left by the social dislocation and discontinuity created by the disembedded economy and the subordination of social life to the dictates of the market. The deepening of the structures of neoliberalism and the market not only further disrupt social continuity and erode the cohesiveness of basic social units, but also result in individual psychoses and cultural dilution and disintegration (Doug Brown 1996).

## **2.2. Neoliberal Identity**

Within the neoliberal project, the individual is taught that individual responsibility represents the pinnacle of justice. As such, neoliberal man is accountable only to himself for no matter what he does, in serving his best interests he serves the common good. Neoliberal man shares an identity with no greater group than that of other individuals working within their own isolation. “There is no such thing (as society)! There are individual men and women and there are families... people look to themselves first” (Margaret Thatcher, quoted by Douglas Keay 1987, p. 9). Society is but a collection of individuals

Within neoliberalism, the economic sphere dominates society, so that the ethos of individual responsibility is replicated on all subordinate levels and consequently, the inevitable alienation of neoliberal capitalism is replicated throughout all social spheres. The modern citizen’s identity is ascribed by the neoliberal ideology whereby previously distinguishing facets of personal identity become subordinate to the agent’s neoliberal identity as a citizen accountable to and responsible for no one (John Rawls 1971). The

individual is taught that to have a responsibility for the care of others diminishes one's own identification, constrains the possibilities of the responsible individual who is thereby self-sacrificing her own personal identity. If under neoliberalism the market mentality and economic sphere dominate all other spheres of living, then it stands to reason that collective social identity is circumscribed by neoliberalism as well. In other words, that piece of an individual's identity that is other-assigned should rightly be called *neoliberal identity*, instead of collective social identity since neoliberal, or more broadly, economic assessments of character will dominate that other-assigned identity of an individual.

Neoliberal identity is isolating, disconnected from any larger community, and as such leaves the individual alienated. Alienation is a product of neoliberal capitalism that makes clear the connection between the market and the need for a constructed self-identification. As the division of labor intensifies and the individual becomes more removed from both process and product, the individual is less able to identify herself with any material contribution to society. Disengagement from social obligations and attachments heightens with the escalation of the market setting. It is this very detachment within the intensified market setting that lends itself to alienation from others (John O'Neill 1998).

As a counter to the alienation experienced by the individual (and as a measure against the potential for revolt of the working class against the irrationality of neoliberalism), individuals are further socialized into believing that their social context consists of the reified institutions of democracy, freedom, and individual independence. The idea behind the building of patriotic fervor or the unification of the general population behind the generic theme of "freedom" serves as what Luis Pozo (2007, pp. 56, 78) refers to as a "mechanism of accommodation," which promotes a shared identity that trumps class division – that "what unites us is far greater than what divides us" (John F. Kennedy 1961). The construction of collective identities, based on these nebulous, shared values and ideals, replaces the social



cohesion once afforded by social relationships prior to the intensification of the market and the domination of the economic sphere over other spheres of living. This social glue prevents class fissures from developing into class divides and obfuscates shared consciousness between individuals within the working class (Poza 2007). The high gloss of superficially shared, amorphous values will, however, crack.

Ontological insecurity unites the working class and sets it apart from those positioned higher in the economic hierarchy. While all individuals, regardless of class or rank, face existential anxiety, not all are confronted with the realities of job insecurity. The persistent threat to livelihood is one that unites the working class and strikes a sharp contrast with those individuals with financial security and access to power (Metin Ozugurlu 2011). Individuals in the working class become more aware of these differences in access to power through the protective response.

### **2.3. The Protective Response**

Outside of the economic sphere, an individual forms her personal identity in large part by her social or familial relationships. In the intensifying market setting, however, social relationships subordinate to market relationships; the individual's personal and social identities subordinate to her place and rank in the economy (Steven Miles 2004). The individual seeks meaning, order, and the means for social continuity in daily living and looks to the major social institutions to serve that function as an integrating mechanism, as well as to provide opportunities for citizens to address social concerns and seek amelioration (McClintock 1998). The social dislocation generated by the market mentality and the intensification of the market, prompts Karl Polanyi's protective response (2002). Although Polanyi's work pre-dates the rise of neoliberalism through the 1970s, his analysis of the protective response of capitalism writ large continues to resonate.

