

Crisis, Suffering Physicality and the Politicisation of Supply Chains

Contribution to a Critical Exchange on *Disorienting Neoliberalism: Global Justice and the Outer Limits of Freedom* by Benjamin L. McKean for *Contemporary Political Theory*
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In the early autumn of 2021, the UK media lit up about a ‘supply chain crisis’ in Britain. Commentators blamed the combined effects of Covid and Brexit for the disastrous shortage of truck drivers that was keeping goods tied up at ports and warehouses. Many recent drivers have been East Europeans who returned home when the pandemic broke out and then found their UK re-entry blocked by new Brexit-based constraints on international mobility. Meanwhile, transport workers who had stayed in Britain were having difficulty keeping their jobs because Brexit had altered the rules about who could work legally in the UK. The main objects of media concern in the ‘crisis,’ however, were the travails of consumers. Desperate to fill up their tanks, Britons queued for hours at petrol stations waiting for scarce fuel deliveries. Along with panic-buying gas at record prices, British consumers foraged around picked-over supermarket shelves for dwindling food items. Looming on the horizon was the catastrophe to be feared most gravely, in this country that is singularly obsessed with the Yuletide season: a ‘bleak Christmas’ with no ‘turkeys,’ ‘trees’ or ‘toys’ (Guardian 2021)

For a brief time in Britain in September 2021, it thus appeared that the normally hidden operations of the supply-chain economy and their potential for breakdown had cracked through the surface of everyday life. Although supply-chains fundamentally organise early twenty-first-century economic experience, they hardly register in ordinary consciousness. It is as though the more wildly dispersed commodity production and distribution have become geographically, and the greater the sheer numbers of actors required to bring petrol to the pump or milk to the fridge, the more bedazzling the commodity’s enchantments as fetish have become. This seems paradoxical because the nodes of possible dysfunction and opportunities for claiming credit have proliferated with such abandon.

Disorienting Neoliberalism provokes insights into this ‘crisis’ that is at once very British and brimming with global portents. McKean argues that supply chains have assumed economic dominance largely because neoliberal orientations have wormed their way into the tissues of people’s everyday habits of thought and action. The unreflective disposition to perceive supply chains in our roles as consumers, when it occurs to us to consider them at all, has become very difficult to dislodge. McKean observes that for Hayek, ‘the experience of living under neoliberal institutions can make one into a properly oriented neoliberal subject who will submit to the market’ (p. 38), through a subjectivating process that Foucault’s concept of governmentality clarifies. Following McKean, we might thus wonder: what mechanisms of neoliberal governmentality were at work in BBC narratives and the Johnson government’s actions in response to the British supply chain crisis? How might these governmental mechanisms have reaffirmed popular faith in supply chains not only as a comforting expectation that they soon would resume running smoothly but, more crucially, as a matter of mundane, unthinking purchasing practise?

The Nativity as normalisation, would be one answer. All the hue and cry about the crisis robbing good Britons of their holiday certainly stoked anxiety. Yet it also folded neatly into a narrative that Christmas would come, just the same, unlike 2020 but like every other year and with plenty of packages, boxes, and bags. Such hopefulness was not misplaced. The retail and logistics industries had been investing massively for years in expanding their capacities. Then came Covid-19. The pandemic may have caused logistics snarls, but it also delivered record profits to Amazon as online orders shot through the roof. This, in turn, accelerated an already-in-motion global dynamic of increasing land purchases for warehouse construction. In California’s Inland Empire (IE) east of Los Angeles, known as the West Coast hub for the logistics industry, warehouse-building is pushing further east into agricultural territory, where one farmworker aid organisation’s representative noted, ‘We see them

