

**How to talk about**



# **NEOLIBERALISM**

**with your friends and colleagues  
(and what to do about it)**

# **I Feel Disconnected and Powerless**

It is clear that society is not working. We are promised that if we work hard, then we will be rewarded with economic security, but we see the rich getting richer and everyone else struggling to pay rent, much less afford to own a home. We are promised that if we let the market decide, unencumbered by regulation, then everyone will benefit, but we see pollution spread through our rivers and ecosystems because doing otherwise affects short term profits. We are being lied to, and the game is up.

The lies are insidious. Even as you struggle to find work that fits your qualifications, you are told that you're lazy to not have a job and that the only value you have is as a worker. If you can't afford your bills, you're told you're irresponsible, never mind that the cost of living keeps rising. If you become disabled through doing your job, you're told that you're a burden to depend on benefits, even though you can't work anymore. The narrative always blames the individual for their situation instead of blaming our leaders for reinforcing structural disadvantages, and for keeping necessities behind locked doors.

In seeing the struggle as ours alone, we become deeply isolated from each other, even as we are all facing the same pressures. Worker solidarity has been dismantled as value is extracted from workers and funnelled to the few already rich at the top. Social institutions that were the basis of community have been eroded. Small businesses have been replaced by multinational chain stores meaning we lack local connections, and money is moved out of communities making them even poorer. At the same time, those in power are deliberately creating conflict in society, deepening the divide of citizens vs foreigners, winners and losers, us vs them, dividing the working class to diminish its power.

We are also divided from the commons, our natural resources like water and forests that we used to share and were free to enjoy. They are now privatised, legally stolen from the public, and rented back to us. Private businesses capture resources and dictate their transformation into products that may be harmful or unwanted, often putting labour in unsafe conditions for low wages, or exploiting workers overseas where labour and environmental laws are more lax.

All these tools — tax cuts for the rich, corporate bail outs, deregulation, offshoring, privatisation, outsourcing public services, mergers consolidating wealth and power, crushing trade unions, job insecurity, the continuation of colonialism, racism, and eugenics — are used to retain domination of our resources at the expense of human rights and a liveable planet. This is done under the guise of freedom, conflating the freedom for businesses to exploit workers, to poison rivers, and to not be taxed, with the freedom for individuals to live a life of dignity in a clean environment full of opportunities to pursue self actualisation. Theft of the means to thrive is justified and legitimised by the 'hard work' and 'brilliance' of the capitalists. The arrogance of those in power to take take take take and

continue taking is glorified by the media.

Sometimes referred to as 'end stage capitalism', the name given to all of these policies by their designers in the 60's and 70's is 'neoliberalism'. The name was later abandoned, as politicians instead choose to call the policies 'realistic' and 'just how things are'. However, humans existed for a hundred thousand years without capitalism, and neoliberalism makes a radical departure from regulation and small scale business, constraints that were baked into the original 19th century concepts of markets and capitalism. Neoliberalism is not just how things are, it is a spectacle to prop up the lies that greed is good, and that the rich deserve to be rich because they have some sort of moral superiority.

A lifetime of living under such gaslighting and oppression accumulates a mountain of stresses. We internalise the blame and even start to think it is our fault for making bad choices, rather than recognising the structural factors that restrict our choices. It's a betrayal. Further, there is very little effort to hold abusers accountable, and fewer real consequences if they are charged. The systems that have harmed us are able to continue unconstrained to continue harming others. This means we learn that our opinions and actions don't matter, and leads to a deep feeling of disconnection as our needs are ignored.

Understanding that your disconnection and powerlessness is a symptom of the problem, you are looking for concrete things to do next. You want to counter the systems that separate you from agency and dignity, but by design you have very little money, resources, connections, or time. You want to talk about these systems with the people in your life, but you suspect that challenging the status quo may create conflict and discomfort. If you're unsure of how the conversation will go, it's easy to simply not say anything.

This pamphlet is for you — it gives some concrete suggestions of first steps towards resisting neoliberalism, and having conversations with others about how we could begin to reclaim democratic power and create vibrant communities that support each other. These suggestions start small, beginning with your own personal experience, to plant seeds of dignity and agency before confronting neoliberalism head on.

