

# On the WEIRDo neoliberal policies that protect free markets over the planet and its people



Criticising the idea that “every culture is as good as any other”, Friedrich Hayek observed in an interview from 1978 that if we do not “create and maintain” a “market society” but “destroy” it, “then two-thirds of the present population of the world will be destined to die” (p 173).<sup>1</sup> His position is reflective of the intellectual origins of the corporate-backed neoliberal crusade predominantly attached to the creation of The Mont Pelerin Society in 1947.<sup>2</sup> One of the goals of the Society was to protect western civilisation against socialism (and later, environmentalism) and to promote economic freedom, individualism, and industrial capitalism.<sup>2,3</sup>

Ironically, nearly five decades after this interview, the western model of industrial capitalism that underpins the market society cherished by Hayek and his neoliberal acolytes<sup>3,4</sup> seems largely responsible for the current climate breakdown that threatens biodiversity and the flourishing of future generations.<sup>5,6</sup> Importantly, the global spread of neoliberal ideas and institutions, promoted by what is now more generally identified as Western, Educated, Industrialised, Rich, and supposedly Democratic (WEIRD) societies<sup>7</sup> and perpetuated through the policy agendas of the International Monetary Fund, World Bank, or World Trade Organisation,<sup>2,3</sup> has further accelerated the greenhouse gas emissions responsible for global warming; from 1990 to 2019, more fossil CO<sub>2</sub> has been emitted than in the previous 240 years between 1750 and 1990.<sup>6</sup> Clearly, if neoliberalism has been the ideology ruling the planet since the 1980s or so under the spin of Reaganomics and Thatcherism,<sup>2,4</sup> this ideology did not contribute to limiting CO<sub>2</sub> emissions but rather worsened the climate crisis. Thus, unsurprisingly, neoliberal policies are often deemed incompatible with planetary health.<sup>8</sup>

In this Comment, we propose to take this argument forward by positing that the intersection of the WEIRD cosmology and neoliberal policies is neatly encapsulated by what we termed the WEIRDo framework, which consists of five characteristics: Wasteful (and polluting), Extractive, Imperialistic, Reductionist, and Domination-oriented policies.<sup>2-4,9</sup> Together, they foster the protection and promotion of free markets over those of the planet and its people.

A wide range of historical, political, and sociological studies show that neoliberalism is the epitome of pro-capitalist activism boosting a carbon-intensive agenda.<sup>2-4</sup> Indeed, many neoliberal policies were crafted by and promoted through a large network of oil-funded think tanks and “second-hand dealers in ideas” (p 483),<sup>1</sup> which offer the intellectual and material justifications for a WEIRDo policy strategy. These justifications are meant to prevent the development of alternative imaginaries to market-based approaches for addressing environmental degradation.<sup>2</sup>

The full-spectrum neoliberal response to the challenge of the climate crisis relies on three main pillars: agnotology, market-based instruments, and technofixes.<sup>3</sup> Agnotology amounts to the edification of ignorance (eg, science denialism) to cast doubt and disseminate disinformation on the detrimental impacts of waste and pollution on planetary health, which are largely generated by extractive industries.<sup>2</sup> The implementation of market-based instruments such as rights to pollute (eg, carbon markets) appears as a flawed and failed solution that contributes to maintaining an imperial mode of living inherently in breach of planetary boundaries and that reduces the resolution of ecological issues to mere commodification.<sup>3,5,6,9</sup> Technofixes (eg, geoengineering) are the most striking and concerning manifestation of hubristic human domination over an ever-more commodified nature.<sup>4</sup> These pillars showcase the deep-seated neoliberal belief that to address global warming, engineering the climate with fantasised profit-led technologies is a better approach than criticising or regulating fetishised market processes.<sup>3,4</sup>

Since the financial crisis in 2008, the world is witnessing growing criticism of neoliberalism,<sup>2,3</sup> but arguably WEIRDo policies are stronger than ever.<sup>6</sup> Challenging these policies will require serious engagement with the addiction to economic growth that characterises the post-war cosmology of WEIRD societies and has colonised the rest of the world.<sup>5</sup> Hayek’s motto for neoliberalism was “to make politically possible what today is not politically possible” (p 199).<sup>1</sup> Although post-growth might not seem politically possible nowadays, the idea that no alternative exists to neoliberalism stems from a displacement of

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imagination.<sup>5</sup> The world needs to now decolonise its imagination from the WEIRDo policies of WEIRD neoliberal economists,<sup>5</sup> protect (climate) science,<sup>2,3</sup> and establish ecosocial principles such as the Wellbeing, Inclusivity, Sufficiency, Empowerment, and Resilience (WISER) framework.<sup>10</sup> Planetary wellbeing highlights the detrimental effects of waste and pollution on living beings and ecosystems. Inclusivity gives voice to the local communities who oppose extractive industries. Sufficiency challenges the imperial mode of living that crosses planetary boundaries. Empowerment counters the depoliticisation of market-based policies that reduce everything to economic trade-offs. Resilience exposes the short-lived illusion of being able to dominate nature with technofixes. Protecting and promoting the planet and its people—no longer the market society—is now an urgent need.

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