

Contemplating Efficiency: Secular Mindfulness Practices from the Perspective of Neoliberalism

By Janina Misiewicz

Waiting in line at the grocery store is boring. Sometimes you might stare at the candy and imagine what it would be like if you bought a Reese's Cup or a Snickers bar, and then other times you might anxiously contemplate the food that you have at home until a forgotten item is recalled and you initiate a wordless debate with yourself about leaving the line to go get it, or you might even glance over the magazine headlines, pausing at "How to Lose Your Belly Fat in Three Days" and "Brad Pitt Talks to Ex-Girlfriend Jennifer Aniston for the First Time in Eight Years" until your attention lingers at "The New Mindfulness." It is a *Time: Special Edition* issue that features a young woman on the cover whose hands are drawn together in prayer. The subtitle says "living, thinking, being." You pull the magazine from the shelf and open it to the table of contents: "How to Be Centered in a Crazy World," "The Antiaging Promise of Mindfulness," "The Real Secret to Life Balance," and "Sleep Hacks for Your Most Restful Night Ever" among others.¹

It is a magazine that reflects a growing cultural trend in the United States: a push to incorporate mindfulness practices in work environments, schools, and day-to-day activities as a way to curtail stress, enhance performance, and even reduce or eliminate psychological disorders such as depression and anxiety. The social shift towards mindfulness—which can also be extended to include yoga and meditation, among other practices—has garnered so much attention since the 1960s that there is now a name for it: the mindfulness movement. The roots of

¹Edward Felsenthal, editor. "The New Mindfulness." *Time: Special Edition*, Meredith Corporation, 2019. Print.

the mindfulness movement extend into the history of Buddhism, which goes back to the teaching of the Buddha, who lived and taught in northeast India in the fifth century BC;² however, the way in which most Americans think of the term now only extends to 1979 when Jon Kabat-Zinn introduced his program of “Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction” at the University of Massachusetts Medical Center,³ historically divorcing the term from its spiritual beginnings.

Kabat-Zinn, who is considered the torchbearer of the Western mindfulness movement, defines the term as “paying attention in a particular way: on purpose, in the present moment, and non-judgmentally.”⁴ Ellen Langer, a social psychologist who was labeled the “mother of mindfulness” after releasing a book in 1989 called *Mindfulness*, stated in an interview with Krista Tippett for the National Public Radio program *On Being* that mindfulness is “the simple act of noticing new things.”⁵ These reduced definitions have removed all religious undertones from the term, and have undoubtedly paved the way for it to evolve into a complex industry. The popularity of the mindfulness movement has gained so much traction since the 1960s that it is not only disseminated through popular psychology and self-help literature, but it now also plays a role in education, criminal justice, occupational health, and public policy.⁶ The ubiquity of the mindfulness movement can also be found in the growing number of yoga studios across the country, the extensive research being done to investigate its benefits,⁷ the cost of its services, and

²Bhikkhu Bodhi, “What Does Mindfulness Really Mean? A Canonical Perspective,” *Contemporary Buddhism* 12, no. 1 (2011), 20.

³*Ibid.*, 19.

⁴Jessie Sun, “Mindfulness in Context: A Historical Discourse Analysis,” *Contemporary Buddhism* 15, no. 2 (2014), 400.

⁵Ellen Langer, interview by Krista Tippett, *On Being*, National Public Radio, May 29, 2014.

⁶Phil Arthington, “Mindfulness: A Critical Perspective,” *Community Psychology in Global Perspective* 2, no. 1 (2016), 87.

⁷Daphne Davis et al. “What Are The Benefits of Mindfulness,” in *American Psychological Association* 43, no. 7 (2012), <https://www.apa.org/monitor/2012/07-08/ce-corner>.

even its status as a *Time: Special Edition* issue that gets sold at grocery store check-out lines.

And yet, its popularity is not immediately understandable: why has an idea as simple as “notice new things” created an obsessive fervor among its adherents?

