

**Economic Recovery for Whom?**

**Jobs, Business, and *Homo Oeconomicus* in BC's COVID-19 Economic Recovery Plan**

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**ABSTRACT**

This qualitative study examines how neoliberal rationality is reproduced and reinforced, in addition to how certain lives are centered while others marginalized and excluded, in British Columbia's COVID-19 pandemic economic recovery plan titled "*Stronger BC for Everyone*". Utilizing Foucauldian Discourse Analysis, this study found that neoliberalism is sustained in this recovery plan through the discursive centering of jobs, business, and *homo oeconomicus*—the productive, self-interested, and entrepreneurial "economic man". This paper also proposes that the realities of marginalized subjects and demands for radical alternatives are repackaged to uphold neoliberal rationality, leaving palpable silences on the realities of those who are the most marginalized throughout this pandemic. These reconfigurations and silences further entrench the hegemony of neoliberalism as the only common-sense solution to the existing inequities. Furthermore, this study illustrates the importance of re-politicizing social work and the need for more research radical alternatives to neoliberalism.

**KEYWORDS:** economic recovery, COVID-19, inequity, neoliberalism, Foucauldian Discourse Analysis

## Table of Contents

Dedications.....	2
Abstract.....	3
Table of Contents.....	4
CHAPTER ONE: Introduction.....	5
Situating the research within a scholarly field.....	7
Methodology and Theoretical Framework.....	8
Research Design.....	11
Data Coding and Analysis.....	12
Ethical Considerations.....	13
CHAPTER TWO: Neoliberalism and Post-Crisis Recovery: Literature Review.....	16
CHAPTER THREE: Jobs, Business, and <i>Homo Oeconomicus</i> at the Centre.....	29
Jobs and <i>Homo Oeconomicus</i> at the Centre.....	29
Business and the Economy at the Centre.....	34
Conclusion.....	38
CHAPTER FOUR: Repackaging Marginalized Realities & Demands for Change.....	39
Repackaging Marginalized Realities.....	39
“The Most Vulnerable” .....	41
Repackaging Demands for Change.....	44
Palpable Silences.....	48
Conclusion.....	49
CHAPTER FOUR: Conclusion: Radical Alternatives and Re-politicizing Social Work.....	50
Limitations of the Study.....	51
The Need for Research on Radical Alternatives.....	52
Re-politicizing Social Work.....	53
Reference List.....	56
Appendices.....	63

## CHAPTER ONE

### Introduction

At the time of writing, Canada is in the grips of the COVID-19 pandemic's third wave. Over 300,000 people have been infected since the World Health Organization announced COVID-19's pandemic status, while over 11,000 have died of this virus (Government of Canada, 2020). British Columbia (BC) is seeing a rise in new infections, hospitalization, and deaths as the economy reopens (BCCDC, 2020a). In addition, this province is in the midst of a homelessness crisis and a worsening deadly overdose crisis—one which has taken the lives of more people per month than COVID-19 (Mauboules, 2020; Schmunk, 2020). The convergence of these public health crises is exacerbated by longstanding social and economic inequities.

Despite the province of British Columbia not collecting disaggregated race-based and sociodemographic data on COVID-19, recent data shows that marginalized communities in BC are disproportionately impacted by the health, social, and economic impacts of this pandemic. A Statistics Canada report shows that BC neighborhoods with a higher number of racialized households experience a mortality rate that is 10 times higher than other neighborhoods, a trend that can also be found in other major Canadian cities (Subedi, et. al., 2020). This data is further supported by monthly surveillance reports by BC Centre for Disease Control showing that neighborhoods where many low-income, migrant, Indigenous, and racialized communities reside account for the steady increase of new infections (2020a). Low income and racialized people also reported experiencing a higher rate of food insecurity and more difficulty accessing health care during this pandemic (BC Ministry of Health, 2020). Given the stark disparity, policy solutions that completely challenge the status quo in the post-pandemic recovery are crucially needed.

In September 2020, the centre-left New Democratic Party (NDP) government of British Columbia announced its post-pandemic economic recovery plan titled *Stronger BC for Everyone* (Government of BC, 2020a). Touted by political commentators as a pre-snap election political platform for the NDP, this document lays out the then-minority government's vision of BC's COVID-19 economic recovery. A snap election was indeed announced a month after the release of this economic recovery plan, and the BC NDP successfully secured a strong majority government on October 23, 2020 (Weichel, 2020). Given its majority status, this government will be able to implement its post-pandemic economic recovery agenda without much political resistance.

Grounded in a critical analysis of neoliberalism as the common-sense political answer to a deeply inequitable crisis, this research aims to unearth the exclusion of communities experiencing marginalization in BC's post-pandemic economic recovery plan. Utilizing a Foucauldian methodology of discourse analysis, I center this research on the research questions: How does the BC's economic recovery plan reproduce and reinforce neoliberal rationality? How does this plan center certain lives and certain communities while marginalizing and excluding others? Based on this study's findings, I assert that neoliberalism is discursively reinforced through the centering of jobs, businesses, and *homo oeconomicus*—the rational, productive, and self-interested economic man—in *Stronger BC*, while marginalized realities and demands for radical change are repackaged to further serve neoliberal reason.

This research is crucial and relevant now more than ever due to the deeply political and ethical questions facing us today—questions which have been brought under the spotlight due to the inequitable impacts of COVID-19. Whose lives are allowed to live and thrive? And whose lives are not worthy of living under our current sociopolitical and economic system? The

staggering discrepancy of this virus' impacts may finally serve as a wake-up call for the wider society to reconsider our commitment to neoliberalism, a system which has divided and harmed us so badly. I expect the next months and years after the delivery of vaccines to be a crucial political window for social movements to demand a pandemic recovery that offers a more just and equitable sociopolitical and economic system. Now is the time to act, question widely-held assumptions, and radically envision solutions that center the lives and wellbeing of communities that have long been subjugated. I hope that my work could contribute to this growing movement and emerging topic because research is, after all, a political act (Macias, 2015a).

This research is deeply rooted in my experience working alongside communities that face interlocking forms of marginalization in BC, such as poverty, homelessness, racism, colonialism, substance use stigma, transphobia, and mass criminalization. I worked in these neighborhoods in various capacities: as a shelter worker, community organizer, outreach social worker, and educator. Throughout, I bore witness to the immense strength, joy, and mutual aid that exist in these communities. However, I also witnessed the injustices they face in the forms of growing wealth inequality, rising incarceration of Indigenous and racialized people, and a deadly overdose crisis. The Downtown Eastside and Surrey areas of BC's Lower Mainland where I worked as a social worker are some of the hardest hit by COVID-19—an unsurprising fact given the social and health inequality faced by these communities (BC Centre for Disease Control, 2020a). Yet, I fear that their lives are not considered at all in crucial policies such as this economic recovery plan. I decided to pursue this research topic to resist the silencing and exclusion of the lives of the people I served and continue to serve.

### **Situating the Research within a Scholarly Field**

Discussions on the root causes of the inequitable impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic strike a similar tone to the same discussion on the 2008 financial crisis. Authors identify neoliberalism as the root cause of both crises' disproportionate impacts on marginalized communities, manifested in longstanding cuts to health and social services and corporate deregulation (Ferguson & Lavalette, 2013; Kecskes, 2020; Primrose, et al., 2020; Thomas and Tufts, 2015). Defined by Brown (2005) as a "political rationality" invested in the creation of *homo oeconomicus*, neoliberalism aims to produce the ideal citizen-subject, one who is rational, self-interested, focused on consuming, and entrepreneurial. Those who fail to follow these ideals risk being marginalized or excluded in neoliberalism's nation-building project (Ferguson & Lavalette, 2013).

Despite being the culprit of inequitable crises, economic recovery policies post-2008 financial crisis across the Global North show a deepening commitment to neoliberalism. Touted as "common sense" solutions in the name of stimulating the economy, governments of all stripes in Canada, the US, and the UK opted to implement neoliberal measures, resulting in deeper cuts to health and social services, weakening labour protection, and "Open Door" economic policies (Cahill, 2011; Ferguson & Lavalette, 2013; Labonte & Ruckert, 2015; Apeldoorn & de Graaff, 2017). In Canada, there are growing calls for a radical and more just health, social, and economic system after COVID-19 pandemic—one that is founded on principles of equity and justice, committed to putting people's health and wellbeing first, and invested in strengthening universal health access and social safety net (The Chief Public Health Officer of Canada, 2020; Just Recovery, 2020). However, lessons from the financial crisis' recovery shows a grim outlook on

the possibility of radical change. A powerful social movement demanding meaningful change is, therefore, required (Cahill, 2011).

### **Methodology and Theoretical Framework**

This research utilizes the tools offered by the methodology Foucauldian Discourse Analysis (FDA). A Foucauldian analysis to discourse provides the ability to ask a different set of question when attempting to understand the exclusion of marginalized groups in a policy plan created by a government claiming to be inclusive and progressive. Instead of asking “why” such exclusion occur, a Foucauldian analysis to discourse asks “how” existing structures of “common sense” truths, domination, subjugation, and control come to be (Rabinow, 1984). Specifically, it requires researchers to “interrogate how power is at work” in how a taken-for-granted truth governs the lives of subjects, how it “explicitly or implicitly denies, disavows, or excludes” certain lives while accepting or including others (Macias, 2015a, p. 225). FDA is grounded on the onto-epistemological assumption that problematizes claims to universal truths by exploring how power and knowledge produce these truths and their subjects through discourse (Chambon, 1999; Macias, 2015a). Rabinow (1984) contends that Foucault himself takes a highly critical approach to statements of universal truths, urging to “historicize” such claims in order to examine their social functions.