The protective response which rises against the dehumanization, persistent commodification, and increasing social dislocation of neoliberalism prompts the construction of provisions of the welfare state, but in an unorganized, ad hoc fashion, primarily as a result of its spontaneity and pragmatic immediacy. The welfare state is thus not a systematic creation of social protection measures, but rather a product of the uncoordinated efforts to ameliorate immediate concerns. The conflicting interests of individuals, corporate interests, and specifically focused special interests groups campaign for legislation to serve their respective purposes. As the neoliberal market intensifies, however, and the economy becomes venerated above all other spheres of livelihood; the sharply focused interests and rights of corporations take precedence over the wide, unorganized interests of disconnected citizens and the scales are consequently tipped.

Corporate interests seek protection from the intensified market setting. The institutions of the lobbying industry and generous campaign contributions with which to cajole politicians, corporate interests have proven quite proficient at moving their priorities up the political agenda (Frances Fox Piven 2004), while a 2010 United States Supreme Court ruling affirmed the right to do so. Indeed, neoliberalism does not advocate complete removal of government intervention; corporate interests remain dependent on aggregate demand stimulation for safety from stagnation, while their calls for privatization of the public sector provides support through government contracts (Kosta Josifidas 2010). When the unorganized, individualized needs of the citizenry are weighed against the needs of the organized machines of industry it becomes clear whose needs will be addressed first.

You want me to go down to the garment district and push one of those trucks through the street. . . ? They don't have animals doing what you want me to do. There would be some society to protect animals if anybody had them pushing them damn trucks

around. I'm better than an animal, but nobody protects me. Go away, mister. I got to look out for myself (drug dealer in Harlem, quoted by Kenneth Clark 1989, p. 13).

Neoliberalism cloaks the execution of the corporate agenda behind rhetorical manipulation that advocates for limited government. The corollary absence of government involvement on behalf of the citizenry writ large disarms the means of social redress for the individual.

If the state is the centralized authority of society and if its constituents understand via cognizant recognition of legislative efforts or subconscious recognition of the inapproachability of the state, that this centralized authority constrains action through law yet provides protection primarily to corporate entities, then the individual's need to find authority which provides shelter for the individual's interests as opposed to conscribing them is made clear. The individual pledges allegiance to that authority which provides protection, particularly during times of uncertainty even at the risk of reprisal by the state. If the market is the locus of control for the state then when the individual challenges the state, she is also challenging the market and vice-versa. Those individuals who rebel against the state are by proxy rebelling specifically against the market when the market and the state are synonymous. Democracy funded and fueled by corporate power disenfranchises the individual, provoking some to search for empowerment through extra-economic, social identities. The individual does not stand to lose anything as the state serves other interests anyway.