pulling down the grapevines every day.’ Even as the industry moves into the Coachella Valley and stakes out more distant territory in Phoenix and Salt Lake City, **new industrial real estate construction** in the already saturated IE was still over 20 million square feet (a 3.6 percent expansion) for the third quarter of 2020 (Garland 2021). Warehouse development in the UK in the wake of the pandemic has been even more eye-popping. **The Guardian** reported in August 2021 that ‘nearly 37m sq ft (3.4m sq metres) of warehouse space is slated for construction in 2021, up from 23m sq ft last year and 21m in 2019’ pandemic’ (Kollewe and Davies 2021). Online orders had ‘risen to 60 percent of all sales, from 40 percent before the pandemic’ (Kollewe and Davies 2021). The big companies are beefing up their capabilities to ensure that, over the long haul, supply chains will govern ever more of the earth and never keep Christmas from coming. Keeping labour costs down by hiring through temp-agencies, paying low wages and thwarting unionisation among workers, who are predominantly Latinx in the IE and largely non-UK-born in Britain, is crucial to this process (De Lara 2018; Reese and Struna 2018).

McKean argues persuasively that in view of the consumerist fixations of ‘supply-chain subjectivity,’ changing capitalist society requires concerted efforts to get consumers and workers to see themselves as ruled by common conditions of domination. He then elaborates a normative philosophical basis for people implicated in supply chains to democratise supply-chain governance in the interest of pursuing certain ideals of justice. McKean’s insights that supply chains materialise a ‘political rationality’ and that bringing this ‘political effectiveness’ under the people’s control requires worker-consumer solidarity, however, can also inform critiques of discursive patterns that bolster supply chains as neoliberal apparatuses. During the Christmas supply chain crisis, for instance, the British media mostly confined reporting on labour issues to the lorry drivers. Of course, these labourers’ rights and working conditions deserve careful attention. Yet this narrow angle for covering work-related matters displaced consideration of all the other groups of workers implicated in supply chains. The event could have prompted consumers of festive delights to mull over their dependence on workers in poultry abattoirs, tree farms, and toy factories, made more palpable by the supply chains’ sudden fragility, and perhaps to inquire about these labourers’ working conditions. Instead, spotlighting truckers reinforced a prevalent ideology in supply-chain management discourses: ‘if supply chains have a *telos*, it is neither consumption nor production but the creation of value through movement along the chain’ (57). News coverage of the crisis personified that problematic by keeping the public pre-occupied with the people whose job it was to *move* things rather than make things.

Although McKean focusses on how critical orientations toward supply chains could emerge under conditions in which supply chains are operating normally, system-breakdowns might offer uniquely advantageous opportunities for transforming supply-chain subjectivity. The intense ideological work at such moments suggests as much: the effort to titrate just the right mixture of fear that eagerly sought-after products might become unavailable with reassurance that the fix is merely technical. A special threat to this discursive economy and the chain of equivalences that defines it, however, might arise from the experiences of material loss that such crisis-events precipitate for consumers. Consider, for example, the major disruption in the US meat supply chain that followed the onset of the pandemic. Despite prolific reporting on meatpacking workers’ shocking Covid infection rates, no major media figures apart from **John Oliver** seized the obvious opportunity to underscore how severe and even lethal health hazards in meat factories were hardly anything new. More ink needed spilling over the reality that meat-eaters’ reliance for nourishment on meatpackers’ exposure to bodily injury and disease wasn’t just a cruel consequence of authoritarian action by the Trump administration in the face of Covid but a core dynamic of the industry. Empty meat counters could have spurred such a new awareness of these supply chain subjects’ mutual implications in each other’s lives. Yet, ironically, genuine sympathy over slaughterhouse workers’ scandalous exposure to a virus that threatened everyone overshadowed any recognition of the more deeply embedded shared fates wrought by meat supply chains. McKean’s exhortation to acknowledge supply chains’ political logics and availability for democratic politicisation invites more attentiveness to these and other strategic opportunities.

I agree with McKean about the vital importance of political action that cultivates worker-consumer connections, in part, because this was such a powerful mode of organising in the immigrant meatpacking workers' struggle about which I wrote in my book *Breaks in the Chain* (Apostolidis 2010). To develop these links, community leaders and I founded a non-profit organisation called Safe Work/Safe Food in partnership with the workers' union. We appealed to consumers by stressing that the same production processes that destroyed workers' bodies yielded meat contamination risks that threatened to sicken people who ate Tyson's beef. Such an embodied interest in the matter made a real difference in motivating participation in the movement by people who were spared the physical horrors of meatpacking work. These individuals' bodies were not subjected, day in and day out, to the ultra-high risks of laceration, spinal injury, and muscular-skeletal disorder that abounded in the packinghouse. Yet community supporters' bodily wellbeing was at stake when the pressures of capitalist competition fostered high-speed production practises that compromised the life-enhancing benefits these people were supposed to receive as meat consumers. That mattered, politically.