Foucault’s conceptions of power/knowledge and discourse is central in FDA. For Foucault, power is diffused—it exists everywhere, not just through a top-down manner and never divorced from how knowledge is produced and sustains certain truths (Waitt, 2005; Chambon, 1999). Therefore, in order to understand power, one must understand “how discourse constitutes subjects, regulates their desires, and implicitly and explicitly calculates their relationships with other subjects and with society” (Macias, 2015a, p. 231). In defining discourse, I am particularly

working off of Powell and Khan's (2012) and Macias' (2015a) elaborations of discourse as existing not just as text or talk, rather it includes social structures, social struggles, and "historically variable ways" that enable the dominance of certain truths at the expense of the control, delegitimization, and silencing of others. Waitt (2005) further elaborates this definition by contending that discourse creates "processes of exclusion" which limits both the collective boundaries of the social and what can or cannot be said. Through examining neoliberal discourses of "the economy" embedded within the economic recovery plan, this research uncovers which subjects are allowed to be included/excluded in BC's economic recovery, in addition to examining how other realities and demands for radical change are silenced.

The theoretical frameworks of this research are neoliberal rationality (Brown, 2005) and interlocking systems of oppression (Razack, 1998). Brown (2005) rooted her analysis of neoliberalism in Foucault's conceptual tool of governmentality, which examines how "processes, techniques, and procedures" that exist in the management of politics, the state, communities, and individuals regulate and govern lives, conduct, and choices (Rose, 1999 in Powell & Khan, 2012). Contrary to its common conflation with laissez-faire economics where the state "steps back" from intervening in the free market, Brown (2005) argues that actually-existing neoliberalism requires the active involvement of the state and its apparatuses—the law, the economy, and policy—to ensure the flourishing and continuous social dissemination of this political rationality. Neoliberalism as a political rationality extends beyond mere politics and the economy; rather, it disseminates neoliberal values to all spheres of life, striving to discursively produce the ideal rational, self-interested, and entrepreneurial citizen-subject: the *homo oeconomicus* (Brown, 2005). This framework is crucial to better understand how the economic

recovery plan relies on “common sense” neoliberal responses to the health and socioeconomic crisis of COVID-19 while continuing to produce ideal neoliberal subjects.

Interlocking systems of oppression as defined by Razack (1998)—unlike the oft-essentializing and additive application of intersectional analysis—underlines the complex, historically-, and site-specific interrelations of systems of domination. This analysis acknowledges the shifting positions of power and privilege, positing that systems of domination rely on each other to produce subjects that “exist symbiotically but hierarchically” (Razack, 1998, p. 13). Through utilizing this framework, I am able to examine how, despite potential claims of inclusion in the government’s plan, marginalized bodies and communities experiencing interlocking forms of economic, racial, or colonial subjugation are still excluded. This analysis matches well with a Foucauldian framework given its suspicion of essentialism and its focus on the historical footprints of and subject formation produced by systems of domination. Furthermore, these two frameworks enable me to gain a deeper understanding of how some lives are centered within BC’s economic recovery plan while rendering invisible the lives of those seen as undeserving under the dominant discourse of post-crisis recovery: those who are the most marginalized and experiencing the disproportionate harms of this pandemic.

### **Research design**

This qualitative research examines the BC Government’s economic recovery plan titled “Stronger B.C. for Everyone” using Foucauldian Discourse Analysis as methodology. This document is available to the public on the BC Government’s website. I also utilized an additional source of data: the BC’s Economic Recovery Backgrounder document, available on the BC Government’s website. Barbour (2016) notes that archival or documentary research are useful in exploring how certain issues come to be, aligned with FDA’s quest to understand how certain

discourses become unquestioned truths. Having this additional source in addition to the economic recovery plan is aligned with Macias' (2015a) suggestion on the importance of a genealogical approach to FDA, given its emphasis on understanding that text and talk are "manifestations of discourse". The combination of these documents, albeit not exhaustive, will provide a more comprehensive understanding of the wider discourses of this government and the mechanisms it uses to sustain certain truths.

### *Data Coding and Analysis*

I utilized a thematic analysis approach to coding in this research, defined by Braun and Clarke (2006, p. 79) as "a method for identifying, analyzing and reporting patterns (themes) within data." This approach is appropriate due to its flexibility, usefulness in providing a rich and complex account of data, and compatibility with essentialist or constructivist paradigms (Braun & Clarke, 2006). After gathering the sources of data as described above, I began my coding process by reading the texts and familiarizing myself with the texts. This step is aligned with Waitt's (2005, p. 189) suggestion for FDA researchers to "absorb yourself in your texts" in order to be able to look for key themes which will be useful in analyzing the connections between texts and statements. I generated preliminary codes as I was re-reading the texts, going line-by-line and marking the codes on the margins of the documents while always keeping in mind my research question. At this stage, additional analytical questions included: How does this plan discursively produce ideas of deserving and undeserving subjects? Who is imagined as the beneficiary of this plan? How does this plan define the economy? Who are the creators of this document? Which sector or initiative receive the most investment and the least, and which ones are entirely missing? Next, I grouped different codes and identified their potential themes and sub-themes. Following Braun and Clarke's (2006) advice, I relied on the visual aid of a mind

map for this stage. After a few iterations of this process, accompanied by continuously reviewing the codes and themes, I began to extract the data onto a table on Excel sheet, grouped according to themes as suggested by Braun and Clarke (2006). The analysis of data occurred after this, writing the story for each individual theme in relation to the research questions and bearing in mind the research's methodological and theoretical frameworks. The final analysis and writing process occurred right after this.

Throughout the processes above, I investigated the mechanisms that silence certain truths and reinforce common sense ideologies such as neoliberalism. Waitt (2005) provided the example of the provision of an academic discipline or key expert commentary as “strategies of conviction”, in addition to underlining the role of silence in underlining the subjugation of others and maintaining unquestioned assumptions. This is crucial in examining the exclusion of marginalized communities in the economic recovery plan, especially given the socioeconomic and political context BC is in with skyrocketing overdose deaths, high rate of wealth inequality, and rising number of homelessness on top of the disproportionate number of COVID-19 infections in poor and racialized communities. I kept a research journal where I also noted the silences that are palpable throughout my coding and analysis processes, with the goal of including its content in my final analysis process.

### **Ethical Considerations**

This research is solely focused on publicly available policy documents; therefore, it did not require an ethics review process. However, there are still several ethical considerations I had to take into account. The first is that this study will take place on stolen Indigenous land while attempting to center the realities of subjects experiencing interlocking forms. As an uninvited settler, I will never be able to fully comprehend the impacts of continuous policies of settler

colonialism on this land and of this pandemic on Indigenous communities in BC. In addition, a Foucauldian approach to analyzing discourse is still grounded in Westcentrism, rendering it incompatible to the project of decolonization, defined by Tuck and Yang (2012) as “the repatriation of Indigenous land and life.” However, I am committed to utilize Foucauldian analysis of discourse to understand how this Economic Recovery Plan discursively produces and upholds the dominance of neoliberalism and settler colonialism while subjugating Indigenous ways of being, living, and knowing.

This is connected to another concern I have, which is what Macias (2016, p. 20) refers as the “violence of representation enacted in the representation in violence.” Archival research is not an innocent endeavor, and in this research I will be attempting to represent the violence of exclusion of subjugated lives. In deciding whose subjugated lives are named as excluded in this research alone, I have undoubtedly excluded or simplified other lives in addition to retelling stories of communities which I am not a part of. I am, and have been throughout the research process, in the ever-shifting “ethical quicksand” (Macias, 2016, p. 36). However, I am committed to maintaining a critical awareness of the ethical quandaries throughout this research. In addition, I am committed to staying true to my commitment to utilize this work to join a larger call for a more just post-pandemic recovery and the envisioning of a more just social relations.

In the next chapters, I lay out the contents of this research. I begin with this study’s literature review in Chapter Two, with a focus on exploring neoliberalism and post-crisis recovery policies in the Global North. In Chapter Three, I explore the first finding of this study: how jobs, businesses, and *homo oeconomicus* are at the centre of BC’s economic recovery plan. Chapter Four continues with the second finding of this study: the repackaging of marginalized realities, the repackaging of demands for change, and the palpable silences that exist in the

economic recovery plan. Finally, I end in Chapter Five with a conclusion on this research's findings, a discussion on its limitations, a brief exploration of the need for radical alternatives and a call to re-politicize social work.

## CHAPTER TWO

### **Neoliberalism and Post-Crisis Recovery: Literature Review**

Discussions on the neoliberal root of COVID-19 pandemic's economic recovery plans and its inequitable impacts strike a similar tone to the discussions on the 2008 Global Financial Crisis. Literatures exploring the causes of the financial crisis and its severe social, economic, and health impacts point to neoliberalism as a root cause while also shining a light on various governments' move to further implement neoliberal policies as common-sense solutions to the crisis. Given that COVID-19 economic recovery is an emerging issue, I critically analysed literatures on both the 2008 financial crisis and recent proposals for post-pandemic recovery to understand the historical underpinnings of both crises and why certain economic recovery policies are preferred by political actors across the Global North. I start by exploring neoliberalism as a rationality and the historical context of both crises. Next, I explore the debates surrounding post-crisis recovery. After a discussion on the outlook for change, I end by examining what a radical alternative might look like.

#### **Examining Neoliberalism**

A deeper understanding of neoliberalism and its implications not only on state policies but the everyday life and citizen subject making process is crucial. Authors writing about the connection between neoliberalism and economic recovery policies after the 2008 financial crisis and COVID-19 pandemic identify policies such as welfare reforms, corporate deregulation, marketisation and privatisation of health and social sectors, and attack on labour rights as manifestations of neoliberalism (Ferguson and Lavalette, 2013; Grover & Soldatic, 2012; Kecskes, 2020; Thomas and Tufts, 2015). However, there is a common misconception that links neoliberalism with laissez-faire – reducing government intervention as much as possible to let

the free market take over all aspects of life. Neoliberalism as practised today is, in fact, not synonymous with laissez-faire. Aalbers (2013) and Brown (2005) argue that unlike laissez-faire, the state is always an active actor within “actually-existing neoliberalism” to continuously reinforce its ideology. It continuously intervenes through its state apparatus such as law, political system, and welfare system to further reinforce the ideology of neoliberalism in all aspects of life with the ultimate goal of benefiting capital.