### ***3. Extra economic, social identity***

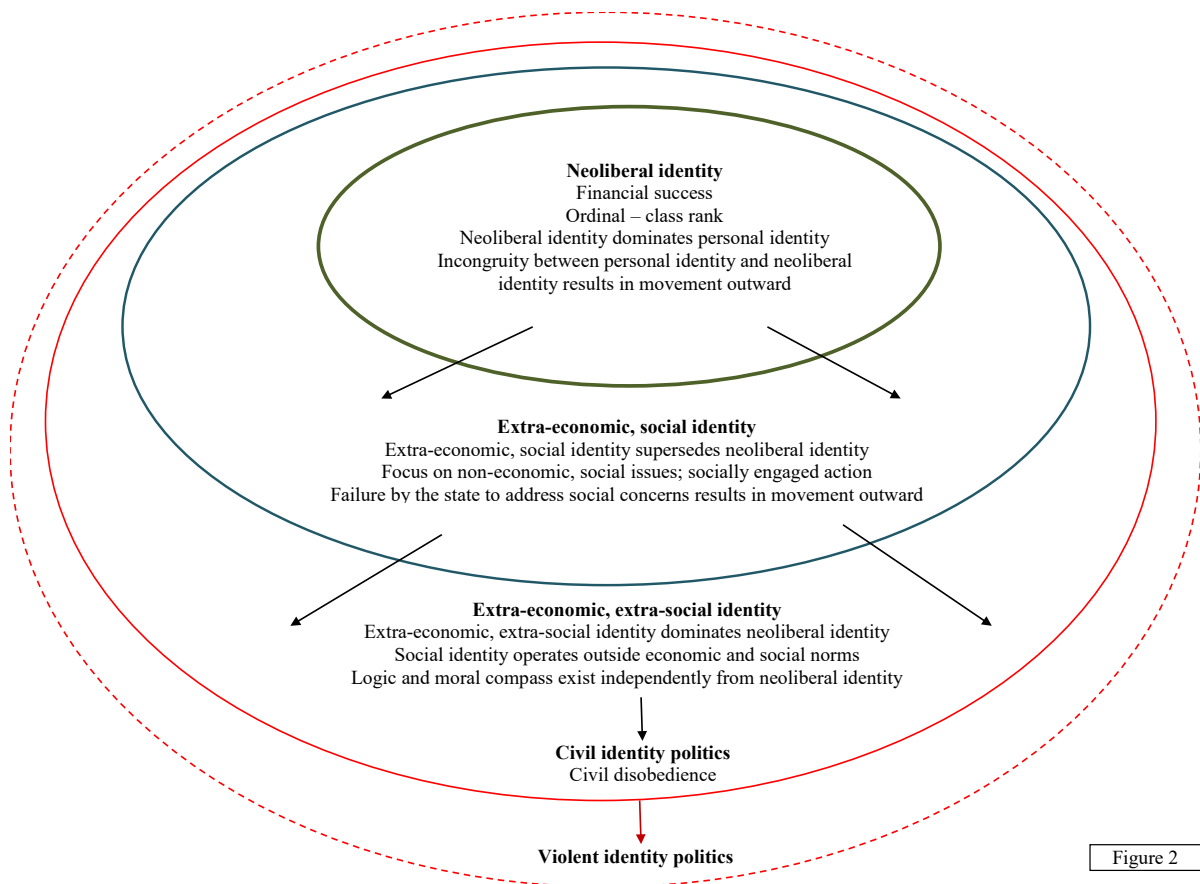
It is easy to see how the individual might react to the persistent other-identification as failure within the institutional context of neoliberalism by constructing a personal identity that is in some non-neoliberal way, successful, via the adoption and allegiance to a relational social identity that operates outside the neoliberal context. If the individual agent's personal identity is subordinated to her neoliberal identity, then when her personal identity grows

increasingly incongruent to her status in the polity and economic hierarchy, rejection of neoliberal identity appears inevitable. Neoliberal identity is predicated on financial success. Neoliberal identities that are measured via financial success are manifest not only in class categories, but especially through their ordinal rankings: upper, middle, lower, or proxies for these ranks, such as ‘working’ that still clearly indicate rank in the ordinal hierarchy. The individual identities ascribed by the neoliberal context for those who have not achieved financial success or advance in ordinal class rank include epithets such as: loser, trailer trash, “ghetto,” and “welfare queen” (David George, 2006, pp. 433-434).

With respect to neoliberal identity, history does not matter. Under the enabling myth of equality of opportunity, all individuals, regardless of beginnings or background, are responsible for their own success or failure. In this bootstrap society, neoliberal identity redirects and is not cast as other-assigned, but rather as self-determined. The more that the public views society as fully democratized and advancement based on merit, the less it recognizes the influence of heredity in neoliberal identification and rank, and the more demoralizing the inferior assigned identity is (George 2006).

Those who represent neoliberal success stories will adopt relational social identities that reinforce or at least do not dilute the neoliberal identity and which promote the idea of exclusivity: country-club membership, cotillion classes, and debutante balls, for instance. When the individual does not fit the identity ascribed by neoliberal authority and is thus rejected – alienated – from mainstream society, the individual can find connection to others through relational social identities, that is, the formation of social identities is at least in part a response to the individual’s perception of the undeserved divergence between how she envisions herself and her social status (Gerard Jaynes 2000). As failure of the neoliberal identity intensifies, the individual – whether consciously or not – begins to seek a relational

social identity that is non-economic in nature. The individual seeks empowerment via this extra-economic, social identity (see figure 2, movement out of the innermost circle).



