



Book Reviews

Jessica Whyte, *The Morals of the Market: Human Rights and the Rise of Neoliberalism* (Verso, 2019), 278 pages.

“When we say the debt cannot be paid we are in no way against morality, dignity, or respect for one’s word. It’s our view that we don’t have the same morals as the other side. . . . We can’t accept their morals. We can’t accept their talking to us about dignity.” With these words, former President of Burkina Faso, Thomas Sankara, addressed his fellow African leaders at the summit of the Organization of African Unity in 1987 where they had gathered to discuss the rising debt crisis in post-colonial Africa. Sankara understood the neoliberal project as not being solely economic but also as having its own moral framework. In her fascinating recent book, *The Morals of the Market: Human Rights and the Rise of Neoliberalism*, Jessica Whyte identifies and addresses this blind spot in the critical literature on neoliberalism that ignores its moral dimension, by simply reducing neoliberalism to economics. Whyte, who also engages with questions of post-colonial economic justice in her book, draws attention to the centrality of morals in the neoliberal human rights enterprise, and argues that this was in itself “moral and political, rather than strictly economic” (14).

Unlike most commentaries that begin their account of the relation between neoliberalism and human rights in the 1970s, Whyte revisits the 1940s, a period in which the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) was drafted and the neoliberal intellectual cluster known as the Mont Pèlerin Society was founded. This is a defining moment in that early neoliberals foresaw that a competitive market could function only if it was anchored in a solid moral foundation, and sought to establish that ground. Whyte contests arguments that neoliberalism is amoral or that human rights are its “powerless companions” (as Samuel Moyn puts it in *Not Enough*). According to her, the trajectories of human rights and neoliberalism were intertwined, and neoliberals orchestrated the agenda of human rights and deployed its language so as to specifically instill their morals.

In the course of five chapters, followed by an afterword, we are taken on a captivating journey from the Swiss Plateau, where the neoliberal intelligentsia envisaged “a moral order for all humanity” (136), to Pinochet’s Chile where this ideal was consolidated (160), to the Global South where its colonial past has been whitewashed and absolved of colonial guilt. Whyte contends that *Liberté sans Frontières* (LSF), along with other major human rights and humanitarian NGOs, instrumentalized human rights in order to discredit Third Worldist demands for postcolonial redistribution of wealth, and to delegitimize the New International Economic Order agenda. Whyte holds that LSF played a central role in shifting responsibility for Third World struggles away from international economic arrangements and onto postcolonial states and their internal shortcomings. By intentionally depoliticizing society and taking human rights out of context, she argues, these NGOs embraced the fundamental neoliberal dichotomy between violent, coercive politics and peaceful, free markets.

Whyte captures in great clarity the subtleties and divergences within neoliberal circles and among their leading figures. She illustrates, for instance, how despite their differences the Mont Pèlerin Society neoliberals, German ordoliberal, Chicago School economists and *quadros técnicos* in Chile were all on the same wavelength about reinventing a liberal project beyond *laissez-faire* that would be founded on conservative moralism and foster Christian and family values.

Whyte meticulously traces how neoliberalism is constructed in a dualistic mindset permeated by arbitrary assumptions about human nature and social relations. In a series of close readings, she exposes how the “morals of the market” stand for adult responsibility and individual entrepreneurialism within a spontaneous order that prioritizes self-interest as well as commercial and consumerist values. Another exciting aspect of the book is how Whyte scrutinizes the “explicitly masculine subject” (94) of social and economic rights in the UDHR, and challenges the male breadwinner model of the nuclear family as the “model for the world” (95). In this respect, she sheds light on how the neoliberal ideal of professed self-reliance and independence was in fact conditioned upon women’s invisible domestic work, as well as on slave labor and colonial exploitation.

In the epilogue, Whyte returns full circle to what she hints at in the introduction. Looking at the contemporary work of human rights organizations that detach human rights from broader structural inequalities, Whyte warns that long-cherished neoliberal ideas can cross over to social movements and struggles that are led in the name of human rights. She thus alerts us to remain vigilant about whether we might be strengthening neoliberalism even while we use human rights language to contest it.

Throughout the book, Whyte does not resort to aphorisms about the ills of neoliberalism, or offer a dramatic prognosis about the fate of human rights. In an effortless and flowing writing style, Whyte confronts neoliberals with their own appalling words, woven into an astonishing and erudite critical synthesis. The book thus delivers a far-reaching and perceptive critique that fills a long-standing gap between human rights studies and analyses of neoliberalism.

Whyte concludes that “[a] break with neoliberalism requires a break with the morals of the market” (242). As the world finds itself in a crisis yet again and market morality is back on the table, this appeal could not be timelier. Earlier in her analysis, Whyte also crucially points out that neoliberals perceived socialists and social democracy as threatening the moral underpinnings of the market. She does not assess, though, that while neoliberals were framing their explicitly moral claim, socialists drawing on Marxist tradition could not agree on whether criticizing neoliberalism could rely on moral grounds or not. Surely the disagreement and deep-seated skepticism towards moral arguments within different currents of socialist thought is another story to tell. Meanwhile, however, whether today’s political economists can articulate a moral vision relevant to Sankara’s call for a post-colonial economic justice is a pressing question. If this demand goes unanswered, there may well be a temporary break with neoliberalism, only to be followed by a reinvention that will again conform to the Mont Pèlerin Society’s “morals of the market.”

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Robert B. Reich, *The System: Who Rigged It, How We Fix It* (Penguin Random House, 2020), 224 pages.

Robert Reich’s new book, *The System: Who Rigged It, How We Fix It*, is an indictment of the political structures that have created and maintain socioeconomic inequality in America, levelling an