Beyond being only an economic ideology, neoliberalism is a form of governmentality that discursively produces the citizen-subject through various technologies such as the political system, health care system, economic policy, welfare reforms, and labour policy (Albers, 2013; Browning, 2005; Cahill, 2011; Grover & Soldatic, 2012; Macias, 2015b). In her essay, Brown (2005) describes neoliberalism as a “political rationality” invested in the creation of *homo oeconomicus* – the economic man. It strives to construct the ideal neoliberal citizen: a rational, self-interested, and entrepreneurial individual who continuously consumes. Individuals unable to fully participate in the economy such as people with disabilities and the elderly are considered to be insignificant, enabling Seniors Care and Long Term Care to often be the first to receive major cuts and massive welfare restructuring aimed at putting people with disabilities “back to work” (Grover & Soldatic, 2012; Primrose, et al., 2020). Under the neoliberal and capitalist system, “The only thing worse than being exploited economically is *not* [emphasis added] being exploited economically.” (Ferguson & Lavalette, 2013, p. 103–104). Furthermore, the ideal neoliberal citizen also accepts widespread inequality as a normal part of neoliberal capitalism; in fact, they recognize its necessity within the system (Brown, 2016).

### **Neoliberalism as the Root Cause of Crises**

In the three decades after the Second World War, governments across the Global North adopted an approach of “shared prosperity”, one which focused on some state control over the economy, the implementation of progressive taxation, and investments in the welfare system (Goldberg, 2012; Ferguson & Lavalette, 2013). In the U.S., this approach resulted in the reduction of income inequality and the growth of public housing, albeit benefiting poor white Americans more than Black Americans (Goldberg, 2012). However, from the 1970s to 2000s, state policies in the West took a sharp turn towards neoliberalism.

In the UK, this neoliberal turn is evident from conservative Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher’s open embrace of austerity and neoliberalism in the 1980s to Prime Minister Tony Blair’s centre-left New Labour government’s suspicion on welfare programs and the social work profession itself in the 1990s (Ferguson & Lavalette, 2013). A similar trajectory occurred in the US in the 1980s, characterized by regressive taxation which mostly benefited capital–corporations, major investors, and employers (Goldberg, 2012). Austerity measures such as significant cuts to social programs, welfare restructuring, and increased privatisation of public services were implemented by various governments in North America (Beder, 2009; Fernando & Earle, 2011; Goldberg, 2012). Goldberg (2012) identified the “unprecedented political mobilization” of big corporations, financial institutions, conservative academics and right-wing media as the key reason for the change in policy direction in Washington in early 1970s. Their efforts have proven to be successful in convincing policymaker and the public to embrace austerity as a viable policy option. These austerity measures resulted in the emboldening of the corporate and financial sector and a weakening of the public service sector such as health, social services, and social housing. Workers, the poor, and those who are the most marginalized were

significantly impacted by these state policies prior to and during the 2008 crisis, while capital enjoyed significant gains in wealth and political power (Primrose, et al., 2020).

Literatures on the inequitable impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on marginalized communities similarly place the blame on policies of austerity and neoliberalism. Prior to 2020, governments across the Global North have shown a pattern of a lack of investments in public programs and cuts to health and social spending, continuing with the trend of the 1980s (Primrose, et al., 2020). This pattern is worsened by state policies that further reinforce corporate deregulation, privatisation, and the marketization of social services, which have significant implications on those bearing the worst effects of income, social, and health inequity, such as women, Indigenous Peoples, and racialized migrant workers (Kecskes, 2020; Michie, 2020; van Barneveld, et. al., 2020). In addition to resulting in a weakened public health care system, neoliberal policies are known to have dire impacts on health and key social determinants of health, including housing, food security, and income security (Labonte & Ruckert, 2015; van Barneveld, et. al., 2020;). These policies also result in deepening already-existing health inequities; therefore, impacting marginalized communities the hardest (Labonte & Ruckert, 2015; van Barneveld, et. al., 2020). Furthermore, Michie (2020) argues that fewer lives would have been lost to due to COVID-19 had governments invested more in health care and social programs. It is clear that authors writing about the 2008 Global Financial Crisis and COVID-19 pandemic agree on the neoliberal root of both crises' inequitable social, economic, and health impacts (Aalbers, 2013; Beder, 2009; Michie, 2020; van Barneveled, et. al., 2020;).

### **Post-Crisis Economic Recovery**

A majority of the articles on 2008 financial crisis recovery and COVID-19 recovery touch on the call for the building of a new and more equitable social, economic, and political

system. Several post-Global Financial Crisis economic recovery policy solutions proposed by authors include the regulation of the financial sector, reducing the influence of big money in politics, increasing social welfare, the creation of living wage for all who want to work, and better investments in health care, housing, and child care (Clark, 2010; Goldberg, 2012).

Goldberg (2012) asserts that progressive taxation and decreasing military spending are two fiscal policy changes that could help states afford such recovery measures. In the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis, authors also call for a rejection of the cult of individualism that is inherent in neoliberal ideology (Ferguson & Lavalette, 2013).

Similar calls for systems change can be found in articles discussing COVID-19 recovery. van Barneveld, et. al. (2020) contend that a radical change of direction away from a neoliberal economic system is urgently needed in the post-pandemic recovery period. Instead of opting to further reinforce neoliberal measures, the authors suggest the creation of a centralized global movement, led by the United Nations, to convene a forum on a just and sustainable recovery. This suggestion was inspired by the memory of US President Roosevelt's convening of a United Nations Conference to encourage a widespread recognition of human rights at the end of the Second World War, and the authors advocate for similar global leadership at crucial times such as now to avoid further catastrophe. Several policy proposals for an equitable recovery that can be discussed in such forum include enhancing universal health care, implementing reconciliation with Indigenous Peoples, furthering efforts to build clean energy, progressive taxation, and strengthening the social safety net through expanding social housing programs (Van Barneveld, et. al., 2020).

In a report published by YWCA Canada National Office, Sultana and Ravanera (2020) argues that a Canadian economic recovery plan post-pandemic must be guided by a Gender-

Based Analysis-plus (GBA+) framework, rooted in feminist intersectional analysis. From this framework, the authors propose eight guiding pillars for a feminist economic recovery in Canada, which include investing in good jobs, strengthening public infrastructure, ensuring the presence of diverse voices in decision-making tables, and supporting small businesses owned by women from equity-seeking groups. Specific policy demands outlined in this report are, among others, ensuring equitable access to jobs and training for Indigenous Peoples, investing in child care, increasing care worker wages, investing in good jobs, and legislating job protection for people with disabilities (Sultana & Ravanera, 2020). Despite its intersectional analysis and claim of a change in paradigm, the solutions proposed in this report still fall within the neoliberal narrative of putting people back to work instead of calling for a bold path away from this ideology (Grover & Soldatic, 2012) . The authors further missed the opportunity to support the calls to strengthen the social safety net and health care programs that have been eroded for decades since the 1980s in Canada (Clark, 2010; Platt, et. al., 2020). Such advocacy would arguably benefit those who experience intersecting forms of marginalization and, therefore, the heaviest brunt of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Other authors on COVID-19 recovery argue for the implementation of Universal Basic Income (UBI), which entails a regular transfer of cash to individuals with no means-testing nor requirement to work or find work (Prabhakar, 2020). In Canada, the idea of a Universal Basic Income has increased in popularity ever since the creation of the Canada Emergency Response Benefit (CERB) during the COVID-19 pandemic. CERB was widely seen as a popular and life-saving bailout for the people, to the point where NDP MP Leah Gazan proposed the continuation of this program into a guaranteed universal basic income program (Loreto, 2020). However, significant questions remain unanswered about whether UBI is an appropriate response to the

projected economic crisis post-pandemic: is it adequate enough to tackle poverty and inequality, and are there better policies that could address these issues? (Prabhakar, 2020). Loreto (2020) argues that the \$2,000 cash transfer amount proposed in MP Leah Gazan's motion is inadequate for many living in Canada's major cities while also failing to address the much-eroded health care and social service systems. Instead of implementing a form of UBI, authors argue that better policies to solve systemic inequities would be stronger investments in universal public services such as housing, health care, universal Pharmacare, and the creation of a national childcare program (Prabhakar, 2020; Loreto, 2020).

Articles discussing proposals for a post-pandemic economic recovery fail to mention strategies to solve systemic inequities faced by communities experiencing intersecting forms of marginalization. For example, migrant workers in Canada are still experiencing significant access barriers to health care in addition to poor job safety protection and overcrowding in their housing (Migrant Rights Network, 2020). People who are undocumented and people with precarious immigration status are not only experiencing similar challenges to migrant workers, but are also unable to access health care services and basic social safety net due to a fear of deportation (Caulford & D'Andrade, 2012; Magalhaes, et al., 2010). In addition, sex workers are often forgotten in the conversation on post-pandemic recovery. Platt, et. al. (2020) advocates for the inclusion of sex workers into the worldwide response during and after the COVID-19 pandemic, especially given that many sex workers are homeless, use drugs, and have precarious immigration status. Due to these factors, sex workers, migrant workers, and undocumented people, among many other groups, are highly vulnerable to health, social, and economic impacts of COVID-19, yet they are missed in some calls for an equitable recovery such as Sultana and Ravanera's (2020) *Feminist Economy Recovery Plan* or MP Leah Gazan's proposal for a

guaranteed basic income (Loreto, 2020). This risk of exclusion serves as another reason to advocate for a post-crisis recovery plan that upholds the provision of public programs that are available to all regardless of immigration status, such as a welfare system that is available to all despite their immigration status and the provision of emergency housing for all who are homeless or precariously housed (Platt, et. al., 2020).