This brings me to a critical comment about the book: I am more sceptical than McKean about how strongly the moral-philosophical dilemmas that he discusses in connection with Rawls can kindle political solidarity between privileged persons and the working-class people whose labour makes supply chains hum. McKean argues that individuals who do not have to endure the dangerous and precarious labour conditions that many supply-chain workers face can be moved to seek solidarity with such workers in order to gain relief from an impasse in moral reflection. The problem, McKean contends, is that the supply-chain economy makes it impossible for consumers who do not depend (directly) on supply chains for employment to affirm the justice of the society that has shaped them as moral agents. This, in turn, costs such persons their own self-respect, which is frustrating and shame-inducing. As McKean writes: 'The self-respect of consumers is threatened when they too face a constrained set of options that lead them to live their lives in contradiction with their principled beliefs in fairness. They cannot look back on a life that has been shaped by a habitual reliance on unjustly produced commodities and freely affirm the forces and relations that have shaped their self-conceptions' (p. 110).

No doubt, McKean has a valid point that this moral-philosophical quandary could help generate support for social movements that challenge the power of supply chains by inspiring individuals to form relations of solidarity with differently situated others. Yet the book bestows a primacy on these concerns that seems unwarranted, attributing to them a decisive ability to catalyse an effective re-orientation to the political economy. In contrast, I would argue for giving supply-chain subjects' embodied personal and inter-subjective experiences stronger weight when theorists envision how the social links forged by supply chains could be re-purposed as nodes and conduits of politicisation. It might be particularly important to cultivate the transformative potential of such bodily-affective experiences when the challenge is to forge solidarity between severely oppressed groups and others whose social circumstances are more favourable. Eliciting this potential would help avoid making political cooperation hinge, rather paternalistically, on privileged people's moral repugnance toward suffering endured by others, notwithstanding the translation of such disquiet into diminished self-regard that McKean sees as morally motivational.

Two distinct intellectual reference-points can help us elaborate this line of thought. Insofar as a change in consumers' critical consciousness is needed, the activation of thought through sense-experience in what Theodor W. Adorno calls 'the somatic moment' may generate more transformative energy than Rawlsian thought-experiments. McKean quotes the following memorable line from *Negative Dialectics*: '...the smallest trace of senseless suffering in the empirical world belies all the identitarian philosophy that would talk us out of that suffering' (p. 129). Adorno devised his negative-dialectical procedure, in which suffering physicality initially takes precedence over the concept even as it catalyses the critical work of mind, specifically as an antidote to the reification of the world through omnipresent commodification. This is precisely the nut that must be cracked if we are to become able to decipher supply chains as maps of strategic points for political intervention rather than as the always-already-forgotten machinery that gives 'the mystical character of commodities' ever-more global and

speedier opportunities to manifest its wonder (Marx 1977, p. 164). De-naturalising commodity fetishism depends on exploding everyday embodied experience more than it needs the judging of society by abstractly derived criteria of justice. As Adorno suggests, the latter perpetuates the fetishization of rational thought itself, as the effect and mirror-image of captivation by the commodity's mysterious antics. Rather than 'the pain of injustice' (p. 129), as McKean puts it in his passage on Adorno, what has real incendiary power is literal, physical pain: not pain that can be coherently thought as 'injustice' but rather pain that the mind cannot make sense of, and that therefore can provoke genuinely new thinking.