The research that has emerged about secular mindfulness since Kabat-Zinn introduced his Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction workshops in 1979 frames mindfulness as borderline miraculous: it claims that a regular mindfulness practice is thought to reduce anxiety, improve sleep, increase productivity, and stall aging; all of which portray it as an attractive tool, but mindfulness has not garnered its success solely from its expansive set of cures, but more importantly, from the way in which those cures are related to the economic and competitive standing of the individuals who practice it. The Western mindfulness movement is contemporaneous with a cultural shift in the United States during the 1960s, 70s, and 80s in which the economy transitioned from being a regulated system to one that was decentralized and globalized, creating a slew of social, political, and economic changes. This essay will investigate how the emergence of the mindfulness movement in the United States coincided with the neoliberalization of the West, leading to an increase in personal responsibility that secular mindfulness practices reinforce rather than undermine.

The Emergence of Neoliberalism in the United States

The term “neoliberalism” is notoriously difficult to define. It is social as well as political and economic; it is related to capitalism but not exactly the same thing; it is at times paradoxical in nature, and it manifests in seemingly disparate ways. The rise of public figures like Donald Trump, the increase in our cultural dependency on technology, the three million people living in

the United States who self-identify as “doomsday preppers,”⁸ the deterioration of public school systems, and the onslaught of wellness apps reminding us to be mindful are all instances of neoliberalism in action, even if these examples might not seem related to one another at first glance.

As the name suggests, neoliberalism is embedded in the philosophical and political tradition known as liberalism, an idea that was introduced to European countries during the Age of Enlightenment as both an economic and political choice, most commonly credited to John Locke, who famously made the argument that each man is entitled to life, liberty, and property—rights that governments must not violate. In Europe, liberalism coalesced into the larger historical framework of those governments, but in the United States, liberalism was woven into the inception of the country’s independence, establishing itself as an essential component to the United States’ overarching cultural values, like the importance of freedom and agency. The Founding Fathers of the United States believed in the importance of both human dignity and individual freedom, planting the seed for the “American Dream” and the belief that anyone can accomplish anything if she works hard enough and uses her resources both efficiently and systematically to maximize her gains. By the end of the twentieth century, liberalism had evolved into a much more pervasive and complicated social and economic paradigm known as neoliberalism. Many of the overarching values of liberalism remained intact, but neoliberalism complicated them by constructing a new, economic lens through which they could be viewed.

During the twentieth century, major events such as the Great Depression and World War II provoked dramatic economic changes in both the United States and abroad. It was amidst these

⁸Casey Ryan Kelly, “The Man-pocalypse: *Doomsday Preppers* and the Rituals of Apocalyptic Manhood,” *Text and Performance Quarterly* 36, nos. 2-3, 95-114 (2016), 95.

changes that neoliberal theory gained traction, largely in response to the interventionist economic policies of John Maynard Keynes. In 1947, the Mont Pelerin Society was formed, an academic group consisting of economists, historians, and philosophers who passionately advocated for neoliberal theory.⁹ During the following decades, neoliberal theory continued to gain academic respectability until eventually two members of the Mont Pelerin Society, Friedrich von Hayek and Milton Friedman, won Nobel Prizes in economics in 1974 and 1976, respectively;¹⁰ however, the watershed moment in which it transitioned more concretely from theory to praxis was not until the years 1978 to 1980. It is fitting that the term “mindfulness” was introduced to mainstream American culture at the exact same time. In the introduction to his book, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, David Harvey claims that historians will look upon the years 1978 to 1980 as “a revolutionary turning-point in the world’s social and economic history”¹¹ because a combination of world events occurred that changed the global economy: Deng Xiaoping took the first steps towards the liberalization of a communist-ruled economy in China, Margaret Thatcher was elected to be Prime Minister of Britain in 1979, and Ronald Reagan was elected to the Presidency of the United States in 1980.

Ronald Reagan’s victory over Jimmy Carter was crucial because it led to the deregulation of the economy, a reduction in corporate taxes, and attacks on trade unions and professional power,¹² resulting in a dramatically different economy than what had existed during the prior decades. The Reagan administration was able to garner support for its neoliberal agenda because

⁹David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 60-61. Epub.

¹⁰Ibid., 67.

¹¹Ibid., 16.