Other calls for a just post-pandemic recovery provide a more comprehensive and inclusive set of policy recommendations. Just Recovery for All (2020), a Canada-wide movement supported by hundreds of organizations, demands federal, provincial, and municipal governments in Canada to abide by six principles of a just recovery after COVID-19 pandemic, including putting all people's health and well-being first, strengthening the social safety net, prioritizing the need of workers and communities, building resilience for future crises, and upholding Indigenous rights. Crucial policy solutions within their guiding principles include implementing redistributive policies, permanent resident status for all, transitioning away from fossil fuels. The builders of this movement strongly underline the urgency of including everyone, especially those who are the most vulnerable in society, in a just recovery after the pandemic. A recent report by The Chief Public Health Officer of Canada (2020) further provides an exhaustive and arguably more progressive list of policy recommendations all levels of government can implement to ensure an equitable recovery after the COVID-19 pandemic. The author advocates, among other policy recommendations, better work safety protections that includes temporary foreign workers, investments in affordable and high quality childcare, the decriminalization of illicit drugs, the collection of disaggregated data in key health and social areas, and the implementation of a Housing for All framework that includes investments in affordable housing, Long Term Care, and supporting people who are incarcerated and those

transitioning out of incarceration. The report also underlines the importance of implementing a “One Health” approach to policymaking—one which considers the interrelation between the environment, human, and animals in order to prevent further global pandemics caused by zoonotic diseases (The Chief Public Health Officer of Canada, 2020). If fully implemented by all levels of government, such post-pandemic economic recovery would arguably signal a radical shift away from the neoliberal status quo, a system which have wreaked havoc on the health of the people and the planet.

### **Grim Outlook on the Possibility of Change: Learning from 2008 Financial Crisis**

Despite calls for a radical shift in the economic, social, and political systems after the 2008 financial crisis, economic recovery measures chosen by governments across the Global North countries serve as a cautionary tale of what could occur after the current global pandemic. Instead of utilizing the political window of opportunity to enact change after the Global Financial Crisis, federal and provincial governments in Canada, the US, and the UK opted to further reinforce neoliberalism through its post-crisis response (Aalbers, 2013; Green & Lavery, 2015; Labonte & Ruckert, 2015; Thomas & Tufts, 2015). This reinforcement was marked by an unabashed recommitment to austerity measures and neoliberalism, including severe cuts to the welfare system and health care, weakening labour protection, the implementation of “Open Door” economic policies to stimulate foreign investments, and aggressive marketisation of public services such as the National Health Service in the UK (Cahill, 2011; Labonte & Ruckert, 2015; van Apeldoorn & de Graaff, 2017;). This move was founded upon the mantra often heard in today’s political discourse: stimulating the economy (Beder, 2009).

Political actors of all stripes, including those claiming to occupy the centre or centre-left political spectrum such as former President Barack Obama and former Ontario Premier Dalton

McGuinty, chose to deepen neoliberalism during and after the recovery period after the 2008 financial crisis (Kuttner, 2019; Thomas & Tufts, 2015; van Apeldoorn & de Graff, 2017). The neoliberal responses taken by governments after the 2008 crisis is argued by Ferguson and Lavalette (2013) to largely perpetuate ideologies of individualism, choice, and putting social value on a person's ability to participate in the economy through work. Governments opted to prioritize economic recovery policies that restore the confidence of the markets and promote economic competitiveness rather than enacting systemic change to help those who have been harmed the most by the crisis (Thomas & Tufts, 2015; van Apeldoorn & de Graff, 2017).

A group's access to governmental power determines how policies are shaped and who can benefit from them (Giger, et al., 2012; Kuttner, 2019). Van Apeldoorn and de Graff (2017) found that in the 2008 Obama administration, architects of post-Global Financial Crisis recovery policies had clear links to capital such as corporations, the finance sector, and conservative think tanks. The authors argue that the significant influence of people with links to capital resulted in economic recovery policies that were more beneficial to and represented the interests of corporations and the wealthy while failing to represent those of from marginalized communities. Moreover, studies on the correlation between American elected officials' policy responsiveness and income levels of constituents show that policy preferences of affluent individuals and those living in higher-income areas are better represented in both the US Senate and House of Representatives compared to those who are poor or are living in impoverished areas (Flavin & Franko, 2019; Gilens, 2005; Hayes, 2012). Rigby and Wright (2013) and Gilens (2005) further argue that the higher amount of campaign contributions coming from the wealthy and those living in affluent areas may play a significant part in elected officials' bias towards policies that are aligned with higher income constituents.

Recent announcements on COVID-19 economic recovery plans in Canada shine a light on a possible repeat of post-2008 financial crisis recovery. Kecskes (2020) argues that the Economic Recovery Act omnibus bill announced by Premier Doug Ford's Progressive Conservative government aims to further reinforce neoliberal policies in post-pandemic Ontario. The article posits that policies proposed in this bill, such as further corporate deregulation and the creation of a new agency to attract investments in the province, primarily benefits corporations and major investors instead of those experiencing the hardest health, social, and economic impacts of the pandemic. In addition, Primrose, et al. (2020) caution that there is a strong likelihood of deepening neoliberal responses after the pandemic. The authors argue that the overwhelming use of war metaphors in state and public health responses to this virus, posing it as an "unprecedented threat" or a threat from an "external Other" with little mention of systemic failures signal the possibility of status quo responses after the pandemic ends. War-time and individualistic discourses may enable governments to further justify the use of neoliberal solutions as an economic, social, and political response while ignoring the growing calls to address the roots of the devastating and inequitable impacts of this pandemic (Primrose, et al., 2020). In British Columbia, a closer look of the list of names on the province's economic recovery taskforce shows that a majority of its member represent trade, commerce, and labour, indicating the possibility of an economic recovery plan that benefits some groups more than others (Office of the Premier, 2020).

### **Possible Alternatives to Neoliberal Solutions**

To implement a progressive alternative, authors propose for advocates to follow the strategies that have been adopted by proponents of neoliberalism to ensure a durable and politically "sticky" ideology (Aalbers, 2013; Cahill, 2011). Despite various moments in history

signalling its potential demise, neoliberalism continues to be the common-sense solution to the issues of its own making (Albers, 2013; Macias, 2015b). Its success can be traced to its embeddedness within all aspects of life beyond state institutions, including in academia, media, Wall Street, powerful think tanks, and the discursive process of subject-making (Kuttner, 2019; Macias, 2015b). Therefore, arguably a new system needs to follow neoliberalism's footsteps to ensure it becomes a viable, embedded, and long-lasting alternative.

An alternative to neoliberalism demands a radical shift of priorities and values. Gerardo (2019) discusses of creating an alternative, small-scale economy that can complement stronger state regulation on corporations and the market. Brown (2005) advocates the political Left to present an alternative system which rejects neoliberalism's fixation on the creation of *homo oeconomicus* and the cult of individualism. This alternative, the author argues, must center collective power and a collaborative form of government while building an equitable distribution of wealth and access to public institutions such as housing, health care, and education. Kuttner (2019) proposes progressives to create a practical form of politics and sets of policy that can prove that governments are better equipped than the free market in building a more equitable society. This approach to politics and policymaking would serve to dispel the myth of trickle-down economics. Furthermore, Cahill (2011) argues that proponents of a non-neoliberal system must first organize and mobilize a powerful social movement demanding a radical change and presenting to the public its coherent ideology and merits. Then, proponents of a new system must ensure that it becomes not only embedded in the social, but also in institutions and state norms through policy measures such as progressive taxation and the provision of high quality, universal social services (Cahill, 2011).

## Conclusion

Neoliberalism is widely identified as the root cause of the 2008 financial crisis' and COVID-19 pandemic's inequitable impacts on marginalized communities. As a form of rationality, it not only influences state policies, but also discursively creates its ideal citizen-subject, which renders neoliberalism a durable hegemonic system of governance. To remedy the inequitable impacts of a global crisis, authors overwhelmingly call for the implementation of a new economic and political system, one which benefits all people instead of only the wealthy. However, post-2008 economic recovery policies show that governments across the Global North have only strengthened their commitments to further neoliberal policies as common-sense solutions, even to a neoliberal-made crisis. The outlook for a new radical system and economic recoveries post-pandemic is, therefore, grim. Nonetheless, change is still possible if paired with concerted mobilization of proponents calling for a radical shift that prioritizes the lives of those who have been hurt the most by this pandemic added with strategies in ensuring its durability. In Chapter Three and Four, I explore the findings of this research. Chapter Three focuses on how jobs, business, and *homo oeconomicus* are at the centre of BC's economic recovery plan. Next, Chapter Fours discusses how marginalized realities and demands for change are repackaged to fit into neoliberal rationality.

## CHAPTER THREE

### **Jobs, Business, and *Homo Oeconomicus* at the Centre**

#### **Introduction**

In the previous chapter, authors writing on the subject of the 2008 Global Financial Crisis and COVID-19 global pandemic assert that both crises inequitably impacted those who are the most marginalized in society due to neoliberalism. In addition, authors contend that governments across the Global North will likely to further reinstate their commitment in the same system which created this crisis in the first place in the pandemic recovery period. In this chapter, I present the first finding from my analysis on British Columbia's pandemic economic recovery plan titled *Stronger BC for Everyone* and its accompanying set of backgrounder documents in order to examine which subject(s) are centered and which ones are excluded (Government of BC, 2020a; Government of BC, 2020b). I argue that the *homo oeconomicus*—the rational, self-interested, and productive economic man—and the creation of jobs as the primary driver of economic productivity are centered throughout the plan. In addition, businesses and the economy are portrayed as the primary victim of the pandemic; therefore, needing the most support from government. This centering of jobs, businesses, and homo oeconomicus signals a deepening commitment to neoliberal rationality by the BC New Democratic Party government.