There are many approaches to countering neoliberalism, and we need a diversity of tactics, everything from protesting for policy changes, and direct confrontation to hold those in power accountable for the harms they've caused, to plans for rebuilding from the ashes. This pamphlet is focused on the latter, specifically on things we can do right now.

The priority of our society is making rich people richer at the expense of all else. If this is not your priority, then read on.

# Live In The Truth

The truth is that the current system: capitalism, neoliberalism, individualism, is not working for the majority of us. It is hard to make ends meet, to find connection, and we are increasingly seeing the real time effects of the climate crisis. However, day to day we continue as if the system is working, and indeed as if the economy were more important than living on a habitable planet with justice and dignity for all people. The truth is not found in our media, which asks us not to look too closely at social or environmental injustice, while our politicians do nearly nothing to speak to the root causes of the climate crisis, to legacies of colonialism that fuel global inequality, or even to their colleagues' corruption. We are told this is just the way things are, that our misfortune is our own fault, and to shop to boost the economy. The truth is that our humanity is worth more than any profits. The truth is that there is such a thing as society, and that we can rebuild it.

The phrase 'Live in the truth' comes from the 1979 book 'The Power of the Powerless', in which Vaclav Havel writes about living in Czechoslovakia under communism. This is a system that was also not working, that everyone knew was not working, but that no one could speak out about. Being a dissident could lead to losing status and opportunities, and being ostracised from society. But it is impossible to be constantly gaslit, and to be forced to participate in the gaslighting of others, and at the same time to preserve one's sanity and dignity. Havel describes the core of survival as living in the truth for oneself. Living in the truth means trusting your senses to see, hear, feel what is happening — even and especially if this is counter to what the media and everyone else is saying — and acknowledging to yourself what is real.

We are in a very similar situation today, except that the system that's not working, neoliberalism, is usually unnamed. It is disguised as a base assumption about our civilisation, and therefore usually goes unchallenged. The ideas of neoliberalism are always presented as realistic, as just the way things are, as if there is no alternative. Neoliberalism would like you to see yourself as a consumer, as a passive recipient of goods, and of ideas that are pre-made for you as simple slogans, as a vassal or consumer, not as someone who has an equal stake and opportunity in creating the world we live in. The truth is that you deserve respect, and you deserve a voice. Living in the truth means recognising and knowing your dignity down to your bones.

Living under neoliberalism means experiencing trauma, even indirectly through moral injury. Acting with agency — making choices that are aligned with your values and purpose — is a strategy to avoid the worst effects of trauma. If you don't already have spaces you control in your life, you can work to carve out small spaces where you can take initiative, think and develop ideas on your own, with joy.

# Name It to Tame It

Giving something a name has power. When we can point to a phenomenon, behaviour, or pattern and name it, we begin to think critically about it. If it's something that's hurting us, naming it begins to engage our brains and takes us out of our feelings of powerlessness and overwhelm, and into a mindset where we can take action. When we can clearly name the problem, then we can begin to find a solution.

Call out neoliberalism and its lies when you see it, even if it's just in your head to yourself or in a journal you keep. Be clear and specific about what is happening. Here are some examples.

When your water bill increases while sewage is still being dumped in our rivers, you can say that the sting to your pocketbook is the result of years of neoliberal policy to privatise utilities. It is the result of giving private companies the right to profit by selling the essentials of life and of deregulation that allows neglect and mismanagement of the ecosystem to be a profitable financial decision. And all of this is enabled by a profound devaluing of the life of people and planet.

When electronics or appliances you've purchased recently break down, you can connect this to planned obsolescence, because companies profit from material extraction from the global south, and having you buy another one is profitable for these companies. Often countries are given loans by the IMF that they are unable to repay, and their only recourse is to offer their resources to the West at fire sale prices, in a modern extension of colonial looting. This extraction is exploitative of the people who live there and of their environment, all so someone can make a profit off your need for a new appliance.

When the record breaking wealth of the world's richest man (of course it is a cis, white, able bodied man) is next announced, you can ask whether their concentration of wealth is justified. Is their wealth due to talent and hard work, or have they been lucky to not face any institutional discrimination and win at a rigged game? When more weight is given to the opinion of this person on matters where they have no other qualifications, you don't need to listen. Outsized wealth and influence is a symptom of exploitation, and it is grotesque. It prevents people from having enough, and from public goods being created. Conversely, when poor people are blamed for being poor, you can point to union busting, low quality education, inadequate pay, job insecurity, zero hours contracts, the expenses of being poor, all of the structures that are designed to make life difficult.

