

A Christian Counter-Movement to Neo-liberalism?

Recently I was sitting with friends on the back-deck when the topic of neo-liberalism came up.

Somehow, the friends who had gathered that afternoon had each listened to a podcast on this subject on our national radio and were pondering the implications of what they'd heard. These were not academics who read economists or social theorists but ordinary people who, looking at what is happening in their worlds and to their children, are getting scared. They sense that they will, probably, be alright, but their children and grandchildren? The fear now runs deep. They're also Christians who, in the privacy of the deck, were expressing their frustrations about the churches they attend. They see them as irrelevant when it comes to their fears of a society falling apart or the parlous nature of what seems to lie ahead. They see their churches introducing new programs for bible study and discipleship or new techniques for connecting with their neighborhoods or another round of mission statements but nothing that signals, in the midst of liturgies, worship songs and culture wars, that their churches grasp the crisis of our society.

The conversation caused me reflect again about the Christian response to this massive social and cultural unravelling too many of us are experiencing. I know Catholic thinkers^[1] who are engaged with these questions in their parishes, but what troubled me out of this back-deck conversation around a podcast was that the majority of Euro-tribal churches of which I am aware seem to be lost in entirely different kinds of questions about their own identities and survival. In the language of the German social theorist, Heinz Bude^[2], the 'mood' of more and more people is that of confusion, anger and fear. He comments for example that '...outrage that the world as we know it has been allowed to self-destruct merely conceals fear about not knowing where to go next' (page 2). Meanwhile the mood of the Euro-tribal churches continues focused on how to fix and reform themselves out of their loss of identity and anxious fears about connecting with people.

It was in this context that I was reading Michael Brie's *Karl Polanyi in Dialogue* where he presents a question raised by the feminist theorist, Nancy Fraser,^[3] in a 2012 lecture where she asked why there is no 'Polanyian' counter movement for the protection of society against neo-liberalism?^[4] Karl Polanyi (1886-1964) was a Hungarian émigré to England (1933) and then the USA (1940). His book *The Great Transformation* continues to shape our thinking about the nature of capitalism and the forms of a just economic community.^[5] Fraser represents a growing body of thinkers wanting to understand the development of neo-liberalism in the second half of the 20th century and its effects on contemporary societies. In the question she raises, is the conviction that those effects involve the unleashing of destructive forces that are undermining democracies and the common good of societies. A multi-faceted conversation about the situation of societies in the West, the economics of neo-liberalism and a renewed search for common good is being taken up across a multiplicity of disciplines. It is, one might say, in the water – there is an urgent concern across multiple segments of society about finding ways of protecting growing numbers of people who feel left out of the social and economic world that neo-liberalism has created.^[6] These forces created a crushingly destructive social imaginary that has resulted in a backlash of resentment^[7] so evident in Trump's farcical circus and the UK's struggle with Brexit. The tragedy is that movements of resentment are being

turned into pantomime by leaders with no idea of what is actually happening. It's sobering and scary because the resentment hasn't gone away (witnessed in the "yellow jacket" protests on the streets of Paris against Macron's imposition of gas taxes), neo-liberalism is still in place and liberal elites still believe they can fix the old story.

In the meantime, the churches continue on their merry way seeking out means of reforming themselves, trying on various fixes that will restore them, and doubling down on identity politics. The question staring at us as God's people is why there isn't a groundswell, a counter-movement from Christians to these massive forces of social destruction that are so plainly visible? Without it these churches don't deserve to exist. Alongside concerns about our climate, the compelling question facing us, is that of how we transform the economic basis of our lives (and, therefore, the social structures). Questions about the kinds of societies and economies needed to confront these challenges are critical in the face of the increasing anxiety people feel over their social and economic futures. It's not that there is no response coming from the churches. There are congregations trying to find ways of engaging the ravages of neoliberalism in their communities. The Archbishop of Canterbury has been pointing the Church of England in that direction as does the wonderful body of Catholic social teaching that informs their communities. But it seems these represent small ripples in the wider pools of church systems focused on their own preservation.

There's lots of evidence that western societies, like the environment, are unravelling in scary ways. The social contracts that formed and held these societies together following the end of World War 2, with its unprecedented economic boom (social safety nets, labour and capitalist cooperation or the enlarging of a bureaucratized state) have fallen apart. Keynesianism in its many forms was replaced in a post-Regan and Thatcher era (80s), by a neo-liberal economics convinced that the invisible hand driving capitalism is far better suited to benefit all members of society when freed from the constraints and controls of the state. This long experiment has resulted in the undoing of social safety nets and the throwing of increasing numbers of people onto their own means. By the beginning of 2018 the economic disparity between the top 1% and the bottom 50% of the world was growing rapidly.