#### **Jobs and *Homo Oeconomicus* at the Centre**

The *Stronger BC: BC's Economic Recovery Plan* signals a recommitment to neoliberal economic system through the discursive production of *homo oeconomicus* and its focus on job creation in the name of fostering economic growth. BC Premier John Horgan is not hesitant in declaring his government's focus on job creation in the recovery period in his welcome message by stating that their focus "turns to creating jobs and opportunities — as well as the training

people need to turn those opportunities into rewarding careers” (*A Message from Premier John Horgan*, Government of BC, 2020a, p. 2). This attention to job creation and job training is immediately supported in the first chapter of the plan titled *The Economic Impact of COVID-19* by telling a story of how the rate of employment in BC was “hit very hard” and unable to be fully restored to pre-pandemic numbers even after gradual reopening of the economy in Summer 2020 (Government of BC, 2020a, pp. 7-8). This claim was further bolstered by the use of a chart by Statistics Canada’s LabourForce Survey which details employment numbers in BC below (Chart 1). The dramatic dip in the line chart’s 2020 employment number and the emphasis put on a still-low August 2020 numbers create the effect of an unquestioned truth that job losses are indeed an issue which are dire and in need of government attention.

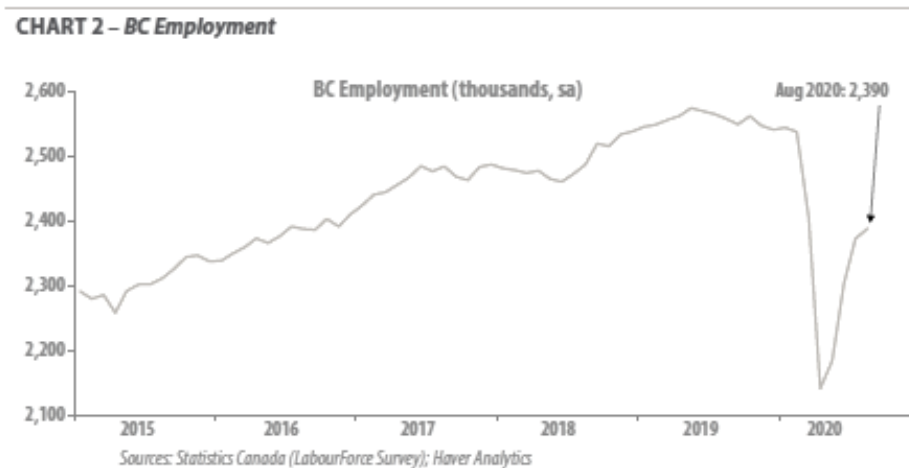


Chart 1. BC Employment. (*The Economic Impact of COVID-19*, Government of BC, 2020a)

The fixation on economic productivity and putting social value in a person’s participation in the economy through work (Ferguson & Lavallette, 2013) is apparent in the BC government’s

pandemic economic recovery plan. In its section on Restoring Growth: Budget 2021 and Beyond, the plan asserts that:

This Recovery Plan is both a response to the immediate needs facing hard working British Columbians and the businesses that employ them — and a recommitment to quality long-term economic growth... (Government of BC, 2020a, p. 13)

Human subjects throughout this plan are primarily configured as “hard working British Columbians” eager to participate in the economy. Various measures are dedicated solely to upskilling programs dedicated to retraining unemployed workers to go back to the job market and to support businesses in hiring, making the category of “jobs and training” one of the top spending measures in this plan (Government of BC, 2020a, p. 30). However, the discourse of “hard working British Columbians” is the most prevalent in the images included all throughout the Stronger BC plan as can be seen from the example of Image 1.



Image 1. *Untitled*. (Government of BC, 2020a, p. 7)

Out of 16 images which contains human beings in *Stronger BC for Everyone*, 12 are images of people at work. They contain images of racially diverse, age-diverse people of all genders

appearing to be “in action” at their respective workplaces. All of the subjects in these images appear to work in industries that garner the most attention in the recovery plan such as retail, trades, food and beverage, film, technology, and health care. Following Waitt’s (2013) particular urging to pay attention to the “devices” used to persuade in Foucauldian Discourse Analysis, I argue that these images serve as tools that reproduce certain truths of the ideal human subjects as workers participating in the economy and that a dominant focus on job creation is simply a common-sense approach in a post-pandemic recovery.

Throughout the plan, whether it is about health care measures or childcare investments, job creation becomes the end goal and reason of why measures are implemented, as can be seen from the quote below:

Value-added services and strategic infrastructure, from highways and bridges to childcare spaces, will make the economy more productive by getting people to work and goods to market for years to come. (*Restoring Growth: Budget 2021 and Beyond*, Government of BC, 2020)

Much needed investments in public services such as childcare are justified through the lens of “getting people back to work” in order to create a productive economy. Likewise, life-saving public health measures are justified through the lens of protecting jobs and the economy, as stated in Finance Minister Carole James’ message legitimizing them as “tools” to “open the economy” given that if people feel unsafe “they will be reluctant to shop in stores or go to work” (Government of BC, 2020, p. 5). In contrast, demands for a just recovery (Just Recovery, 2020) and effective public health measures (The Chief Public Health Officer, 2020) do not attempt to legitimize through economic lens. Instead, they are founded upon the understanding that better health and social services are simply basic human rights and that health measures are key in

saving lives in a global pandemic (Just Recovery, 2020, The Chief Public Health Officer, 2020). Such approach by the BC government in the justification of public service investments and public health measures would have challenged the dominant discourse of neoliberal rationality and the reproduction of *homo oeconomicus* as the ideal subject. Yet, the choices made in this recovery plan show the opposite.

The perpetuation of *homo oeconomicus* is also evident in the additional document to the recovery plan titled *Backgrounder: Investing in Technology and Innovation*. In its discussion of the “InBC Strategic Investment Fund”, the document talks about how despite government’s investment of yearly funds into new technology and innovation companies, many new ventures still fail to grow or are bought by bigger companies outside the province, which means:

[...] some or all of the jobs and the government revenues from corporate and personal income taxes move with it, meaning that *British Columbians don’t realize fair value for their investments*. (emphasis added, Investing in Technology and Innovation, Government of BC, 2020b)

British Columbians are configured to be rational market actors who pay taxes in order to obtain return on investments in the form of jobs and revenues. In effect, the government’s role is no different than to be akin to a financial manager, concerned only about how to maximize the value of their investors’ investment. This configuration upholds neoliberal rationality, one which has proven to have detrimental impacts especially on marginalized communities prior to and throughout the pandemic (Michie, 2020; Primrose et al, 2020). And yet, the BC NDP government chose to reproduce this discourse anyway. In neoliberal rationality, the primary interest of its ideal subjects is solely the enhancement of their present and future capital through practices of strategic investments, and it, too, must be the primary goal of government.

Focusing on job creation in the name of the economy also sustains the government's argument to provide immense support to businesses. In this recovery plan, businesses are touted as job creators; therefore, playing a key role in BC's economic recovery, as seen through claims that business support measures "will keep thousands of people attached to their jobs, and will help firms survive [...]" (Government of BC, 2020). Businesses are also incentivized to create jobs through measures such as the BC Increased Employment Incentive (IEI). The IEI program is a refundable tax credit on payroll which could "support up to 50,000 employers and support 80,000 recently-hired and soon-to-be-hired employees" and provide "much needed assistance" in the economic recovery period (Government of BC, 2020b). The discourse of jobs and business as the ones needing particular attention in COVID-19 recovery not only deepens neoliberal economy fixated on growth and productivity, but also in the continuous production of *homo oeconomicus* as the only subject allowed to thrive in post-pandemic BC.

### **Business and the Economy at the Centre**

Brown (2015) contends that "the contemporary firms" are always at the centre of neoliberal reason. The common-sense perspective of neoliberal reason is that the health of businesses is equal to the survival of economic growth, and economic growth will in turn benefit "all". However, as Klein (2014) noted, the unending quest for growth foundational to neoliberalism has only put the planet closer to a climate emergency while further marginalizing many lives. The BC government could have highlighted how decades of neoliberal erosion of the social safety net has proven to be detrimental to human lives and the natural world, and stayed true to its social democratic roots in calling for meaningful systemic change in post-pandemic recovery. Instead, it chose to lay out a story of how businesses and, by extension, the economy, are the ones experiencing the most harm throughout this pandemic. This story featured

prominently in the recovery plan, complete with the persuasive tool of economic measurements by expert sources such as a line chart by Statistics Canada showing a dramatic dip on retail sales in 2020 as shown in Chart 2 below (Government of BC, 2020, p. 9).