¹²Ibid., 68-69.

it promoted the new market as a “way to foster competition and innovation,” while it actually was just “a vehicle for the consolidation of monopoly power”¹³ that would benefit a few while disenfranchising the rest. This can be exemplified by the fact that “the Federal minimum wage, which stood on a par with the poverty level in 1980, had fallen to 30 per cent below that level by 1990.”¹⁴ In addition, “[c]orporate taxes were reduced dramatically, and the top personal tax rate was reduced from 70 to 28 per cent in what was billed as ‘the largest tax cut in history.’”¹⁵ The 1980s was a pivotal decade for the United States because the federal government was not only shifting its attention away from individual liberties to focus on the deregulation and freedom of corporations, but framing this shift as something that was beneficial to all individuals, despite the clear evidence to the contrary.

Higher education was getting more expensive, people were working longer hours despite earning lower wages, and federal programs were being cut or privatized, but despite all this, individuals were being framed as better off than ever before because more people, especially women and African Americans, had more individual rights than in the prior decades; new sectors were expanding the economy, like information technology, biotechnology, and media; and no longer were people and businesses as inhibited by the government as they were before. It was a new, liberating era. However, with freedom also comes responsibility, and increasingly, the expectation was that, in a deregulated economy, individuals were responsible for their wellbeing, and if anyone were to fall behind, either personally or professionally, it was viewed as a personal failing, not a systemic failure. If the system is barely visible, more like a general outline, holding

¹³Ibid., 75.

¹⁴Ibid., 74.

¹⁵Ibid., 75.

structures in place but standing far away from interventionist practices, how can unhappiness be anyone's fault except the person who is experiencing it? As a result, it comes as no surprise that, in conjunction with the emergence of neoliberalism, the self-help industry was also rapidly expanding, which included the expansion of secular mindfulness.

During the 1960s, a combination of cheaper airfare and social disenchantment made it possible for new ideas to be woven into the fabric of American life, such as Eastern thought and practices. These ideas converged to create a countercultural movement that questioned aspects of reality that, up until that point, had been taken for granted. In particular, the philosophy and meditative practices offered by Buddhism served as catalysts for the expansion of the hippie subculture, eventually leading to the dissemination of mindfulness, a central tenet to the classical systems of Buddhist practices. The religiosity of mindfulness kept it lurking on the fringe of American thought until, finally, in 1979, Jon Kabat-Zinn effectively severed it from its religious roots so as to make it palatable to a wider population. By creating his Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction workshops, he permanently altered the way in which Western practitioners and researchers would think about the term.

The emergence of mindfulness in the West represents a larger self-help trend that was taking hold of the United States at that time. In addition to mindfulness, other forms of spirituality were also growing in popularity during the 1960s and 70s, such as the emergence of new age spirituality programs, like Erhard Seminar Trainings, also known as est [sic], and Scientology; the emergence and dissemination of yoga; and the large number of gurus who traveled to the United States from India, like Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, who started the Students

International Meditation Society (SIMS) in 1965 and was a guru to the Beatles.¹⁶ During that time, spirituality was thought to be a method of escape from the conventional social structures that so many people had grown to distrust or reject entirely; however, after 1980, not only did the economy begin to change, but the orientation of the self-help industry, including its spiritual side, also underwent a dramatic change. Rather than rejecting the physical body and social conventions for the sake of attaining enlightenment, as was traditional in these practices, spirituality-based self-help programs, like mindfulness and yoga, were being reevaluated as ways to enhance the performance and efficiency of individuals *within* the established social structure. The cultural, economic, and political upheaval of the second half of the twentieth century opened a door to a new way of viewing not only economics, but also the way in which individuals would relate to economics, all supporting the emergence of neoliberalism, or what David Harvey calls “the financialization of everything.”¹⁷

The Significance of *Homo Oeconomicus*

Neoliberalism integrated economics into spheres that had not been historically considered economic, like raising children or finding a romantic partner, and through doing so, it established itself as not only an economic system, but also as a form of social organization, creating what philosophical thinker, Michel Foucault, calls *homo oeconomicus*, or the economic person, someone who organizes her life around the goal of maximizing her economic profitability and profit. Through the model of *homo oeconomicus*, economic analysis was applied to domains of behavior that were not initially considered economic, like, for example, a regular mindfulness

¹⁶“The Rush of Gurus,” The Pluralism Project, Harvard University, accessed March 26, 2020, <http://pluralism.org/religions/hinduism/hinduism-in-america/the-rush-of-gurus/>.

