

Individualism and the Travails of Neoliberalism

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Abstract: Much of the success of neoliberalism can be explained by its appropriation of individualism. In the nineteenth-century egalitarian individualism led to progressive social movements aiming to universalise opportunities for autonomy and self-development. From anti-slavery and extending to universal human rights, these social movements supported the idea that individualism was for everyone, and increased individual freedom went along with increased equality. In this context, education became a means to achieve equality. The process of industrialisation, however, introduced competitive economic individualism, which took over and changed the role of education. From being about making good citizens, education became about personal advancement, and competition. Expansion of education across the world meant the dissemination of education as 'human capital'. In workplaces, Human Resource Management practices helped to spread ideas that seem progressive, even desirable, such as equal opportunities, equality and diversity. The ultimate result of these developments was rising inequality throughout the world.

Keywords: individualism, neoinstitutionalism, neoliberalism, education, inequality.

Título: Individualismo e as atribuições do neoliberalismo

Resumo: O sucesso do neoliberalismo pode ser explicado, em grande parte, pela sua apropriação do individualismo. No séc. XIX o individualismo igualitário originou movimentos sociais visando a universalização da autonomia e autodesenvolvimento. Independentemente da sua natureza, estes movimentos sociais apoiavam-se na ideia de que o individualismo seria para todos e que mais liberdade individual equivaleria a mais igualdade. A educação tornou-se um meio para a igualdade até que o processo de industrialização originou o individualismo económico e competitivo. De instrumento para melhorar os cidadãos a educação tornou-se um domínio de competição e avanço pessoal. A expansão da educação significou a sua disseminação enquanto 'capital humano'. No trabalho, as práticas de Gestão de Recursos Humanos disseminaram ideias que parecem progressivas, até desejáveis, como igualdade de oportunidades, igualdade e diversidade. O resultado final destes desenvolvimentos foi o aumento da desigualdade no mundo.

Palavras-chave: individualismo, neoinstitucionalismo, neoliberalismo, educação, desigualdade.

Título: Individualismo y las tribulaciones del neoliberalismo

Resumen: Gran parte del éxito del neoliberalismo puede explicarse por su apropiación del individualismo. En el siglo XIX, el individualismo igualitario condujo a movimientos sociales progresivos con el objetivo de universalizar las oportunidades de autonomía y autodesarrollo. Desde la lucha contra la esclavitud y la extensión a los derechos humanos universales, estos movimientos sociales apoyaron la idea de que el individualismo era para todos, y una mayor libertad individual acompañó a una mayor igualdad. En este contexto, la educación se convirtió en un medio para lograr la igualdad. Sin embargo, el proceso de industrialización introdujo el individualismo económico competitivo, que se hizo cargo y cambió el papel de la educación. De ser sobre hacer buenos ciudadanos, la educación se convirtió en avance personal y competencia. La expansión de la educación significó la difusión de la educación como "capital humano". En los lugares de trabajo, las prácticas de gestión de recursos humanos ayudaron a difundir ideas que parecen progresivas, incluso deseables, como la igualdad de oportunidades, la igualdad y la diversidad. El resultado final de estos desarrollos fue la creciente desigualdad en todo el mundo.

Palabras clave: individualismo, neoinstitucionalismo, neoliberalismo, educación, desigualdad.

Individualism and the travails of neoliberalism

The essence of neoliberalism is that politics is put at the service of international capital. In the UK, people are constantly being told that they are living in a strange, new world after the Brexit vote and the election of Donald Trump. It is a world of protectionism and trade wars fueled by a revolt against the idea that politics merely exists to facilitate international capitalism. Evidence of this revolt can now be found throughout Europe. The revolt is often labelled as 'populism' or 'a swing to the right'. But what do we call those who do not want to revolt against neoliberalism, for example, those who did not vote for Trump or Brexit; but might have voted for Macron? Tony Blair likes the term 'progressives' and one of the things this paper will do is explain where this idea comes from and why it is misleading. There is much research, such as Hochschild's (2016), to suggest there are a lot of people who do not like the way the world has gone since the late 1970s. In the UK, 1976 is the important date: the high-point of equality and of trade-union membership. What we do not have is a lot of research on the people who think that there has been social progress since that time and who, moreover, feel they have a personal stake in it.