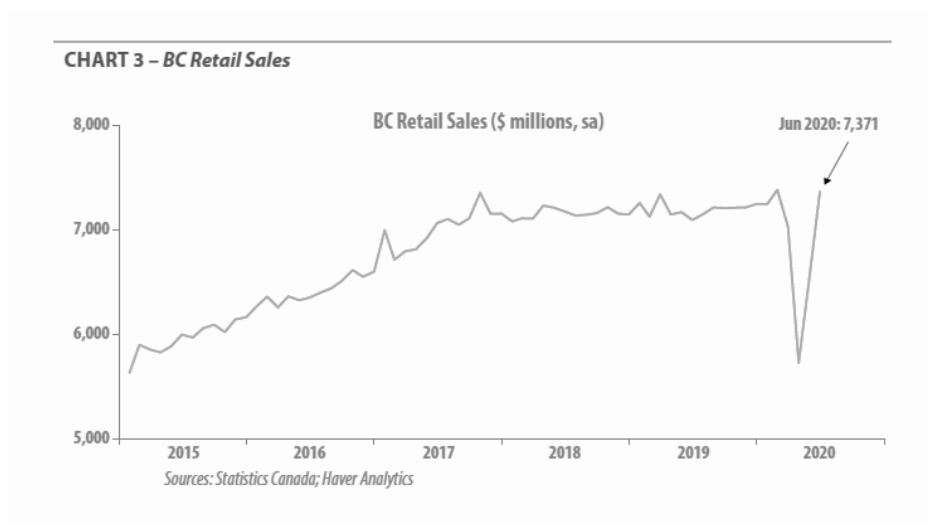


Chart 2. BC Retail Sales. (*The Economic Impact of COVID-19*, Government of BC, 2020, p. 9)

With its dramatic dip in the trend of retail sales, the graph above underlines the victimization of retail and other businesses throughout this pandemic. Similar charts showing significant declines in employment and private sector outlook can be found the same opening first few pages of this plan, all indicators of the health of a neoliberal economic system: employment, sales, and private sector economic outlook. In discussing how BC businesses are still reeling from the lockdown in the pandemic's first wave, the quote below found in the same section as the above chart captures how specific tactics were deployed in creating and bolstering the credibility of this narrative:

Businesses everywhere — not just in BC — are not confident. The Bank of Canada's latest Business Outlook Survey, released in July 2020, indicates that business sentiment is negative across all regions in Canada, as businesses navigate pandemic-related

uncertainty. While business confidence appears to have recovered somewhat, based on the August survey results, many business owners remain concerned about the general state of their business' health, and in particular, the short-term outlook. (Government of BC, 2020, p. 9)

This quote exemplifies a seemingly nation-wide, if not global, concern of the importance of business confidence in the economy, bolstered by the use of the Business Outlook Survey from the Bank of Canada. Waitt (2005) argues that a Foucauldian analysis to discourse needs to pay close attention to the “strategies of conviction” deployed to render the effects of “common-sense” or unquestionable “truth”, including by invoking voices of a discipline, statistics, or expert spokesperson. Chart 2 exemplifies the invoking of seemingly objective method of economic measurement that is the retail sales volume, while the above quote invokes the voice of a ‘trustworthy’ body that is the Bank of Canada to not only persuade the reader of the dire state of business in BC but also of the economy. Of utmost importance is the quote’s focus not on the health of human or nonhuman natural subjects, but on the health and survival of businesses—a notion that is found across the recovery plan. This particular focus can be found in the discourses used by various other government across the Global North, regardless of their political leaning, in the recovery period after the 2008 financial crisis to justify corporate bailouts in the name of “common sense” economic recovery (Aalbers, 2013; Ferguson & Lavallette, 2013).

Given that businesses are imagined as the real victims of this pandemic, it is unsurprising that they become the primary beneficiaries of the recovery plan in the name of saving the economy. Pages of the BC government’s strategy dedicated to supporting businesses outline a myriad of supports from payroll “tax credit” to “Business Recovery Grant” and e-commerce supports. This wide variety of supports for businesses make up a big portion of the total funding

dollar amount for the recovery plan, significantly higher than the allocated funding for other measures such as social supports (Government of BC, 2020a, pp. 30-31).

A fascinating theme, however, is the fact that the economy becomes the justification of measures that do not have anything to do with the economic sphere. Public health measures, key to curbing the spread of COVID-19 and save lives, are described in this plan not only through an economic lens, but also merely as a tool of economic growth. This is evidenced by the quote below:

We need to continue to build business confidence with a combination of effective public health measures and supports for BC businesses to encourage them to create jobs, while continuing to adjust to a post-COVID-19 economy. (Government of BC, 2020, p 27)

Saving lives and protecting the health of British Columbians are not good enough reason to justify effective public health measures to curb COVID-19 infection. Instead, it is a tool, alongside a line of government supports for businesses, to boost damaged business confidence and create jobs; therefore, saving the economy. In ‘actually-existing neoliberalism’, all spheres of life become economized (Brown, 2016) so much so that critical pandemic health measures need to be justified in economic terms.

The discursive technique of framing business and the economy as the main victim of the pandemic justifies the intense focus on business supports in the plan’s spending measures. Most importantly, its repeated storytelling all throughout the recovery plan creates the effect of an unquestioned truth of the common-sense approach of saving the economy as the primary focus of post-COVID recovery plan. The reality of a severely weakened healthcare and social service systems, a deeply inequitable economic system caused by decades of austerity measures and

calls for a more just and equitable economic system are largely missing (Just Recovery, 2020; van Barneveld et al., 2020).

### **Conclusion**

This Foucauldian Discourse Analysis shows that jobs, businesses, and the *homo oeconomicus* make up the focus of BC's COVID-19 pandemic economic recovery plan. I argue that the BC government's centering of the economy and economic growth as common sense solutions to the crisis brought by this pandemic only deepens its commitment to neoliberalism. Furthermore, this move ignores the growing calls for radical change towards more just and equitable social, economic, and health systems that do not rely on neoliberal reason. In the next chapter, I continue to present my second main finding on how this recovery plan also repackages not only such demands for change, but also the realities of the many marginalized communities that have been disproportionately impacted in this pandemic. These reconfigurations serve to further justify and reinforce neoliberal solutions to this deeply inequitable crisis.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### **Repackaging Marginalized Realities and Demands for Change**

#### **Introduction**

In Chapter 3, I discuss how jobs, businesses, and *homo oeconomicus* constitute the focus of BC's pandemic recovery plan titled *Stronger BC for Everyone* and its backgrounder documents. In this Chapter, I explore how through various tactics, the realities of marginalized communities and demands for change are repackaged to serve neoliberal reason. As evidenced in the discussions below, despite an acknowledgement that youth, women, and Indigenous Peoples are disproportionately impacted by the pandemic, it is only done through an economic lens. Unsurprisingly, this move only justifies the government's focus on solutions which centers economic growth, primarily through employment-focused measures. Those who do not or cannot fulfill the ideal of a productive economic citizen through work are primarily framed as "the most vulnerable", reinforcing the neoliberal reason which strives to individualize deeply structural issues such as homelessness, income inequity, and the overdose crisis. These tactics, I argue, serve to reinforce neoliberal reason and further silence the truths of those most marginalized in BC.

#### **Repackaging Marginalized Realities**

This pandemic has significantly harmed those who are the most marginalized in society. For example, in BC, neighborhoods with a high percentage of poor, Indigenous, and racialized people are known to have higher rate of COVID-19 infection than other areas (BC Centre for Disease Control, 2021; St. Denis, 2021). Authors writing about this inequitable impact across the Global North argue that neoliberal policies such as austerity measures, a continued lack of investment in social programs, and government focus on marketization that have been ongoing

since the 1980s and after 2008 are to blame (Michie, 2020; Primrose et al, 2020; van Barneveld, 2020). It is important to note that before the pandemic, for example, that welfare rate for a single person in BC was only \$760 per month while the rate of homelessness had increased—two issues that are gendered, classed, heteronormative, and racialized (Gaetz, 2010; Maboules, 2020; Vancouver City Council, 2021). The question is, how are experiences of those who are marginalized during COVID-19 captured in this recovery plan?

The inequitable impact of COVID-19 on marginalized communities such as Indigenous Peoples, women, and youth are mentioned in this recovery plan, albeit only through the lens of the labour market. In a section title *BC's Economic Framework* which lays out the guiding principles of the economic recovery, the importance of an equal distribution of economic growth is underlined:

[Equal distribution of economic growth] means ensuring all British Columbians have access to good jobs, an even greater challenge in the wake of a pandemic that has disproportionately affected women, youth and the most vulnerable people in our society. (Government of BC, 2020a, p. 14)

There is an acknowledgement that this pandemic disproportionately harms certain groups. However, it is implied that it is simply due to loss of jobs, substantiating the plan's overall focus of job creation as the silver bullet. The recovery plan does not mention how young people in BC have been more and more forced into precarious labour and women and people of colour are overrepresented in precarious work due to neoliberal policies (Bernhardt, 2015; CUPE BC, 2016), rendering them more vulnerable to the pandemic's economic impacts. It is no surprise that in a section titled "Breaking Down Barriers", the chosen measures to address this inequity are more jobs and job training programs, such as a "women-in-trades" program which offers

“individualized employment readiness and job search services” and a “women in tech” scholarship program to build “a more diverse and inclusive economy” (Government of BC, 2020a, p. 27). From the title of *Breaking Down Barriers* alone, it is implied that marginalized groups are left behind from enjoying the benefits of economic growth due to certain systemic ceilings or barriers; therefore, a solution is to simply break these ceilings by providing more opportunities to join the workforce. A similar approach is taken by Sultana and Ravanera (2020) in their proposal of a “feminist recovery” grounded on “Gender-Based Analysis Plus” (GBA+), calling for equitable access to jobs and job training for women, Indigenous Peoples, and other marginalized groups while missing calls for a radical change. Both plans are still embedded within a deeply neoliberal system which continues to perpetuate *homo oeconomicus* as the ideal citizen-subjects. Of course, all of this is done without any criticism of the neoliberal rationality which led to such inequities to exist to begin with.