¹⁷Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, 33.

practice or the acquisition of a new language. These social and economic changes altered the ways in which individuals viewed both themselves and their roles in society, but more importantly, it persuaded them to adapt their personal interests to be in better alignment with optimal economic outcomes.

In 1979, Michel Foucault delivered a series of lectures, known collectively as *The Birth of Biopolitics*, at the Collège de France. Although neoliberalism was not a widely understood term at that time, Foucault delivered a prescient account of the paradigm. He was able to do this, in part, because he had spent the majority of his career developing critical ideas around terms that are fundamentally in accordance with neoliberalism: governmentality, technologies of the self, and knowledge/power. In his lectures, Foucault explains how the emergence of *homo oeconomicus* is related to a trend that began during the Age of Enlightenment: the emergence of the human body as a governable subject. Many social and political changes took place during the eighteenth century to influence this trend, but for Foucault, one of the most important changes was the emergence of social institutions, like state-funded prisons, schools, and hospitals, that implemented coercive “techniques of domination” so as “to determine the conduct of individuals, to impose certain wills on them, and to submit them to certain ends or objectives.”¹⁸ Alongside these social institutions, the individual was reevaluated as a governable subject who could learn to alter his behavior with what Foucault calls “technologies of the self,” or “techniques which permit individuals to effect . . . a certain number of operations on their own bodies, on their own souls, on their own thoughts, on their own conduct . . . so as to transform themselves, modify themselves, and to attain a certain state of perfection, of happiness, of purity,

¹⁸Michel Foucault, “About the Beginning of the Hermeneutics of the Self,” *Political Theory* 21, no. 2 (1993), 203.

or supernatural powers, and so on.”¹⁹ Technologies of the self are a response to techniques of domination, but simultaneously, techniques of domination are also a response to technologies of the self. These two categories—individuals and institutions—operate in accordance with one another, fulfilling the needs and desires of the other. The interaction between the two coalesce to create governing bodies that rely on a “subtle integration of coercion-technologies and self-technologies”²⁰ to regulate themselves, or in other words, people choose to behave in the way the government wants them to behave without the government having to force them to do anything.

In two lectures presented at Dartmouth College in 1980, “Subjectivity and Truth” and “Christianity and Confession,” Foucault traces the genealogy of the hermeneutics of the self from Greek technologies to the development of self-examination in early Christianity, demonstrating that technologies of the self were being used as early as the first few centuries A.D. However, part of his motivation for giving these lectures is to clarify that there is a significant difference between the techniques that were being used during early Christianity and how those techniques have developed since then. In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault explains how there was a historical moment during the eighteenth century in which discipline transitioned from a monastic type, “whose function was to obtain renunciations rather than increases of utility,”²¹ to an art of the human body, “which was directed not only at the growth of its skills, nor at the intensification of its subjection, but at the formation of a relation that in the mechanism itself makes it more obedient as it becomes more useful.”²² This transition marks the beginning

¹⁹Ibid., 203.

²⁰Ibid., 204.

²¹Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage Books, 1995), 137.

²²Ibid., 137-8.

of an era in which the human body was no longer seen as a vessel that must be renounced or saved, but a machinery of power that, if cultivated correctly, could result in a “positive self,” or a subject who responds positively to the mechanics of power, resulting in behavior that is in pursuit of what one desires and with the “techniques, the speed and the efficiency that one determines.”²³ Technologies of the self were introduced at the level of the individual, not en masse or wholesale, but through education and schooling, the penal system, the military, and other social institutions, gradually acclimating each human body to an environment of control and discipline. Using confessional and disciplinary techniques reminiscent of early Christianity, the emergence, rather than the destruction, of the self became paramount.

The trend that Foucault observes from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries is strikingly similar to the emergence of Eastern spirituality in the United States during the second half of the twentieth century, and the subsequent changes to those practices after the implementation of neoliberalism in the 1980s. Similar to how the disciplinary and confessional techniques from early Christianity were seized by liberalism to be used as methods for self-improvement in public institutions, religious and spiritual practices that emerged in the United States during the 1960s, such as mindfulness and yoga, were also extricated from their traditional roots so as to support a social system; however, there is an important disparity between the technologies of the self that emerged several centuries ago and their formations today.