Progressives are likely to be graduates. We know that the 'left behind' who voted for Trump and Brexit do not like the way having a university degree has become the starting point for any sort of successful or worthwhile life. They also do not like what they discern in the tone of some newspapers, experts, and debates – namely that a degree is a necessary qualification for having an opinion worth listening to. Nor do they like the laws passed since the 1970s which are seemingly designed to allow those who do not deserve it to do better than them by jumping the queue. This is usually what is meant by criticism of 'political correctness'. Lots of these people decided years ago that politics was not doing anything for them, so they did not bother to vote. Until Trump, and Nigel Farage and Marine Le Pen and Viktor Orbán and so on, there was no-one they could vote for who would promise them a world which was more like the one they believed existed before the mid to late 1970s. This had been a world in which your prosperity, and your worth, was in large part determined by your nationality, and sometimes by your race and your gender, rather than your education. Your fate was decided by your birth into membership of something much bigger than you (a version of natural rights) and which gave you certain duties and privileges.

The advanced economies had delivered on this promise for much of the twentieth century with their corporations (often state-owned) acting as national champions, economic nationalism, well-paid jobs, training (including apprenticeships) the promise of long-term employment (rarely fulfilled in fact) and, in many countries, high-levels of union membership. Do not just think of the UK, US or France, think of the former Eastern Bloc with many of the same characteristics, though with less affluence. The education system was fit for purpose too. Hardly anyone went to university in the UK for example, and the UK still had a twin-track education system with leavers going into different parts of the world that economic nationalism built. But in the 1970s the ground was already shifting: not just in the economy, with the growth of the service sector, the oil shock, the beginnings of what became known as the 'new international division of labour' which meant that manufacturing jobs moved to less developed countries; but also in the organization of the workplace and in education. This largely meant creating the kind of institutions necessary to make individualism a reality for large numbers of people rather than a tiny minority. Opportunities for autonomy and self-development were no longer to be confined to a small elite.

The populist revolt is made up of people who do not feel they have benefitted from the institutions that were created to spread the benefits of individualism. On the other side of the political divide are the people who feel they have benefited from those institutions, and who also feel that those institutions are progressive. Those who oppose Trump and Brexit do so from a position of moral superiority since they believe they are defending human rights, meritocracy and equal opportunities. This moral superiority may not be well-founded and it can be best understood by looking at the history of the way neoliberalism appropriated individualism.

The idea that opportunities for autonomy and self-development should not be confined to a small elite was a mainstay of nineteenth-century progressive social movements beginning with anti-slavery and extending to universal human rights. For a long time, this idea gave equal weight to increased individual freedom and increased equality – individualism for everyone. However in the later nineteenth century, and especially the twentieth, individualism became less of a radical critique of the status quo, and particularly of the way capitalism was turning out, and more mainstream politics (for example informing debates over legal regulation, for example through the Factory Acts in the UK) and, eventually, a defining characteristic of all sorts of modern institutions including capitalist ones. The way that modern workplaces claim to offer freedom and equality to employees is one of the key reasons why progressives find themselves on the same side as neoliberal capitalism.

One way of thinking about the way nineteenth-century progressive movements gave neoliberal capitalism its moral superiority is to use the theoretical framework developed in my earlier work (Fevre, 2005). This framework includes the distinction between ways of making sense of the world which depend on beliefs and on knowledge, or sentiment and cognition. The progressive social movements were powered by a belief that all human beings deserved freedom and autonomy. Because this *sentimental* individualism depends on a fundamental, egalitarian belief, this kind of individualism can never accept inequality. Neoliberal capitalism gains legitimacy from *cognitive* individualism which takes it as self-evident that modern institutions provide freedom and autonomy for all. If they produce inequality this is merely the inevitable outcome of people choosing to exercise their freedom and autonomy in different ways.

In my latest book (2016) I describe how sentimental individualism was turned into cognitive individualism because it was in this process that neoliberalism acquired the political support it needed to put sympathetic politicians in power for several generations. This meant moving away from economic nationalism but, at the same time, making the world seem full of fulfilling opportunities for those who could benefit from the new cognitive individualism (from the start this was almost always those with the highest levels of education) while, from the mid-1970s onwards there was ever-widening inequality in the long-established capitalist economies. This process had two main elements – one in education systems, the other in the workplace. The journey starts with education, and the ideas of neoinstitutionalists like John W. Meyer.