### **“The Most Vulnerable”**

Where do those who do not fit the ideals of *homo oeconomicus* fit into this recovery plan? There are some mentions of supports for “the most vulnerable populations”, albeit primarily indexed under the appendix pages (Government of BC, 2020a, p. 26-27), and a single mention on “vulnerable populations” on the backgrounder document (*Safe Restart Funding for Local Governments*, Government of BC, 2020b). As evidenced from the quote below, this term acts as a catch-all phrase for those who do not fit the ideal subject of *homo oeconomicus*, such as people experiencing homelessness, seniors experiencing poverty, and disabled people:

The Province has allocated \$158 million to provide temporary housing and meal supports for vulnerable populations. Spaces at hotels, motels and community centres are assisting

a range of people, including people experiencing homelessness [...]. (*Appendix: Critical Services and Financial Supports Summary*, Government of BC, 2020a, p. 27)

Under the same section of the recovery plan, there is a mention of a provision of a \$300 monthly top-up for “income and disability assistance clients, including low-income seniors [...] from April through December” (*Appendix: Critical Services and Financial Supports Summary*, Government of BC, 2020a, p. 26). One thing to note in the quotes above is how the temporary nature of measures for those deemed as vulnerable populations are emphasized. Housing and meal support for those who are homeless are clearly marked as temporary, while increases to income and disability assistance rates only last to December 2020. In the meantime, as evident from my previous discussion on the centering of business, there is no distinct talk of the end date of myriad government measures to help businesses. This difference serves as evidence to my previous points about the focused attention on businesses and economic growth, which further perpetuate neoliberal logic.

I argue that the oft-unquestioned term of “the most vulnerable” needs to be critically examined, especially within the context of neoliberalism and interlocking systems of oppression which leads to the marginalization of many communities in BC. As I have stated above, there is rich data which point to neoliberalism’s part in marginalizing, among others, poor, racialized, Indigenous, disabled, and elderly communities. However, as argued by Murray (2004), governments’ framing of those most marginalized as the most vulnerable masks the issue’s deeply systemic roots and individualizes issues such as poverty. Throughout this recovery plan, there is little critical analysis on neoliberal policies and interlocking forms of oppression as roots of the pandemic’s inequitable health, social, and economic impacts on the most marginalized communities. Authors of this plan could have taken a bold stance and point out how this

pandemic has shown how interconnected our lives are; and, therefore, making a case for providing meaningful and permanent supports for communities experiencing deep poverty and chronic homelessness. Instead, neoliberal reason is sustained through discourses which bolster individualism and economic productivity while setting aside measures aimed for those most marginalized in the appendix, as if they were a mere afterthought.

In addition, there is a troubling connection made between people who are homeless and use drugs with “street disorders”, an issue which arose to mainstream discourse in BC cities during COVID-19. This connection can be seen in the quote below from the backgrounder document:

[Funding for strengthening communities] to support local governments in addressing the needs of vulnerable populations, the challenges posed in local communities by homelessness, and community concerns with street disorder and safety (Government of BC, 2020b).

The clear connection made by the government between people who are homeless and street disorders here further validates the troublesome neoliberal discourse which not only individualizes the systemic issue of homelessness but also casts homeless people as safety concerns to communities; therefore, validating the need to “strengthen” the community against the threat of unhoused people. The fact that this special funding is particularly assigned for local municipalities, even though housing and social services are within provincial jurisdiction, may not be an accident. In her discourse analysis on the emergence of discourses on vulnerable populations in Canadian federal government policy, Murray (2004) highlights the connection between neoliberal governance and intentional technique of higher-level governments to download responsibilities to local communities in responding to “individuals unwilling or unable

to meet their own basic human needs” (p. 50). The discursive tactic employed by the BC government further embeds the neoliberal rationality of individualism, the portrayal of its ideal subject as *homo oeconomicus*, and create an effect which portrays those most marginalized as undeserving.

### **Repackaging Demands for Change**

It is important to note that this recovery plan came out not long before the then-minority centre-left BC NDP government called a snap election, citing the importance of a majority government in handling COVID-19 pandemic (Nuttall, 2020). Political commentators have speculated that this recovery plan would serve more as a pre-election platform, and indeed, many measures from this plan had been included in the BC NDP formal election platform (BC NDP, 2020; Shaw, 2020). In *Stronger BC*, the BC NDP government, now governing as a majority after a successful election, included policy proposals that, at first sight, address typical demands of its traditionally progressive voter base. These proposals include reconciliation with Indigenous Peoples, climate action, and tackling inequities.

However, when analyzed closer, the details of these demands are repackaged to fit into the governing neoliberal rationality instead of sustaining their more radical calls to reject it. Numerous examples can be found in *Stronger BC*, such as claims that link much-needed health care investments with the creation of “7,000 new front-line health care workers” and climate action with “new short-term jobs to protect [...] natural spaces” and “good-paying, clean-tech jobs” (Government of BC, 2020a, p. 19; p. 17). The calls for a just recovery throughout the Global North highlight meaningful government commitment to fight climate change and reverse the severe cutbacks in health care and other public services; however, these demands are not founded upon job creation nor economic growth (van Barneveld et al., 2020; Just Recovery,

2020). The BC government's focus on job creation as a justification for health care investment and climate action is aligned with Brown's (2015) argument which states that, in neoliberal rationality, progressive demands such as better investment in public services or climate action need to be reconfigured into economic terms. The repackaging of these progressive demands continues the "stickiness" of neoliberal governmentality.

The repackaging of progressive demands is further evidenced in Premier John Horgan's welcome message:

[Budget 2021] will include even more measures to help us build a provincial economy that produces rewarding careers, is cleaner and greener, *unlocks the economic potential of reconciliation with Indigenous peoples*, and is more resilient than before. (emphasis added, Government of BC, 2020a, p. 3)

The phrase "unlocks the economic potential of reconciliation" (Government of BC, 2020a, p. 3) signals the potential underlying assumptions that drive this government's promises of reconciliation. It presents an argument of the importance of reconciliation strictly from the lens of the economy where, once achieved, it will unlock a wealth of economic benefits. But what could this economic potential be? Several clues can be found in specific programs in this plan targeted for Indigenous Peoples and communities. They include a "skills training and education programs" for Indigenous communities in order to access new employment opportunities, "more trades opportunities for Indigenous people" through "Community Benefit Agreements"—government-run infrastructure project agreements which secures work opportunity and training to local residents of the area—and "tech scholarships" for Indigenous Peoples (*Breaking Down Barriers*, Government of BC, 2020a, p. 27). Amidst all the measures to advance reconciliation through job training and education programs, it is important to note that young people make up a

significant proportion of Indigenous population in BC (Ministry of Advanced Education, Skills and Training, 2018). In this context, the repeated promise of government investments in job skills training signals that the economic potential mentioned refers to current and future Indigenous workers. This is reminiscent of Barack Obama's State of the Union address which asserts the importance of racial justice and immigration reform not for the sake of justice and human rights alone, but because they "put kids on a path to a good job" and "harness the talents and ingenuity of striving, hopeful immigrants" (Obama in Brown, 2015). In *Stronger BC*, reconciliation with Indigenous Peoples is not important due to the need to account for ongoing colonization and genocide of Indigenous Peoples and their land. Instead, it is important to the province as an "economic potential" in the form of human capital. Neoliberal reconfigurations of Indigenous reconciliation and sovereignty have been greatly contested by Indigenous voices. Cliff Atleo (2009) highlights the dramatic shift towards neoliberal languages within the wider discourse of Indigenous-settler relation, warning that such moves would abandon Indigenous worldviews and values. Similarly, Indigenous scholar Nicole Penak argues that proposals which simply focus on getting Indigenous Peoples to participate in the current economy is in fact the exact objective of Canada's colonial project, which entails assimilationist policies and the removal of Indigenous sovereignty (Raju & Penak, 2019).

A similar discursive tactic to center neoliberal rationality occurs in mentions of government action to fight climate change. Before the start of the pandemic, BC became the centre of the fight for climate justice and Indigenous sovereignty as Indigenous and climate leaders staged mass demonstrations and blockade in opposition of the Coastal GasLink pipeline project on Wet'suwet'en land in Northern BC (Brown & Bracken, 2020). Discourses on climate action became center-stage in BC in 2019 and 2020 as Vancouver City Council approved a

declaration on climate emergency (The Canadian Press, 2019), and a climate emergency action plan was created for the city (City of Vancouver, 2020). The BC NDP government features climate action throughout *Stronger BC* particularly within the “CleanBC” plan, touted as the “government’s pathway to a cleaner, better future” for BC (Government of BC, 2020a, p. 25). However, climate action is discursively repackaged through the lens of job creation and the economy, as evidenced by the quote below:

Meeting our CleanBC targets for reducing greenhouse gas emissions is key to creating good jobs for all British Columbians through the recovery. (*CleanBC*, Government of BC, 2020a, p. 25)

Instead of simply stating that reducing greenhouse gas emissions is important in BC’s climate plan due to the immediate threat of a climate emergency, this recovery plan argues that it is important because it creates jobs. This tactic is further substantiated by highlighting the creation of government jobs related to “restoring watersheds, protecting habitat” and “enhancing BC Parks” (*CleanBC*, Government of BC, 2020a, p. 25). A brand new “Centre for Innovation and Clean Growth” is also featured prominently in the recovery plan’s, combining the government’s supports to the tech sector and climate plan with a particular goal of job creation in the name of a clean economic growth. However, as Naomi Klein (2014) argues, it is this unending quest for economic growth that has caused such a climate crisis. She contends that a meaningful climate plan needs to steer away from the highly extractive neoliberal system and head towards one which centers interdependence, reciprocity, and cooperation (Klein, 2014, p. 449-462). The climate plan proposed in *Stronger BC* not only falls short of that goal, but it further deepens the focus on individualism and putting social value onto one’s ability to work and, therefore, contributing to economic growth.

### **Palpable Silences**

Waitt (2013) and Macias (2015a) urge Foucauldian discourse researchers to pay close attention to the silences that exist and experiences that are left out in certain texts or talk. Indeed, certain experiences are largely missing in this recovery plan, and the silences are palpable. As seen from my analysis, the dominant story being told in *Stronger BC* is of how businesses and employment numbers—key elements of neoliberalism—are victims of the COVID-19 pandemic. This story comes complete with various tools of persuasion such as graphs, line charts, and expert sources. On the other hand, the realities of many people on the margin who are disproportionately impacted and this pandemic's co-occurrence with the deadly overdose and homelessness crises are largely missing, even when there are opportunities where they could be included.