Since the eighteenth century, but more importantly, since the emergence of neoliberalism during the second half of the twentieth century, the mechanics of self-discipline have increasingly adapted themselves to both the psyches of individuals and the economic structure in

²³Ibid., 138.

which those individuals reside. Historically, individuals—like students in schools—were watched, guided, and coerced regularly so as to become more docile subjects, but those strict disciplinary models have now fallen out of favor, and children are instead encouraged to define themselves as self-driven individuals who have chosen, rather than been forced, to be efficient, productive, and motivated people. This entrepreneurial self, or what Foucault calls *homo oeconomicus*, is an automaton of habit, a pliable machine, a calculated body who lives to achieve economic optimization, even when it negatively impacts his personal health and well-being. In *The Birth of Biopolitics*, Foucault explains how, during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, *homo oeconomicus* was not yet in existence because, at those times, social spheres were considered “non-market relationships and phenomena” that were separate from economic spheres, and although there was interaction between the two, they remained distinct categories.²⁴ However, during the twentieth century, this relationship began to change as non-market relationships were inverted from social to economic modes of valuation, leading to two central consequences: 1.) human capital was introduced as a profitable resource, and 2.) the social body was turned into a network of enterprises.

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Human capital, an economic theory that had been historically overlooked by economists, was introduced to the field of economics in 1971 when Theodore Schultz published a book called *Investment in Human Capital*.²⁵ Until this point, economists had only thought about the economy through the lens of three variables: land, capital, and labor; and the last variable—labor—was

²⁴Michel Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics*, ed. Michel Senellart, trans. Graham Burchell (New York: Picador, 2008), 240.

²⁵Ibid., 220.

only thought about in terms of how many hours laborers worked, rather than thinking about the laborers themselves as forms of capital. Foucault clarifies that a laborer does not sell his labor, he sells his *labor power*, and the “work performed by the worker is work that creates a value, part of which is extorted from him.”²⁶ There is an inextricable link between the laborer himself and “the person who is skilled and who can do this particular thing,”²⁷ creating what Foucault calls an “active economic subject”²⁸ whose income is “quite simply the product or return on a capital,”²⁹ with capital being “everything that in one way or another can be a source of future income.”³⁰ This means that the labor one invests in himself *is* capital because it can be converted into a future form of income that can then be reinvested into the individual to produce *more* capital, creating what Foucault calls a “machine, but a machine which cannot be separated from the worker himself.”³¹ In this neoliberal model, capital is clearly the linchpin holding it all together, but what exactly is capital?

In general, human capital is made up of all the physical and psychological components that constitute a person; components that can be broken down into different categories. Pierre Bourdieu, a relational sociologist whose work was influenced by Foucault, developed a theory about capital during his lifetime, claiming that there are two central forms of capital—economic and symbolic—and from these, symbolic capital can be divided into two parts: social and cultural capital. Although forms of symbolic capital cannot be immediately and directly monetized, they are economic in nature because they give value and sustenance to economic

²⁶Ibid., 221.

²⁷Ibid., 224.

²⁸Ibid., 223.

²⁹Ibid., 224.

³⁰Ibid.

³¹Ibid.

capital. Social and cultural capital are distinct categories, but they are related to each other in the sense that they are oftentimes inherited biologically, enhanced through social circumstances, or accumulated based on access to resources, making it difficult to track and quantify their value.

Social capital refers to the membership of an individual to a specific social group, either informally, like a member of a family, or formally, through institutions, and how these memberships provide “each of its members with the backing of the collectivity-owned capital, a ‘credential’ which entitles them to credit, in the various senses of the word.”³² Cultural and social capital often operate in conjunction with one another, compounding each other’s value, but they are not the same. Cultural capital refers to the educational qualifications of an individual, which can take shape in three ways: the embodied state, or someone’s natural ability to carry himself or talk in a certain way; the objectified state, or cultural goods that can be traded or collectively valued, like books or paintings; and the institutionalized state, or social institutions that give certificates or rewards to individuals so as to recognize their cultural competence and to provide them with “conventional, constant, legally guaranteed value.”³³ Of these three, cultural capital in the institutionalized state, like graduating from an elite university or winning an Academy Award, is the most valuable one because it is embedded in a longstanding system that is not likely to change in value.