Du Bois, whom McKean also enlists to help craft his argument, offers another critical vantage-point on the book's questionable investment in Rawlsian political philosophy. McKean argues that from Du Bois's perspective, white people would be moved to participate in 'partnerships across the veil' primarily because they 'face threats to their self-respect and self-knowledge' (p. 137). This thesis depends on a rather selective reading of *The Souls of Black Folk*, and of Du Bois's writings more generally, notably neglecting *Black Reconstruction*. As I read *Souls*, it is far more intent upon activating new affective interchanges between Black and white people than on instigating white moral self-evaluation in relation to an ideal of freedom. Regarding the implications of *Souls* for white Americans, McKean writes: 'They too have reason to ally with Black people in order to realize their egalitarian convictions so they can achieve greater knowledge of the forces that have shaped them and acquire the self-respect that comes from the confidence that one's achievements are justly one's own' (p. 137). This strikes me as a forced effort to read Rawls into Du Bois. It reconstructs as an austere labour of philosophical reflection, sequestered within the separate minds of white and Black individuals, the warmer challenge of affective re-awakening that Du Bois evokes in the ninth chapter: 'I have thus far sought to make clear the physical, economic, and political relations of the Negroes and whites in the South. . . . But after all that has been said on these more tangible matters of human contact, there still remains . . . the atmosphere of the land, the thought and feeling, the thousand and one little actions which go to make up life' (Du Bois 1999, p. 115). What gets lost in McKean's reading of Du Bois is the latter's preoccupation with the dwindling 'intellectual commerce' and casual, physical commingling of Black and White people in everyday social life, which diminishes the necessary experiential basis of 'sympathy and cooperation' (Du Bois 1999, pp. 116-17). Transgressions of the veil in ordinary experience, not pursuing 'the freedom that [one] experiences in the thinking that lets [one] dwell above the veil' (p. 128), which sounds discordantly like the forgetting implied in Rawls's 'veil of ignorance,' is what Du Bois prescribes to alter Black and white consciousness. Musicality, more than liberated reason, sets the tone for Du Boisian political practise in *Souls*: the musicality of a text that heads each chapter with a line from one of the 'sorrow songs,' and thus with a painful expression of suffering that language alone, without the notes, cannot articulate meaningfully.

This Du Bois likely offers more fecund material for the organisers whom McKean wants to set loose on supply chains than the Rawlsian avatar of Du Bois favoured in *Disorienting Neoliberalism*. McKean rightly underscores the immense political challenge of fostering solidarity in a society that is governed as a whole by confluent dynamics of capitalist, racial, and gender power, even as those same forces incessantly generate highly variegated social experiences and thought-orientations among countless situated groups. As he concludes the book, McKean also makes the compelling point that participating in anti-capitalist social movements aimed at supply chains yields an 'experience of agency' that is vital to realising the broader transformative potential of such activism. He again employs Foucault to good and novel effect, suggesting that we think of organising practise as a 'conduct of conducts' that enables individuals to 'experience an efficacy that neoliberalism may otherwise deny them' as they 'express their freedom and equality with those they seek to conduct' (pp. 225-26). Yet the dualist political-philosophical impulse to distinguish rational ideals from their willed manifestation in practical action sits just as uneasily with the turn to Foucault, given the latter's theory of subject-formation through corporeally applied power, as it does with McKean's appeals to Adorno and Du Bois. In this sense, *Disorienting Neoliberalism* offers more a testament to the durable divides among political

theorists than an example of how to bridge them. Theorists who join McKean in affirming a passion for organising, as I and many others do, need to face this problem squarely.

Thanks in part to the effects of supply chains in breaking down and re-organising labour processes, the contradictory temporalities and spatial disruptions characteristic of precaritised work-life now pervade virtually all levels of the employment hierarchy, albeit with varying intensities. Meanwhile, as McKean points out, workers who manufacture, assemble, and distribute the goods channelled through supply chains feel the ‘uncanny’ condensations of space and time thereby produced, and the way these elude full cognition, no less than those who mainly relate to supply chains as consumers. Ultimately, McKean’s book makes me suspect that efforts to politicise supply-chain relations should focus, first, on making physically present, calling to mind, and historically interrogating these entangled temporal-spatial experiences of work and commodity-enjoyment. If a sense and notion of ‘global justice’ were then to arise, it would do so in the midst of such collective action.

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