In naming neoliberalism, you are going to identify very major, embedded problems. It can feel overwhelming that there are no quick and simple fixes. But, by living in the truth and identifying such deep, interconnected issues, you have already started to chip away at the hold that neoliberalism has on our consciousness.



# Find Joyful Alternatives

The central mantra of neoliberalism is that there is no alternative. When Thatcher said this, it was not a fact, it was a mandate and she tried to make it true. In resisting neoliberalism, it is our task to find and live the alternatives, and we can do it with joy. The joy that we create is a source of power, and joy shared is joy doubled.

Joy can come from many sources, large and small, including finding a sense of purpose, following your curiosity, working on a project alone or in a group, being in the moment, celebrating with others, making art or music, and so forth. When the day to day tasks of living are a challenge, it can be easy to forget to find and create joyful moments, or even to think of them as frivolous or hedonistic. Joy is nourishing, and it is necessary to sustain our movements. If this is a revolution, there will absolutely be dancing.

In finding joy, I'm not talking about the short lived bump that comes from buying something new or the gloating that comes from feeling superior to someone else. I'm talking about finding a deep nourishment that will sustain you. These are some suggestions that I find joyful and that let me exercise agency. Not everyone likes the same things, so adapt them to work for you.

Go for a walk, in nature if possible. Find a plant or mushroom or bird that you're not familiar with, and learn its name. Make some notes about its properties, and then use the library to consult field guides to find out what it's called. The librarians will likely be very happy to assist you. As we've seen, there is power in naming things, and having a closer relationship to nature means seeing it as something to belong to and a source of awe, not as something to dominate. This reverses one of the base assumptions of neoliberalism: that nature has no value on its own and is for taking and exploiting. So this simple, free activity of going into the woods and engaging with the wealth of diversity that can be explored, is a subversive and radical act.

Learn how to fix things. Many cities have repair cafes where items can be fixed, where you can learn how to fix your broken items. Even if you don't have repair skills, you can enable repairs by volunteering to help run a repair cafe, and meet other people who value fixing things. Gaining new skills can help build self esteem, and that boost can be doubled by using these skills to help others. Extending the life of your things means less churn on our material resources, less waste, fewer carbon emissions, and it saves you money. Run by volunteers, repair cafes exist outside of the capitalist system. Everything you repair gives the finger to capitalism.

Grow vegetables and cook them into delicious meals. This will require a bit of outside space, a bit of knowledge about what grows easily and well in your region (again, your library should be able to help here), and a bit of time to tend seedlings as they grow into

robust plants, especially during dry spells. Even if you don't have space to grow plants, learning to cook delicious meals is a daily source of joy.

Adopt an elder in your neighbourhood and find an excuse to check up on them. They might have a pet you can ask about, or a garden, and be willing to share some tips.

Read histories of the way people used to live, what power structures they had and how they changed. Learn about the early history of capitalism, and understand how much we have departed from the thinking of the time, which saw regulation as important to keeping capitalism in check. Learn about Indigenous histories and ways of life and about their connection to the land. Learn about past revolutions, about what tipping points set them off and whether they were successful or not. Learn the more recent stories of the imperial periphery (also called the global south or the developing world) and the impacts that our system of neoliberalism has around the world in terms of resource extraction, exploitation and war. Having an understanding of the past lends a fresh perspective to the present. Knowing that the way things are currently represents a very thin slice of human history makes room for a larger scope of possibility. Knowing that things have radically changed in the past, many times over, makes room for hope.

Lastly, rest. Just rest, for yourself. Not because you're exhausted and have no choice, but because it's pleasurable to have time aside from your responsibilities and obligations to be idle. Your worth is not only what you produce. Make time for rest.

## **How to Approach a Conversation**

With some practice of living in the truth, naming neoliberalism where you see it, and finding joyful alternatives, you have a lot of experience to draw on to begin talking to others. Express how you are living your truth, share your observations that call out neoliberal practices, and share the joyful alternatives that you've found.

Tell people about the 'new' kettle you got at a charity shop, and how you are glad to not create more waste by buying second hand. Tell people about the things you've learned to fix, make or grow, and how empowered it makes you feel to have those skills.