Symbolic capital is economic in nature, which is why someone who increases her symbolic capital is also increasing her human capital and, in turn, her ability to profit from her personal experiences, knowledge, and skills. However, in order for someone to derive value from

³²Pierre Bourdieu, “The Forms of Capital,” in *Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1985), 248-9.

³³*Ibid.*, 248.

her symbolic capital, the symbolic capital must also be embedded in a social framework that recognizes it as valuable. It is, after all, “symbolic.” However, the social contexts that surround and enhance symbolic capital are not clear cut and discernable, but rather, nuanced, difficult to trace, subdivided, and diverse, creating what Foucault calls “enterprises,” or integrative social, political, and cultural networks that people draw from to reward themselves and others with value. In *The Birth of Biopolitics*, Foucault explains how an individual must not only navigate enterprises, but also convert himself into one:

The individual’s life must be lodged . . . within the framework of a multiplicity of diverse enterprises connected up to and entangled with each other, enterprises which are . . . sufficiently limited in their scale for the individual’s actions, decisions, and choices to have meaningful and perceptible effects, and numerous enough for him not to be dependent on one alone. And finally, the individual’s life itself . . . must make him into a sort of permanent and multiple enterprise.³⁴

Enterprises, both individual and collective, are comprised of social value, personal experience, moral systems, and future actions, but most importantly, they are fueled by economics—their overall purpose is to turn a profit. They draw from the allure of one’s cultural values to turn economic profitability and human capital into goals that appear personally relevant and meaningful: does an acceptance letter from Harvard University speak to the academic discipline, integrity, and personal merit of an individual or does it indicate that she is just a cog in a machine who has effectively sacrificed herself to the system, turning her mind and body into profitable human capital? Or to put it another way, what is more important, her individuality, or her existence in relation to the grain of enterprises? A line cannot be drawn between the emotional relevancy of her individuality and the profitability of her economic machinery—they are tied into the same package. The discipline, integrity, hard work, and personal responsibility that she

³⁴Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics*, 241.

has learned to cultivate—all forms of symbolic capital—are simultaneously honorable *and* economic, not only providing her with a sense of personal achievement and meaning, but also keeping her in alignment with a life path that is fundamentally economic in nature.

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During the second half of the twentieth century, the emergence of neoliberalism revamped Foucault's "technologies of the self" by transforming social measures and values into economic ones. This dramatic change in social organization resulted in a culture obsessed with productivity, efficiency, achievement, and optimization; an obsession that secular mindfulness, and the self-help industry more broadly, have worked to sustain. During the past fifty to sixty years, the practice of mindfulness has developed from what was once a spiritual practice into what is now a complex form of social enterprising that is primarily and explicitly designed to enhance individuals' accumulation of symbolic and economic capital. It is a product that practitioners can consume, most often at a cost, in order to increase their ability to perform well in other domains, like the workplace, in school, or even at home. Similarly to the person who is accepted into Harvard, a regular mindfulness practice can feel enriching and personally relevant, but it is also important to note that the work someone invests into mindfulness workshops, meditation practices, or yoga classes often stems from a desire to be more focused, less anxious, and ultimately more productive. It is difficult to separate the work required to develop one's mental acuity from the work required to be professionally successful; these are interrelated forms of effort that inform, rather than displace, one another.

It is also important to note that not everyone has access to a regular mindfulness practice. The practitioner first needs the required symbolic capital, whether social or cultural, to understand what mindfulness is and why someone might practice it, but second, even if someone

knows what it is, she also needs the required economic capital to practice it. Although there are free classes and apps available to practitioners, most workshops, books, yoga classes, and retreats are expensive. In the above mentioned *Time: Special Edition* issue, called “The New Mindfulness,” there is an article that explains how there are various mindfulness apps that can be downloaded to users’ phones, ranging in price from free to \$12.99 per month to \$99.99 per year to a \$399.99 lifetime access fee.³⁵ The magazine itself costs \$14.99. The Center for Mindfulness at the University of Massachusetts, the school where Kabat-Zinn started his Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction workshops, offers intensive 5-day residential programs or 8-week online or in-person classes that cost \$450 and \$675, respectively.³⁶ At a yoga studio in White River Junction, Vermont, a single drop-in yoga class costs \$18 and a ten-class pass is \$145.³⁷