As an example, in the section titled *Economic Impacts of COVID-19*, there is no mention of the state of poverty in BC and how those living in poverty are impacted by the pandemic (Government of BC, 2020a, pp. 6-10). Nor is there any mention of the many lives lost daily to the overdose crisis which has ravaged the province since 2016, with close to 5 deaths every day due to an overdose throughout the COVID-19 pandemic (Ross, 2021). There are no charts, percentages, nor narratives coming from expert sources that capture the dire state faced by the lives of many communities that are marginalized, even when in mainstream discourse, media articles on the health, social, and economic inequities that exist during the pandemic are released regularly in BC (see Aiello, 2020 and McElroy, 2020). These silences, accompanied by an aggressive discursive reproduction of the hegemony of jobs, business, and *homo oeconomicus*, act to further perpetuate the truth and legitimacy of neoliberal rationality.

**Conclusion**

My analysis on the Government of BC's (2020) COVID-19 pandemic economic recovery plan titled *Stronger BC* shows a deepening commitment to neoliberal rationality which discursively repackages the realities of marginalized communities to fit into its logic by focusing on labour market participation and job creation. Those unable to do so are deemed as the most vulnerable in society, a catch-all phrase which serves to perpetuate the idea of individual failure to participate in a neoliberal system as the cause of issues such as poverty and inequity as opposed to systemic injustices. Furthermore, a growing demand for a just recovery that rejects neoliberal solutions are reconfigured in *Stronger BC* to further perpetuate the neoliberal project. In the next chapter, I will conclude my Practice-Based Research by discussing the need for more research on radical alternatives to neoliberalism and how the field of social work research could play a role in making such visions a reality.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### **Conclusion: Radical Alternatives and Re-politicizing Social Work**

This research is located at a time where a global pandemic has wreaked havoc on the lives of many communities experiencing interlocking forms of marginalization. Poor, migrant, disabled, Indigenous, and racialized people have borne the brunt of the COVID-19 pandemic in BC due to deeply unjust power relations. However, despite the immense pain caused by this crisis, there is a window of opportunity to demand and mobilize for meaningful change—away from solutions that still rely on neoliberalism and towards more radical alternatives. Tracing the ways current systems continuously reinforce neoliberal reason, identified as the root cause of this inequitable crisis, is key.

In my Foucauldian Discourse Analysis of BC's post-COVID pandemic economic recovery plan titled *Stronger BC*, jobs, business, and neoliberal rationality's ideal subject-citizen, *homo oeconomicus*, are positioned at the centre of the proposed measures—even ones which are noneconomic. Noneconomic measures, such as investments in childcare and health care, are seen and justified through economic lens, such as how these investments could result in creating jobs and getting women back to the workforce. Subjects whose lives have been disproportionately affected by this pandemic due to interlocking forms of systemic injustices such as classism, ableism, sexism, and racism are also repackaged to fit into the *homo oeconomicus* model: as productive workers in the labour market actively contributing to the economy. Furthermore, the growing demands that exist in mainstream discourse for meaningful change are also repackaged to fit into the neoliberal mold. Government measures to work towards reconciliation with Indigenous Peoples and fighting climate change are calculated and justified through economic lenses in this recovery plan, measured by the number of jobs they can create and the kinds of economic potential they may provide. At the same time, this plan

promises that employment and economic growth are solutions that can provide equality for those currently marginalized in society. These tactics further perpetuate the discursive production of not only *homo oeconomicus* as the ideal subject allowed to thrive in BC's post-pandemic future, but also of neoliberalism as the only common-sense political rationality.

This begs the question: how about those who don't fit into the neoliberal mold? My analysis finds that people most marginalized in BC society such as people experiencing deep poverty, people who are homeless, people with disabilities, the elderly, and drug users are reconfigured as "the most vulnerable" or "vulnerable populations". However, as noted by Murray (2004), this framing distorts deeply systemic roots of marginalization such as neoliberalism and interlocking systems of oppression. Furthermore, this framing has harmful—and in this pandemic's case, deadly—consequences on the lives of many. Meanwhile, the lived/ing truths of those most marginalized during this pandemic are largely missing in this plan, and so are their demands for a radical and just recovery.

### **Limitations of the Study**

The release of *Stronger BC for Everyone: BC's Economic Recovery* occurred only a month before the announcement of a snap pandemic election by the then-minority BC NDP government. As I have noted in Chapter 1, political commentators have argued that this document may have served as a pre-election look at the BC NDP's platform. A pandemic snap election indeed happened, with the party winning contested ridings across BC's Lower Mainland including several more conservative areas. It would not be a surprise if this economic recovery plan and its neoliberal slant was created to please certain centre-right voters in these contested ridings. After all, Waitt (2005) notes that in a Foucauldian analysis on discourse, the intended audiences are seen as co-authors of texts. However, this study did not scrutinise this particular

issue nor did it examine thoroughly this economic recovery plan's political contexts.

Additionally, I did not examine how neoliberal discourses permeate social democratic political parties in Canada, especially in those which hold government power, in this research's review of the literature. This topic is especially important to explore given international research showing left-leaning parties in power's acceptance of neoliberal ideology in its policies and discourses, such as the Social Democratic Party of Finland's noted ideological shift towards neoliberalism (Hoppania, 2019).

### **The Need for Research on Radical Alternatives**

There is a need for research on radical alternatives to neoliberalism and these alternatives' "on the ground" operations. This pandemic, despite the unbearable pain and suffering it has brought to many lives, has also resulted in the resurrection of subjugated discourses (Pease, 2002). Discourses on racial justice, Indigenous sovereignty, climate emergency, economic security, and drug users' rights are now in the mainstream, thanks to grassroots movements' decades of tireless fight. Policies brought forth by radical movements and political actors, such as the Green New Deal, Just Recovery, and Universal Basic Services, present not only practical policy strategies, but also a radical shift of values and priorities that center the interconnectedness of all beings (BC Poverty Reduction Coalition, 2020; Just Recovery, 2020; The Council of Canadians, 2019). These proposals understand the interlocking nature of oppressions and present solutions which embraces the interlocking nature of all demands for justice. However, I argue that more studies need to be conducted in full partnerships with community groups and political actors behind these movements with the aim of supporting their success. Just like how neoliberalism's rise is a result of an unprecedented political mobilization by those in communities, political systems, and academia (Goldberg, 2012), actors

demanding for radical alternatives need to do the same, with the academia's key role in supporting through research and a concerted effort to build meaningful relationships with those fighting in communities and government. Most importantly, knowing that neoliberalism actively reproduces *homo oeconomicus* as its ideal citizen, there needs to be more research examining the kinds of subjects produced by these radical alternatives.

### **Re-politicizing Social Work**

Macías (2015) contends that social work practice and education have not only been subjected to neoliberal restructuring, but social workers themselves have also been rendered as neoliberal subjects. Given that the reign of *homo oeconomicus* has resulted in the demise of *homo politicus* or the political creature interested in the public good (Brown, 2015, p. 41), it is not a surprise that neoliberal social work, be it in practice or academia, has ever-shrinking space for the political. However, I propose that these small spaces of social work practice and academia contain a multitude of opportunities for social workers to resist neoliberal rationality and act on our political commitments.

I align myself with Foucault's contention that the real political task in our society is to historicize the inner workings of seemingly-neutral institutions which have done so much political violence—to unmask them—in order to fight them (Rabinow, 1984). This is a task that social work urgently needs to take on, philosophically, pedagogically, and practically. We need to first start with re-politicizing social work. As social work educator Michael Lavallette advocated during the 2021 Radical Social Work Conference, we need to “celebrate social work as a political project” (SWAN, 2021, 1:20:26). I interpret this as a plea for social work to actively and continuously acknowledge, discuss, and, yes, celebrate the political in social work. I urge us to do this no matter what field of practice we do—micro, mezzo, or macro. If power is

everywhere, then opportunities for change also lies everywhere. In her discussion of practitioners in direct practice settings, Vicky White (2009) appeals social workers to consider the opportunities for “quiet challenges” in their daily work to resist neoliberal managerialism. I, too, appeal for social workers working in all practice settings to not only actively examine the ways neoliberal rationality governs our practice and subjectivities, but also in the multiplicity of ways, big or small, that resistance could be take form. We must ask ourselves: What are the quiet, small actions we could take to resist? How could we contribute to the resurrection of subjugated voices (Pease, 2002) in our daily practice?

This is not to say that larger scales of action are not needed. Political movements rooted in community organizing, political mobilization, lobbying, policy advocacy, and coalition building have shown to be a massively influential force for change in policy and mainstream discourse. Community-led movements such as Black Lives Matter, Idle No More, and the Green New Deal have taught us that the fight to challenge unjust power relations and shift mainstream discourse towards one that centers justice and equity come from the leadership and resistance of communities most marginalized by the current status quo. However, courses on crucial theories and skills in organizing, politics, and critical policy are largely missing in Canadian social work education. As a profession that claims to fight for social justice, a serious and concerted effort must be made to re-politicize social work practice and education. Furthermore, there is an opportunity for social work academics to be part of this political project through allying with on-the-ground community movements in order to do research *with*—not on—their grassroots efforts. Just as neoliberal reason is continuously reproduced in our policies, values, ways of being, and ways of relating, resistance and radical alternatives to neoliberalism need to follow its path to ensure its absorption and durability in the wider discourse. Social workers need to be an active

part of this work of envisioning together and actualizing a radically different and more just future through research, practice, and coalition-building with community-based movements.

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