Mention the assumptions behind the news that aren't being talked about. At whose expense is it happening, whose dignity is being denied, whose voice is not being counted, and who is profiting from it.

Dream big alternatives. Ask questions about 'unreasonable' things. 'Why isn't there more cooperative housing available?' 'Why isn't there a 20 year warranty on all our appliances and electronics?' 'Why are there income caps on disabled people but not on billionaires?' 'Is

it ethical to hoard bread when people are starving?’ ‘Why aren’t we paying reparations to the people we enslaved and colonised?’ ‘Why do we think all this is normal and good?’ Ask your own audacious questions, and plant the seeds of a better world in someone else’s mind.

Make photocopies of this pamphlet and pass them out.

## Listening

People you talk to are bound to be critical of ideas that challenge the norm, but a negative response is much less likely if you are speaking about your joy and your personal experience than about abstract concepts. An argument is never won through force. Don’t try to continue a conversation that is going nowhere or becoming argumentative. People’s minds are not changed with opposition, and telling people they’re wrong isn’t a useful strategy. Instead play the long game — win the argument by creating a more fair and just world.

The story of consumption, and of creating identity through purchases is very strong even if very shallow. People can cling to this. The idea of a post neoliberal world doesn’t envision taking away things people like, it means making things people like while at the same time treating employees well, and finding non environmentally destructive ways to make them. It also means finding genuine things to identify with. Instead of finding status through passive consumption, challenging neoliberalism is about finding status and dignity through active connections to others and community. People’s core identities are not easy or quick to change. It can involve some painful growth and people can be very resistant to it. The conversation you have with them may plant a seed that they can come back to when they are ready. Engage with them with empathy.

People will also tell you ‘we’ve never done it differently, so we can’t do it differently’. Sometimes, all they need is an example to see that an alternative is possible. Sometimes, they will benefit from a side effect that they don’t want to admit to, so finding an alternative needs to consider this as well. Sometimes people just don’t like change. It can be a lot easier to accept change when you feel like you are part of the decision making process, and when you feel like your needs are being listened to. Ask genuine questions. Ask people what they think is good for them. Understand why they hold the beliefs they do. Take people’s resistance seriously. Listening to them could be an opportunity to understand their point of view better — paraphrase their position and repeat it back to them so that they know they’ve been heard. Be genuinely curious and interested in them.

This assumes that people are engaging in good faith and keeping their bigoted opinions to themselves. If they are not, then I’m sorry, you’ll need another pamphlet on dealing with



bullies and trolls.

## Connection in Community

As you start to talk with others, you will find allies. Contrary to what Thatcher said, we are not just men, women, non-binary folks, and their families. For thousands of years, humans have lived together, supporting each other. And we will continue to do so. Talk to your neighbours and find the opportunities on your street. This might start with borrowing gardening tools, and work up to forming a housing union.

Have a block party — a change of seasons is reason enough to celebrate. Find a few neighbours, pick a day, and meet outside. Perhaps your neighbourhood has an apple tree that you could get together and make cider from, then have another party when the cider is ready. Build connections with your neighbours, learn about the common problems folks face, and start to think about how you could solve them together.

Create a Resilience Web for your town at [resilienceweb.org.uk](https://resilienceweb.org.uk). This is a mapping exercise to identify organisations and community groups who are already working for social and environmental justice. The result is an online map available to anyone, and can help identify opportunities to amplify the work of others. For example, the cycle club could help deliver the community kitchen's free meals.

Find a market for gifting/bartering/trading with your neighbours. There are several apps, Olio, Freecycle, and Local Exchange Trading Schemes that enable trading without using money. If they're not available in your area, buying second hand goods sends your money to a charity instead of a multinational company, and it also means new products don't need to be manufactured.

Buying from a farmer's market and from local producers gives an opportunity to understand where your food comes from and to build relationships with the people who grow it.

The solutions we need won't come from any product, or from buying the right thing. Solutions come from working together with your neighbours and community to help each other. If you're someone who gets a large amount of self worth through your job, try to build more connections and find sources of validation in your community.

Join a union and join the general strike on May 1st 2028.

# Reclaim Your Power

With cooperation and community support, we can begin to make bigger changes. It is clear that we need to. The changes that have been won through incrementalism have been a plaster on an arterial bleed, massively insufficient to make a substantial difference. Now is the time to work on the big asks and large scale systems change.