The expense of these classes, apps, and services indicates that to be a participant of and gain access to these benefits, one must have already earned or inherited a certain level of economic capital, but more importantly, it means that the practitioner also understands why it is worthwhile to make this kind of investment in her health in the first place. In a neoliberal paradigm, having access to social goods—like elite education, niche healthcare benefits such as meditation classes, and language—is among the most important kinds of access because these goods are viewed as having high cultural capital, and people who accumulate cultural capital oftentimes gain power and status. Within the framework of neoliberalism, the entrepreneurial

³⁵Felsenthal, “The New Mindfulness,” 23.

³⁶*Center for Mindfulness in Medicine, Health Care, and Society*, University of Massachusetts Medical School, accessed March 26, 2020, <https://www.umassmed.edu/cfm/>.

³⁷“Class Prices,” Upper Valley Yoga, accessed March 26, 2020, <https://www.uppervalleyyoga.com/classes>.

subject is asked to invest resources into her body so as to increase its value, and practicing mindfulness is an effective way to do so.

The Role of Responsibility

The human body is to be cultivated not for the sake of cultivation itself, but to attain a state of economic expansion, and there is no one better equipped for self-cultivation than the individual herself. It is fitting and hardly surprising that the development of liberalism, and subsequently, neoliberalism, is correlative to the development of the self-help industry. The earliest and most popular text associated with the self-help industry was published by Samuel Smiles in 1859 and aptly titled *Self-Help*. It was such a popular book that by the end of the nineteenth century, 250,000 copies had been sold and it was widely translated.³⁸ Over one hundred years later, Margaret Thatcher would go so far as to say that she “wanted to give *Self-Help* as a gift to every schoolchild in Britain.”³⁹ The book is a manifesto of liberalism, claiming that “even those at the bottom of the social ladder should be able to improve themselves through hard graft and perseverance,”⁴⁰ and indeed, this theme can be found as early as the first page of the book:

Even the best institutions can give a man no active help. Perhaps the most they can do is, to leave him free to develop himself and improve his individual condition. But in all times men have been prone to believe that their happiness and well-being were to be secured by means of institutions rather than by their own conduct. Hence the value of legislation as an agent in human advancement has usually been much over-estimated. . . . Laws, wisely administered, will secure men in the enjoyment of the fruits of their labour . . . but no laws, however stringent, can make the idle industrious, the thriftless provident, or the drunken sober.⁴¹

³⁸“Samuel Smiles,” Britannica Academic, accessed March 26, 2020, <https://academic-eb-com.dartmouth.idm.oclc.org/levels/collegiate/article/Samuel-Smiles/68268>.

³⁹“*Self Help* by Samuel Smiles,” The British Library, accessed March 26, 2020, <https://www.bl.uk/collection-items/self-help-by-samuel-smiles>.

⁴⁰Ibid.

⁴¹Samuel Smiles, *Self-Help* (Scotts Valley, CA: CreateSpace, 2011), 1.

In this short passage, Smiles conveys not only the ethos of liberalism, but also the ethos of the self-help industry; an ethos that has dominated the industry ever since: individuals, especially those who are indolent, will only find and acquire success, whether economic or otherwise, when they learn to take responsibility for themselves and cultivate habits that are in alignment with the moral and social values of their cultures. Social systems are not responsible for anyone's unhappiness, personal failures, or hardships. These struggles are the responsibility of the individual, and the faster that she can recognize this, the faster that she will be able to diligently cultivate herself into a "positive self" who is responsive, proactive, and hardworking.

It is a strong message, and it is one that has been embedded into the very core of what it means to be an American. Liberalism is at the heart of the "American Dream," a dream that grew stronger and more nuanced during the twentieth century as not only the self-help industry expanded, but economists learned more about the power of human capital, individuals continued to internalize—and, in turn, naturalize—their role as *homo oeconomicus*, and neoliberalism emerged. The allure of materialism, like affluence and status, has always motivated people to pursue this elusive dream, and during the 1980s, the combination of globalization, the emergence of the internet, and the deregulation of the economy made it more tangible and seemingly accessible to a wider array of people, encouraging those individuals to adhere to symbolic regulatory practices that were thought to benefit them materially. The responsible individual, or the person who implemented stricter disciplinary measures on herself, was rewarded with wealth and status while everyone else appeared to fall behind. The accumulation of economic capital, but more importantly, symbolic capital, was a race in which participants were competing to prove their potential as well as their value, both economically and socially, creating a fervor

among Americans to be methodical workers who carefully stepped through hoop after hoop to achieve power and status.