Ordinal rank might still exist within the extra-economic, social identity group; indeed, an individual might gravitate toward an extra-economic social group that provides a hierarchy that is non-economic. One example is the STARFLEET: The International Star Trek Fan Association, Inc., where an individual can choose whether or not to participate in the ordinal ranking system, and where upward advance in rank is based on social contributions, such as volunteer service within the individual’s community. By attaching to a relational social identity that is extra-economic, the individual adopts a stronger relationship with that relational social identity, and the individual’s sense of agency and self-worth grows within that social context. While perceptions of self-efficacy might be diminished in the agent’s neoliberal identity, the perception of self-efficacy within a social group viz the individual’s relational social identity might be stronger (Davis 2007). Thus the individual, with a stronger

sense of self-efficacy within the social group, becomes more loyal to that group than to society writ large.

It is at this tipping point that the individual's extra-economic, social identity begins to dominate her neoliberal identity. With this shift, neoliberalism is still supported and is permitted even more latitude for movement because the shift from failed attempts at neoliberal identity – the primary form of identity within the disembedded economy – to adoption of extra-economic, social identity pulls the focus of the individual from economic issues to social issues. These social issues are more easily addressed by the neoliberal welfare state in so far as they do not impinge on corporate rights and interests.

The individual seeks extra-economic, social identity as her protective response when the neoliberal corporate welfare state continues to prioritize the calls for protection from the intensified market setting from corporate interests. The less attention and accommodation the individual's new social group receives from the neoliberal state, the greater the allegiance and attachment of the individual to her now prioritized relational social identity. If social issues are not addressed by the neoliberal state or at the very least do not receive attention via persistent debate within the neoliberal state, extra-economic, social identities further develop into extra-social identities. The group and hence the individual's personal identity consequently transform, becoming extra-social in nature. The more the needs and calls for protective response remain unaddressed, the greater the allegiance and the more forceful the movement against the neoliberal state. It is from these extra-economic, extra-social identities that identity politics are catalyzed.

#### ***4. Identity Politics: Extra-economic, Extra-social Identity***

The use of the term “identity politics” is at times, hotly contested (see Mary Bernstein 2005). Identity politics, as discussed here is a neutral phrase that suggests movement against the established state which serves in the current, historical context, the interests of

neoliberalism to the neglect of its citizens. The practice of identity politics encompasses action that can be considered both extra-economic and extra-social. This movement might be predicated on the ideal of change or insurgence; it could be peaceful or violent; evolve or revolt, or it could simply function as a mode of survival.

When an individual's identity becomes both extra-economic and extra-social, the extra-social group with which she identifies is free to set its own standards of existence – its own interpretation and explanation of what is right or wrong (O'Neill 1998). The neoliberal market in its irrationality either prompts an individual's reach toward some set of universal laws of reason by which to guide her or prompts the individual to set her own standards of existence which are consistent with her constructed identity. Within these self-imposed standards, the individual sets her own moral and reasoned compass by which no other system, rational or otherwise can penetrate. These types of groups are extra-economic and extra-social, since they do not organize themselves within the system to make change in the neoliberal state but rather rebel and create a different society that operates outside of neoliberal norms.

While not political per se, an extra-economic, extra-social identity might be adopted as a means of making a living or simply as a survival mechanism. Involvement in street gangs or participation in illicit activities may prove to be the most viable option to those with a marginalized, neoliberal identity. Jaynes (2000), suggests that the restricted labor market opportunities open to the black community, specifically low wage jobs, confirms at best “slave-like” identity within the neoliberal project. For this reason, the individual, in an attempt to avoid this demeaning neoliberal identity, will seek identity and means to make a living via extra-economic/extra-social venues: “Such identic agencies span a range of identities from the constructive rebellion of those who pursue prizes reserved for the other to the wasted and bitter cry of the street hustlers, criminal, and no-accounts” (p. 129). Contrary

to what neoliberal social convention or assumptions might suggest, an individual working in the extra-economic or extra-economic/extra-social sphere does not lack work ethic; indeed interviews suggest that the work of a “hustler” or drug dealer in fact requires a great deal of commitment and hard work. This further supports the proposal that those individuals who choose to work outside of the neoliberal project are not doing so because it is the easier choice or because they are lazy or because they lack respect; indeed it is self-respect that has driven these individuals to eschew the ‘slave’ opportunities offered by the restricted labor market and make the difficult decision to operate outside the economic and social norms of neoliberalism (Jaynes 2000, p. 136).