Political actions like joining protests, signing petitions and writing letters to your MP matter and make a difference. Especially in municipal elections, vote for politicians who will fund spending on public welfare and curb corporate power. Support voting reforms like proportional representation that more accurately reflect the voters' views than winner take all voting. Push for disclosure of politician's financial assets and interests, and hold them accountable for their promises and lies. For many years, the Danish programme Detektor ran on the equivalent of BBC1 in prime time, and would verify whether statements made by politicians were true or not. The host would then have the politician admit on TV whether they had told the truth or lied.

Worldwide, happiness levels aren't correlated to economic growth, they are correlated to spending on public welfare. Happiness grows from having a sense of security, especially through misfortune or major life changes such as unemployment, illness, retirement, and so forth. Wherever you are reading this, the state has shown it is not going to guarantee this security. At the same time as working for social support through campaigning and protest, we also need faster change. Our task is to think of new ways that we can provide security for each other.

One of the best ways to help others is to simply give them money. Begin a redistribution project that will take donations and give out grants. For example, The Cambridge Solidarity Fund has distributed nearly £100,000 over 3 years in £40-£50 grants to anyone, with very few questions asked.

Create community spaces that serve a need. For example, community kitchens, and tool libraries provide reasons for people to come together. This could be a 'Lifehouse' that will act as a gathering point for the community in times of acute emergencies like natural disasters, and that in quieter times will provide services that help people through the long emergency of neoliberalism. This could be a centre to coordinate bulk purchasing for a neighbourhood, car/ride share, provide garden space for people in apartments, a space to offer skill shares repairing or making things, hold trans clothing swaps, offer childcare for people applying for jobs. In short, begin to create a centre for public life. A neighbourhood group in Hastings, Sussex is bringing buildings under community ownership to provide housing as well as space that the neighbourhood can use. They currently have 6 flats, with 12 more on the way.

Libraries give us a model for public luxury — anyone is able to read and enjoy the books, and take them out if they have a library card. Expand the library to include things like tools, hobby and sports equipment, electronics, kids toys, kitchenware. Adding items like furniture and clothing to the library would mean that making over your room or wardrobe would be as easy as returning your current items and taking out new ones. More infrequently used items like boats and vacation houses, could be loaned through interlibrary loans. Create a rich catalogue of items that are held in common that everyone can benefit from having and using.

Hold assemblies in your neighbourhoods to have public conversations about issues that matter to your community. Re-engage with civic discussions, learn how to listen to the most marginalised voices, disagree well with each other, and still agree on a way to move forward. These are skills we need to develop and practice.

Actions at the neighbourhood level can have a big material impact to people near you, and they can have ripple effects and serve as inspiration to other communities. There is a long way to go and a lot that needs to be built, but by starting with living in the truth, finding joy, and working together to assert our dignity, we can do it together.

With love,  
Helen Cook  
Winter 2024

## Acknowledgements

The ideas in this pamphlet were developed over multiple conversations with members of Cambridge Doughnut Economics Action Group, Utopia Book Club, and EarthQuakers. Special thanks to Frances Early, Pamela McLeman, Jeremy Johnson, Paul Paxton for the discussion. Thanks to Frances, Paul, Saul Pwanson and Ben Varney for your feedback on early versions, and to Ben for your insights during our conversations at the kitchen table.

# Resources

Books that have influenced this pamphlet,  
and suggestions for further reading.

*The Invisible Doctrine: The Secret History of  
Neoliberalism & How It Came to Control Your  
Life* by George Monbiot and Peter  
Hutchinson

*Power of the Powerless* by Václav Havel

*Less is More* by Jason Hickel

*Lifehouse* Adam Greenfeld

*Citizens* by Jon Alexander

*Doughnut Economics* by Kate Raworth

*Caliban and the Witch* by Silvia Federici

*The World Turned Upside Down* by  
Christopher Hill

*Braiding Sweetgrass* by Robin Wall  
Kimmerer

*Rest is Resistance* by Tricia Hersey (of the  
Nap Ministry)

*The Dawn of Everything* by David Graeber  
and David Wengrow

*Society of the Spectacle* by Guy Debord

*Capitalism and the Death Drive* by Byung  
Chul Han