As people are increasingly cast upon themselves, economic and social life in bureaucratized and individualized societies have resulted in a deepening sense of isolation in the local and alienation from government. Loneliness grows apace in local contexts with diminishing means to cultivate belonging.^[8] The fragile roots of community and neighborhood that have required constant tending have been clear cut. In cities, younger generations can no longer afford to live where they were born and grew up. Young people, even pre-teens, express anxiety about whether they will be able to afford a place to live or belong. These are not overblown statements, but a raw reality for increasing numbers across our society. In a *Guardian* article ('Theresa May faces a new crisis after mass walkout over social policy')^[9] Michael Savage reported on the massive social inequalities confronting citizens of the UK where London and its environs functions as an economic zone at odds with the social and economic realities of the rest of the country. Over the last thirty years in the US (not just since the 2008 meltdown) the real incomes of most citizens have remained flat or declined while the top 2% experienced massive economic surpluses not seen since the Gilded Age^[10]. Something is terribly awry. The arguments outlining the effects of neo-liberal economics with its politics of minimal engagement

with society (that which Margaret Thatcher adamantly declared doesn't exist – only individuals with their own means and capacities) are now legion as is evidenced by the growing number of books and podcasts describing the alienating, destructive realities it has created. In this massive unravelling of social life people don't see their politicians or economic leaders able to address these challenges or, perhaps more disturbing, the politicians seem incapable of grasping what is happening. This unravelling has created the fear that there are no alternatives.

In the light of these challenges I want to reframe Fraser's question and direct it toward the Euro-tribal churches: **Why isn't there a Christian counter movement for the protection of society from neo-liberalism?**^[11] What is disturbing is that those communities called as sign, witness and foretaste of God's reweaving of all creation in Christ (see Ephesians 1), particularly a majority of Euro-tribal churches, are lost in dreams of remaking, renewing and reforming themselves.^[12] They're self-absorbed in the search for solutions to their own decline; they're stuck in culture wars that have little to do with God's agency. Coming to terms with this unravelling of the modern western imagination must become a priority for the Euro-tribal churches. It's time for the churches to move beyond their ecclesiocentric gazing to discern the way God is calling them to address this question. It's not the only question but right now it's an important one. This is not the same as saying the churches must have social and economic solutions. But the churches are Spirit-guided communities that are called to embody in Christ the practices that form people who are for the common good and, in so doing, discern at the local, multiple ways of engaging the economic and social crises. This is about the focus of their hope, the places where the energy of church leaders is directed. It is not about having answers but about forming communities oriented toward the everyday lives of the people in the communities where they live. It is far more than what has come to be called 'social action' and it is about a way of life than can only be formed out of a liturgical community rooted in the rhythms of worship.

^[1] Thinkers who have retained a focus on the agency of God and the search for the common good or have developed considered arguments for a civil economy, for example Luigino Bruni and Stefano Zamagni, *Civil Economy* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Agenda Publishing, 2016).

^[2] Heinz Bude, *The Mood of the World* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2018).

^[3] Nancy Fraser is the Henry and Louise A. Loeb Professor of Philosophy and Politics at the New School for Social Research, NY.

^[4] Michael Brie, *Karl Polanyi in Dialogue* (Montreal, PQ.: Black Rose Books, 2017) 7.

^[5] Karl Polanyi, *The Great Transformation*. 2nd ed. (Boston, MS: Beacon Press, 2002). First published in 1944.

^[6] The following is a small selection of recent books on this subject: Ari Russell Hochschild, *Strangers in their Own Land* (NY: New Press, 2016); George Monbiot, *Out of the Wreckage: A New Politics for an Age of Crisis* (London: Verso, 2017); Yanis Varoufakis, *The Global*

Minotaur (London: Zed Books, 2015); Wolfgang Streeck, *Buying Time: The Delayed Crisis of Democratic Capitalism* (NY: Verso, 2017); Paul Mason, *Postcapitalism: A Guide to Our Future* (NY: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2016); David Goodhart, *The Road to Somewhere* (London: Hurst & Company, 2018); Ian Bremmer, *US Vs. Them: The Failure of Globalism* (NY: Portfolio/Penguin, 2018); Guy Standing, *The Precariat* (NY: Bloomsbury 2013); Byung-Chulhan, *Psycho-Politics: Neoliberalism and the New Technologies of Power* (London: Verso, 2017); David Coates, *Flawed Capitalism: The Anglo-American Condition and its Resolution* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Agenda Publishing, 2018); Nancy Fraser and Rahel Jaeggi, *Capitalism: A Conversation in Critical Theory* (NY: Polity, 2018); Adam Kotsko, *Neoliberalism's Demons: On the Political Theology of Late Capitalism* (NY: Stamford University Press, 2018); Anand Giiiridharadas, *Winners Take All: The Elite Charade of Changing the World* (NY: Knopf Doubleday, 2018).

[7] See Pankaj Mishra's *Age of Anger: A History of the Present* (Macmillan USA, 2017) and Nancy Fraser's 'Progressive neoliberalism versus reactionary populism: a Hobson's choice' in *The Great Regression* edited by Heinrich Geiselberger (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2017).

[8] See Ceylan Yeginsu, 'U.K Appoints a Minister for Loneliness' *New York Times*, Jan. 17. 2018.

[9] Michael Savage, 'Theresa May faces a new crisis after mass walkout over social policy,' *The Guardian*, Sunday, 3 December 2017. See <http://www.theguardian.com/politics/2017/dec/02/theresa-may-crisis-mass-walkout-social-policy-alan-milburn?>

[10] An expression for the late nineteenth century in America when great wealth became concentrated among a few industrialists.

[11] There remains a good deal of confusion around what is neo-liberalism. Along with the numerous books cited in footnote #6 CBC Radio Canada has an excellent pod cast on this subject. See, <https://www.cbc.ca/radio/ideas/is-neoliberalism-destroying-the-world-1.4839399>

[12] For a comprehensive presentation of this argument see Alan J. Roxburgh and Martin Robinson, *Practices for the Refounding of God's People*, (Church Publishing, 2018).