From sentimental to cognitive individualism

Individualism is the most important cause and consequence of the expansion of education. This expansion happened in different ways in different countries however egalitarian individualism provided many of the goals of that expansion and some of the means too. Throughout the world, more education has helped to create the conditions

required for the shift in politics necessitated for neoliberalism to take hold. The story begins in the US, where the achievements of egalitarian individualism, most obviously in the form of comprehensive education, were unmatched for many years. Some scholars in the US, and specifically John Meyer and his colleagues who share his neo-institutionalist approach, favour theories which suggest that the world is becoming more homogenous (Meyer and Bromley, 2013). Their theories were elaborated long before globalization was recognized as distinctive a phenomenon as it later became. Meyer and his colleagues argued that the world was becoming more the same because institutions were becoming more the same and an example of that was the way that universal education had spread around the world (Meyer et al, 1977). This important aspect of what they described as 'world culture' (Meyer, 2010) started in the US as a kind of bottom-up expansion of universal education (Meyer et al, 1979). It overtook the top-down expansion of education in Germany and it took a long, long time for the rest of Europe to catch up. France was amongst those with the fastest expansion, but it took almost a hundred years for the UK to reach US levels of comprehensive education given to older age groups.

Thus, the expansion of education has happened in all sorts of different ways. Politics has had a lot to do with these variations as we will see. However, while taking effect at different times in different countries, the idea that education was a good thing for everybody was a powerful driver for the growth of mass compulsory schooling across the world. This created new opportunities for lots of people who had not been able to go to school, still less to university. It did all of that, but also did the groundwork needed for the spread of neoliberal capitalism. Under the principles of egalitarian individualism, everybody should go to school, everybody should be able to get the qualifications they needed to succeed, and achieving these aims paved the way for neoliberalism.

The period in which universal education expanded as a result of a bottom-up movement in the US was a time when the US was much more egalitarian than it later became. Michael Sandel (Sandel, 1998, 2012), the American philosopher who advocates that morality should not be left to the market, thinks of it as a golden era. It was in the mid-nineteenth century, before the relatively late industrialization of the US that the egalitarian ideology emerged (Higham, 1974). This is the ideology later celebrated in so many Hollywood films of small rural communities where everybody worked together, and built their schools and churches and defended themselves, and so forth. Of course, freedom and equality was not required in the plantations. The American Ideology described by Higham applied only to whites. After industrialisation and successive waves of immigration in the late nineteenth century, this ideology changed.

The egalitarian American Ideology of the mid-nineteenth century which celebrated the individualism appropriate to the agrarian republic (not including the slave states) was over-laid by a more competitive economic individualism (which also excluded non-whites) as immigration and industrialization proceeded. This was a prime example of cognitive replacing sentimental individualism and it was the former that was famously critiqued by educational philosopher John Dewey (1929/30), who regretted the loss of the moral qualities of old individualism. Individualism was no longer about people living together in community settings. The new individualism was self-interested and recognized economic rather than moral interests.

In the 1930s, Dewey was looking back during at a short period in American history when there had been a revival of progressive thinking which nurtured some hopes for a return to the golden age of moral individualism. Its rejection of the hegemony of cognitive

individualism shows how far this progressive thinking was from the version that Tony Blair has in mind. However, attempts to revive sentimental individualism in the U.S. were short-lived. Competitive economic individualism was already too deeply entrenched, and Dewey thought there was obvious evidence of the strength of its hold over American society in the education system. Education had ceased to be about making people into good citizens who were going to help the community develop and take their part in decisions about what the community should do. Education was no longer undertaken in the interests of the community at all, but simply in the interests of personal advancement.

Since getting into, and succeeding in, education was now undertaken for personal benefit, Dewey's description of education was rather similar to the 'new' intellectual product that, three decades after Dewey's critique, American economists began to describe as 'human capital theory' (e.g. Becker, 1993). What they described as a theory is a perfect match for the way Americans began to feel about education in the 1930s, as described by Dewey. They had started to think about education as an investment for individual advancement. Competition became part of their motives to get educated, immersing people in the vicious circle of trying to outdo their neighbours' qualifications. One of the outcomes of this competition was to increase in the length of time Americans spent in education, especially with the addition of post-graduate degrees in American universities. In Europe, this did not happen until much later.

At the time Dewey was writing, the rate of expansion of education in Europe had slowed and European countries could no longer keep up with the US. Moreover, education was still a highly stratified system with opportunities for the working class limited to vocational education. For example, in the UK, in the 1930s, education was still rigidly divided in terms of class. Working-class people got little education, enough only for a manual job. Working-class children left school at 14, and if they were lucky, they subsequently got some sort of training so they could access a more skilled manual job.