The practice or participation in civil identity politics, although operating outside the bounds of economic and social norms, is non-violent in nature. The civil rights movement of the latter part of the twentieth century represents collections of oppressed individuals who were marginalized and whose needs had been left unaddressed by the state. These individuals shared an extra-economic, social identity and fought for the realization of universal laws of equality; laws which reached beyond the laws of the market. By engaging in acts of civil disobedience, participants in the non-violent civil right movement also engaged in extra-social behavior by violating the established laws of the state (see again, figure 2).

Identity politics might also manifest in violent ways. Extremist individuals, such as fundamentalists who live by a specific, strict interpretation of God’s/Allah’s law, neo-luddites, politico-punk/straight-edgers, the militia movement, or anarchists to name but just a handful, see their constructed self-standards as above man’s law and the laws of the market. These acts of violence may manifest in injury to property or person. The Earth Liberation Front, for instance, prides itself on destruction of property in order to draw attention to



environmental concerns, but remain dedicated to not causing physical harm to people or animals. The Aryan Nations group, on the other hand overtly supports injury to people.

In historical retrospect, specific groups that could be classified as extra-economic and extra-social have split into peaceful and violent factions: the Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) members whom splintered off into the Weather Underground or the Symbionese Liberation Army (SLA); the civil rights movement splintered between Malcolm X and Martin Luther King, Jr.; the National Rifle Association (NRA) into militia men; anti-abortion protests into pipe bombers or shooters. Whether peaceful or violent, identity politics respond to the persistent isolation and neglect from the neoliberal state.

### ***5. Concluding remarks***

Many individuals outside of the upper echelons of society consistently vote against their own economic interests by way of allegiance to social groups (John Harvey 1998). The very groups that serve as a coping mechanism for the incongruity between consciousness of worth and neoliberal identity inform their voting in such a way as to isolate themselves further and enables the functioning of neoliberalism itself. Many individuals upset by Barack Obama's remarks during his 2008 presidential campaign about hunting or religion serving as a means by which individual might 'explain their frustrations' might find extra-economic success reinforcing his very point – that the escapism (argued here as extra-economic, social identification) individuals use as a means by which to achieve success or personal satisfaction is a sign that neoliberalism itself has been the driving force in the need for extra-economic, social identity. The correlation since the post-World War II period between the intensification of the neoliberal capitalist system and the intensification of identity politics seems clear and the causation between the two intuitive.

If we accept for the moment, as proponents of neoliberalism argue, that it is true that the welfare state and individuality are mutually exclusive or antithetical, then the suggestion

that the state in the current neoliberal climate is a corporate-welfare state emphasizes the repression of individuality – the very system that holds as its highest ideal the liberty of the individual, can then only be seen as a system of repression of individuality (Pierre Rosanvallon 1988). Through the development of the neoliberal stage of capitalism, it has become increasingly clear via legislation and judicial decision that the rights of the corporation at minimum are on par with the rights of individual citizens.

Identity politics divides, obscures, or reframes class so that economic and social justice issues not only become irrelevant to the voter but are demonized as well. That, however, does not mean that we, as social scientists must choose to focus on identity politics to the exclusion of the class (Nancy Fraser 2001).

The social scientist must deconstruct the subjective viewpoint to uncover motivations hidden from the actor but relevant to his actions (Jaynes 2000, p. 130)... Our tasks as scholars, social scientists, and activists are to ascertain the facts as clearly as we can, endeavor to understand how and why individuals make the social choices they do, and then, recognizing that life is highly complex, in sober humility prescribe policies designed to expand agents' perceptions of their available choices so that they may improve their own lives and ours (Jaynes 2000, p. 138).

The unification of variegated responses and movements to and against the neoliberal movement is central to the overall struggle (Harvey 1998). Reaching an understanding of why individuals choose certain relational social identities and how that choice is driven by that piece of their personal identity over which they have no control –neoliberal identity – is the first step in the process.

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