In the transition from liberalism to neoliberalism, responsabilization played an essential role. In her book, *Undoing the Demos*, political theorist Wendy Brown explains how even the emergence of the word “responsibilization” as a transitive verb—being *responsibilized*—has shifted the moral weight of responsibility from being just an “individual capacity,” like the way Smiles describes it in *Self-Help*, to being a “governance project,” or a project in which subjects’ conduct is constantly organized and measured, like through data collection, tracking devices, and apps.⁴² In a neoliberal paradigm, responsabilization is an effective governing tool because, on one hand, the individual appears to be the only “accountable actor,”⁴³ or the only person who is making decisions for herself—and consequently, the only responsible agent—but, on the other hand, she is surrounded by an invisible system of governance that is strictly oriented towards economic optimization. By using integrative techniques of domination, this invisible power inflicts moral demands upon the neoliberal subject that manipulate her into sustaining the economy. She is not only responsible for its sustenance, but in accordance, she is also responsible for her performance within that system. The worker, student, or mindfulness practitioner is tasked with “discerning and undertaking the correct strategies of self-investment and entrepreneurship for thriving and surviving”⁴⁴ despite the fact that these tasks are primarily in service to her external environment rather than her internal wellbeing. In this regard, secular mindfulness is a coercive tool. It promotes itself as a way to manage one’s health, like curbing

⁴²Wendy Brown, *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism’s Stealth Revolution* (New York: Zone Books, 2015), 133.

⁴³*Ibid.*, 133.

⁴⁴*Ibid.*, 132-3.

stress, but the reason for attending to one's psyche is not just to reduce anxiety, but more importantly, to be a skilled and effective entrepreneur.

Initially, Buddhist mindfulness was introduced to the United States' culture as an escape, as a way out, and it was practiced as such, but by the end of the 1970s, Jon Kabat-Zinn thought that everyday Americans—those who would otherwise never encounter or accept these practices—deserved access to them.⁴⁵ By removing the “cultural aspects of the tradition,”⁴⁶ mindfulness went from being a tool that could be used to liberate individuals *from* structure to being a tool that could be used to integrate individuals more seamlessly *into* it. It remained a disciplinary practice, but the aim of the discipline shifted focus. Its new goal became economic. If cultivated correctly and executed well, a regular mindfulness practice has been proven to result in greater systemic benefits, like stress-relief;⁴⁷ increased academic achievement;⁴⁸ “a reservoir of inner strength;”⁴⁹ boosted performance;⁵⁰ reduced risk of heart disease;⁵¹ enduring improvements to sustained attention;⁵² and reduced anxiety, depression, and insomnia.⁵³ But more important than all these benefits, the mindfulness movement sends the message to practitioners that perfection is within the grasp of those who work the hardest, those who are

⁴⁵Jon Kabat-Zinn, “Some Reflections on The Origins of MBSR, Skillful Means, and The Trouble With Maps,” *Contemporary Buddhism* 12, no. 1 (2011): 287.

⁴⁶*Ibid.*, 287.

⁴⁷Felsenthal, “The New Mindfulness,” 6.

⁴⁸*Ibid.*, 7.

⁴⁹*Ibid.*, 14.

⁵⁰*Ibid.*, 17.

⁵¹*Ibid.*, 25.

⁵²*Ibid.*, 26.

⁵³*Ibid.*, 20.

disciplined with their time, energy, and income, and those who are committed to both efficiency and productivity. The mindfulness practitioner is a responsible agent who prioritizes her role within the neoliberal paradigm more than her role outside of it, and by practicing it in this way, she is not only smoothly blending herself into the social and economic fabric of neoliberalism, but she is also reassuring the system that it does not have to change—she will change for it.

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