It is important to understand how politics played a major role in the huge differences between the education systems of the US, and the UK, and some other European countries (Rubinson, 1986). Unlike the US, where the political parties had to compete for working class votes, the European bourgeoisies already had their own parties and had captured the state (there was no big state in the U.S. to capture anyway). But the effects of these different political realities on class formation are surprising. In Europe, the working class were strengthened. In the U.S. they were emasculated, and social and economic competition was understood to be classless. The capitalist class in the US could resist not comprehensive education but ended up with no political opposition. In Europe, the capitalist class put a stop to educational expansion but created implacable opposition from an organized working class.

It is worth taking a little bit of time to explain, after Rubinson (1986), how education became political dynamite in Europe in the twentieth century whereas the question of comprehensive education had been largely settled decades before in the U.S. The European bourgeoisies opposed the expansion of education for the working class because they feared that a social revolution might follow. In Europe, therefore, the working class were deprived of education in order keep them subordinated. In America, the process was entirely different, as the political parties there were not based on class divisions. It was noted earlier that the movement for education expansion in the US had started from the bottom-up and had a distinct kind of impetus (Meyer et al, 1979). It was driven in part by the promotion of Protestant values as a component of American national identity, but it

was not political in the European sense and did not encounter the same political opposition. In Europe, the denial of the expansion of education became a cause that strengthened working-class parties, whereas in the US the spread of universal education managed to defuse the potential for political opposition that was latent in American society.

For decades, European countries resisted comprehensive education. In the UK special circumstances, like the Second World War and the national ideology that developed during the war, were necessary to create the political circumstances in which the idea of an equal right to education could be accepted in principle. Thus, egalitarian individualism did not really take hold in education until Britain developed something like the American Ideology during and immediately after the Second World War. It was only now, so many decades later than in the United States, that politics could accommodate egalitarian individualism. It had taken a very long time for politics in the UK to get to the point at which some people began to think that education was not a simply a faithful reflection of a class system, and to believe that education was for everybody. Comprehensive education came into favour however it took another thirty years to achieve a situation in which most Britons did not think the purpose of education was reproducing the class system.

The principle that education should help to deliver the universal rights of individuals, who should all get the chance to succeed and get qualifications, provided that they worked hard and were talented, was not fully in place within UK educational institutions until the expansion of comprehensive education was well advanced. This was in the mid-1970s, at which time the requirements of UK capitalism were changing (paralleling that rapid industrialization decades before in the US) with manual work declining and white-collar work in the services expanding the middle class. More qualified school-leavers were required and, as more of those people were able to use those qualifications in the labour market, the UK was beginning to build a bridge to neoliberal capitalism. This would include the neoliberal macroeconomic policies which would hasten the further decline of manufacturing and the export of manufacturing jobs. It would also eventually include a new regulatory environment for banking and finance. However, for our purposes, the most important element of the bridge to neoliberalism was the way changes in education and the labour market changed the politics of the UK so the people would vote for politicians, from Thatcher to Blair, who would put in place their version of American neoliberal capitalism. Comprehensive education had been growing in the UK from the 1960s simultaneously with the growth of the service sector, but the political significance of this was not evident for several years. Although this only became clear in the late 1970s, class was losing its purchase on politics throughout this period, as social background was no longer seen as the determinant of life chances. Working-class children could go to school and get qualifications, and later find a job different from that of their fathers. Whereas before, in the 1950s, even if you got the qualifications, getting a job which required those qualifications was not guaranteed, and getting an apprenticeship might be more lucrative than a low-paid white-collar job.

By the late 1970s, the stage was set in the UK for the arrival of Margaret Thatcher. The ground had been prepared for voters to accept her claim that there was no longer a class system since anyone could succeed at school, even go to university, and anyone could find a job corresponding to their talents and qualifications. The affluent workers who voted for Thatcher could not have done so if they had not the knowledge that universal education now provided the means to individualism for all. Thatcher also argued that the

remaining barriers to egalitarian individualism had not been erected by capitalism, but socialism. Enough people (to elect her and keep her in power) now agreed with her that socialism was holding people back, just as trade unions kept going on strike and limited people from exercising their freedom. Thatcher managed also to successfully present the labour movement as historically outdated, emphasizing all the advances in people's working conditions evident in modern workplaces. By this point it was becoming clear that the British education system had finally changed into something much more like the American system, so much so that people could begin to think of education as an investment and as qualifications as worth competing over. This ushered in a British version of the US syndrome of never-ending educational competition and conceptual dictatorship of the idea of human capital. Although educational expansion in the UK and other countries certainly proceeded very differently to the US, the same end-point of a competitive economic individualism well attuned to neoliberal politics was eventually reached in all of these cases, although at different times.

This could not have happened without the political changes described here and it is because these political changes were required that it took so many decades for the UK to arrive at the same situation that John Dewey was complaining about in America in the 1930s. What Dewey feared would happen in America, particularly increased inequality, happened in every country where education expansion, and the rise of the service sector, occurred. In the late 1950s, Michael Young's dystopian satire (1958) anticipated intelligence and merit as the main social creed at the basis of a different social division in place of class differences. Young saw a new merit-powered elite opposing a meritless and deprived group of those who did not make it through the educational system. Twenty years later evidence from around the world began to confirm that putting education in charge of people's futures resulted in the expansion of social inequality. It has taken a little while longer, but Young's criticism of meritocracy is now becoming mainstream, even orthodox.

Many other differences between the U.S. and European societies still appeared to be in place in the 1970s yet, behind the scenes, there was evidence of convergence. Putting in place the changes that US institutions had already undergone in the UK proved to be crucial to the development, in the UK, of the kind of individualism that had begun to grow in the US before the Progressive Era. Key examples of this convergence include UK equalities legislation and the conversion of UK employers to the opinion that their employees did not represent undifferentiated labour but were individuals whose talents and contributions were of great value (in other words, they had varying human capital). In the late 1970s developments like these were to prove crucial to the shift that occurred in work and politics, first in the UK and subsequently throughout the world.

The expansion of education worldwide was not the only mean for spreading the vision of education as 'human capital'. The aforementioned neoinstitutionalists, John Meyer (e.g. 2010) and his colleagues, especially Frank Dobbin (e.g. 2005, 2009) researched both global education expansion and the way that the growth of Human Resource Management (HRM) had helped to spread the practices justified by egalitarian individualism. These practices were not simply diffused from one company to another, or from one country to another as companies moved around the world, but were also promoted in supranational organizations. The regulatory organizations, as well as the lawmakers, spread the same ideas which originated in the U.S. around the globe, the most obvious being equal opportunities, and subsequently equality and diversity. The legal changes and HRM practices can be encompassed within the term 'people management'

(not to be confused with 'personnel management'). In the UK, people management developed into something very close to what it had already become general in the United States at a much earlier stage. British equal opportunity legislation closely followed the US legislation for example. Subsequently, other countries have followed the American lead in this and many other aspects of people management.

Just as in the case of universal education, the spread of the American techniques of people management are evidence that the attractions of egalitarian individualism are global. Just as in the case of universal education, equal opportunities are moral goals which reformers and critics of the system can support. After all, who can argue against everybody getting a chance to get an education? Who can now argue against equal opportunities and equal employment? But the acceptance of these ideas created the conditions for neoliberalism to flourish. Neoliberalism is not nineteenth-century capitalism in its practices, or in the way it treats labour, and sometimes it looks like a new type of capitalism. The new institutionalists found it extraordinary how across the world, and despite all the local differences, and the politics, and the history, things were apparently ending up the same. But the one thing that really has been the same is the way that the moral pull of egalitarian individualism turned out to be the means by which the world was made into an environment in which neoliberalism could thrive.

In the 1970s, the elements that would later provide evidence of convergence for the neoinstitutionalists, such as the way British employers responded to equality legislation, had already been under way for decades in the US. British employers were now claiming that they wanted to treat their employees as individuals because, they confessed, they understood that their employees were their most important assets. Two British sociologists were able to document the incredulous reactions of workers encountering this American approach to workplace relations for the first time (Nichols and Beynon, 1977). They said that, when the workers at the Chemical plant they were studying in Bristol heard that they would be treated as individuals, they laughed. Then, when they understood that what their employer intended was that they should become like the managers, managing themselves and driving themselves to work harder, and to seeking to achieve company goals, they refused. At that time, they were happy to rely on the trade unions to look after their interests but things changed, and in the end, neither the incredulity or the resistance endured.

The changes that affected work and politics in the UK in the late 1970s had taken form originally in the United States, then spread around the world. People were ready to accept those changes, and they were ready to accept the neoliberal arguments that trade unions were the problem and not a solution, and that socialism was an obstacle to egalitarian individualism. People were ready to accept that universal education had consigned the class war to history and that employers had changed and now valued their employees as their most important resource. Employers would identify the talents and interests of individuals and invest in them. This is the new strain of individualism which had egalitarian appeal but now started to underpin rising inequality across the world.

In the UK, its late arrival was a major reason for the sudden and unexpected conversion of the UK (remember the high point of equality and union membership was in the mid-1970s) to a neoliberal political settlement that remains in place today. What has now happened, nearly forty years after Margaret Thatcher's first election victory, to the expectations that were raised in British workplaces by the developments in 'people management' covering not only HRM but law and public policy? In particular, what has

happened to workers' expectations that they will be treated as individuals and not undifferentiated labour?

There are significant groups of workers who feel that they have been excluded from all of this and would prefer to go back to the state of work and politics in the UK before the neoliberal revolution with nationalized industries, collective bargaining and economic nationalism. These are the people who voted for Trump, or for Brexit, and feel that they were indeed left behind in this new world. We may think that the reason they feel that way is that they are not graduates although, admittedly, graduates also voted for Trump and Brexit, albeit in significantly smaller proportions. However, this explanation appears weak unless we also bring in both politics and the economy. Those non-graduates come from communities in America and the UK where there have been preceded by generations who had the expectation of good, well-paying manual jobs. Their jobs may not have been good in terms of health and safety, but they were secure, well-paying jobs. In these communities, people expected to be able to go into the same jobs as their fathers, the same jobs as their uncles, and, if they were lucky, they would get an apprenticeship and a well-paying job. They would have money in their pockets, and they would feel secure, especially as the government, whether it was in the United States, in the United Kingdom, or France or Germany, looked after them, had their interests at heart.

Many of industries such as coal and steel had been nationalized. Other companies were cherished as economic champions, for example in manufacturing, utilities or energy, precisely as Donald Trump is now espousing his version of economic nationalism. Under this ideological framework, protection of jobs and living standards is promised in exchange for the contribution to national productivity. The people who were left behind, have this common history to remember; it is not just that they not have degrees; it is also that they remember a world before this neoliberal revolution. The people who feel that have been left behind, have now spoken, and not just in the UK and the US. They speak when they vote for right-wing parties across the world, when they vote for economic nationalism, and when they vote for policies from nationalists like Donald Trump.

The people they feel left behind *by* have been treated to more and more imaginative ways of giving them opportunities for self-determination. In general, they appear to be satisfied with the opportunities they have and the way their expectations are being fulfilled. Although these British surveys are increasingly out of date, various analyses of British data show at least 6 out of 10 employees trust neoliberal institutions, including corporations, to deliver individualism. The Fair Treatment at Work Survey revealed in 2008 that six out of ten workers said that they knew all they needed to know about their rights at work (Fevre et al, 2009). In the British Workplace Behaviour Survey (BWBS) undertaken a few months before, six out of ten said that the needs of their organisation did not always come before the needs of the people, and six out of ten said 'where I work people are treated as individuals' (Fevre et al, 2010). When the neutral option was removed from this question the proportion claiming to be treated as individuals rose from 60 to 80 per cent.

The idea of alienation is central to the history of capitalism, and it is not just Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels we have to thank for descriptions of work as demeaning. Our familiarity with the notion that work in capitalism could never provide meaning or fulfilment to the vast majority but was part of the romantic socialist tradition of John Ruskin (Gagnier, 2010; Sayre and Löwy, 2005) and of the writings of John Dewey. These writers would struggle to understand how neoliberal capitalism could persuade 80 per cent of employees they are treated as individuals at work. If we think about capitalism's record of creating

alienating, demeaning and dangerous work, a 60 per cent approval rate surprising enough, but 80 per cent believing they are treated as individuals shows the full extent of the social and political transformation following the neoliberal settlement. Admittedly these data are a decade old, but questions in the 2008 Fair Treatment survey supplementary questionnaire suggested that the 60 per cent agreement with the assumptions about individualism which supported neoliberalism was fairly solid. For example, around three-quarters agreed, or strongly agreed, that they had some say over the way they worked and got the respect they deserved from their colleagues. Over 60 per cent said they often or always have a choice in deciding how they did their work. Clearly capitalist institutions are doing a good job of persuading lots of people (though less so the unemployed and the retired) that individualism is safe with them, in other words, cognitive individualism really is the answer.

We can assume that the 20 per cent who did not think they were treated as individuals in these surveys would have numbered amongst those whom we now describe as the left behind and who voted for Trump and for Brexit. However, these numbers are drawn from surveys of *employees* and the 20 per cent are members of a larger group that includes retired people and other non-employees. Thus, the numbers of those who not finding meaning and fulfilment in work are bigger than the twenty per cent suggest. Many people in this group have not usually exercised their right to vote. However, if political choices became available which allow them to express their dissatisfaction with the transformation that had so benefitted others, we should not really be surprised that they now chose to take part in elections and referenda.

The main focus of this paper has been on those in the opposite camp. The ones who Blair thinks of as 'progressives' and who certainly feel that they have a personal stake in social progress. We have a programme of international research producing qualitative data to help us explain what the statistics discussed here really mean, for example what do people mean when they say they are treated as individuals? For example, what does it mean when we know power has been transferred from employees to employers to facilitate the intensification of work – most obviously in high-commitment workplaces – even when labour markets are tight?

Our programme of interviews with millennial graduates aged between 25 and 39 in as many countries around the world is almost complete. Since the interviewees in our study are graduates, even postgraduates, so we would expect them to appear within the sixty or eighty per cent of employees who think they are treated as individuals. So far, we have conducted interviews in Portugal, US, UK, and Singapore with China in progress. Our comparative focus allows us to consider the effect of political and economic differences, as well as legal differences between countries. For example, there are huge differences between the UK and Portugal in terms of labour market regulation, as well as obvious differences in employment and unemployment rates. The comparative focus therefore allows us to test the idea that individualism in the workplace really means the same thing in these different countries.

We are only now beginning our comparative analysis, but it is already clear that many people think that it is the workplace, rather than the school or the university, that offers them the best chance of being treated as individuals. This seems surprising given their work is intensifying, particularly in high commitment workplaces where people are driving themselves to work as hard as they ever would have done in the factories influenced by the doctrines of Frederick Taylor since the 1920s. Across all of the countries where we did our research, interviewees told us that their workplaces can recognize them

as individuals, or if they do not do this now, they should. However, it is important to point out that these reports of workplaces which recognize individuals are, to a large degree, independent of how the interviewees defined individualism.

The interviews revealed differences in what people think about when you ask them about individualism. These differences were not reflected in variations in the answers about whether people were recognized as individuals, but in variations in the evidence that the interviewees gave us to attest to this. For example, in one of the interviews in Boston, in the United States, a man said that he was treated as an individual at work because he was allowed to wear what he wants to work a Friday. He might be doing telesales in a Call Centre, without enjoying much discretion of his work, but he has some discretion over what he wears. In Cardiff, in the UK, another call-centre worker said they were treated as an individual because they enjoyed discretion over what music plays while they work. Moreover, they finish earlier on Friday and can go for a drink with their colleagues. These accounts are a long way from the way a highly skilled employee of an engineering company said he had been treated as an individual. He had worked in Amsterdam and was now working in Portugal and had expectations very similar to those from another study of people who worked at very high-end research and development engineering company in the UK (Fevre et al, 2012). They expected the company to get them postgraduate degrees, to allow them to learn different languages, and moreover, to allow them to capitalize on this investment in transferable skills by moving on to other employers. In these cases, the evidence of the employer's recognition of the employee as an individual is not to allow them to dress down on a Friday, or select the music piped into their workplace, but their enjoyment of training and development which puts them in a position to change jobs. Yet, despite the differences, what the interviews in our most recent research had in common was the idea that if they were to be respected as an individual anywhere, it was in work.

Conclusion

The survey data discussed above, and our new qualitative research, suggest that, at least in a large section of the workforce, and particularly amongst graduates, there is acceptance of the principles of neoliberal individualism. However, this latest iteration of the idea of individualism could not have produced so many adherents if it had not been able to build on the earlier moral individualism, that is to say, the idea that we should treat other people the same as us and give them all the opportunities that we have.

It should be acknowledged that this has not simply been a journey from sentimental to cognitive individualism since moral individualism has both secular and religious roots. For example, many of those who supported anti-slavery, and the campaign against child labour, in the UK believed in egalitarian individualism because they believed that everybody matters because everybody has a soul. The anti-slavery movement in the UK certainly had a religious element, and many of those who led the movement were Quakers, but there was also an enormous secular component to anti-slavery. It grew into a huge social movement as the campaign against slavery moved from town to town, organizing mass meetings and boycotts of the produce of the slave states across the Atlantic. The movement recruited small shopkeepers who stopped selling sugar because sugar, they argued, was made from the blood of slaves. They put notices in the windows of the shops announcing their boycotts so spreading the word amongst their customers,

some of whom were working-class. The anti-slavery movement was cross-class, but huge numbers of the working-class turning out at mass meetings.

This powerful social movement eventually led to the abolition of the slave trade but, just as importantly, to the diffusion of new values associated with moral individualism throughout British society. These values could then be drawn upon by subsequent social movements including: the campaign against child labour, the British Chartists who campaigned for universal political rights for men, the later labour movement, the women's movement, the civil rights movements in the United States and in Northern Ireland. To some extent all these movements could draw on a religious as well as secular version of individualism. It is important to recognize, however, that in both cases people were drawing on belief systems, rather than knowledge, for their values and principles. This is, of course, why the secular version of moral individualism is best understood as *sentimental*.

For all of the contribution of religious individualism to particular social movements, these movements shared common roots in a nineteenth-century sentimental individualism for which the seminal text was Tom Paine's *The Rights of Man* ([1792]2014), a world's best-seller and by far the most popular book of its day. Paine made it clear in later, much less popular, writings which criticized Christianity that the belief system he was drawing on was sentimental rather than religious. The classic account of this belief system can be found in Emile Durkheim's ([1898]1969) famous essay about individualism which was written as an intervention in the Dreyfus case. Dreyfus, the Jewish army officer who was falsely accused of spying, was mistreated by politicians and the military and sentenced to solitary confinement on Devil's Island. Several French intellectuals expressed their outrage about this miscarriage of justice including Émile Zola, who faced trial and fled to England to escape imprisonment. Durkheim eventually joined the fight by publishing his essay *Individualism and the Intellectuals* to explain that by disagreeing with the government and the military, supporters of Dreyfus were not letting the French Republic down and being unpatriotic. In fact, they were putting into practice the belief system the Republic was intended to protect by insisting that the rights of all individuals must be respected. Durkheim argued that the very foundation of the Republic was the idea that all human beings matter, regardless of individual characteristics, such as being Jewish. Everybody should be treated the same, and that was why the intellectuals were better defenders of the French Republic than the generals.

Now, so many decades later, we live in a world which was shaped by the belief systems of religious and sentimental individualism but in which the individualism that matters no longer requires the renewal of belief. Around the globe, in many different countries, people now feel that their work situation is allowing them to grow, to develop, to fulfil themselves. When this does not happen, like the Portuguese woman we interviewed who decided to set her own partnership, then people feel cheated, and get very angry because work has not given them the opportunities they expect. Cognitive individualism requires evidence that its expectations are being fulfilled.

We need to understand all this while bearing in mind the other side of the coin: those others around the world who feel they have been completely excluded from these developments and have no expectations of being treated as individuals. We have to remember that the graduates in our qualitative research differ from a lot of people who could have been interviewed in all of these countries and who could not have talked about their jobs being fulfilling and rewarding and allowing them to develop and grow. As noted

earlier, the difference between those who seem happy with neoliberal, cognitive individualism and those who are disappointed by it cannot be captured simply but distinguishing graduates from non-graduates. The expectations people have of how work does, or at least will, allow them to be individuals affect their political attitudes. We did not ask the interviewees in our international study explicit questions about politics. There were no questions about politics in the interviews, except for China where sampling required a question about Communist Party membership, and most of the interviewees did not mention politics. However, their answers to the questions that we did ask them suggest that a part of the reason that they think the way that they do and largely did not vote for Trump or for Brexit is because they have a stake in neoliberalism. Neoliberalism has given them the vocabulary to talk about the work in this way and the expectation of how their work should be (see Fevre, 2016 for a detailed view).

Expectations that cognitive individualism will be delivered in the workplace – where you will be able to express yourself, expect to be listened to, and for your opinion to count for something – are the legacy of sentimental individualism. These hopes began life in social movements which were much radical, even revolutionary, and profoundly egalitarian. Even though the inequality that surrounds them shows how far-fetched this is, those graduates we talked to still thought they were signing up to egalitarian individualism and that individualism for them means individualism for everyone. They retain their moral superiority because they consider they are on the side of human rights, meritocracy and equal opportunities. This helps to explain why so many of them were shocked and offended by the Brexit and Trump votes and the other political developments I mentioned earlier on. It also helps to explain why, even now, they find it so difficult to understand and accept that the travails of neoliberalism may not be temporary. This is also why Blair's 'progressive' label is so unhelpful. The values of the nineteenth century social movements were indeed progressive but neoliberal capitalism had turned them into fodder for its public relations machine.

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