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Modern Constructs of Societal Beliefs: The Battle of Collectivist Ideologies on Conservatism

Corruption is an issue that has existed in society for hundreds of years. An issue so significant, corruption was one mean of causation for the collapse of the Roman Empire over a thousand years ago. This piece explores how neoliberalism's focus on growth contrasts with collectivism's emphasis on equity, impacting healthcare, income, and education. In efforts to isolate comparable values of each, we will explore the history of both Neoliberal and Collectivists ideologies through a series of philosophical and logical instances. The reasoning for the seemingly disparate nature of topics used is due to the long reaching effects that both ideologies can have on society. Our approach to evaluate neoliberalism's impacts with respect to the economy, individual health, and overall societal living conditions will be completed through evaluating the aftermath placed on the individual American upon successful implementation of these ideas. The method of evaluating collectivism will be similar with the aim of limiting lurking variables and mitigating any manifestation or pre-existing bias in relation to personal beliefs. This analysis argues that while neoliberalism promotes individual freedoms, it often exacerbates inequality, whereas collectivism, though critiqued for potentially suppressive

innovation, remains significant for addressing disparities and endorsing cohesion in society.

Ultimately, this research means to demonstrate that neither ideology alone provides a universal solution, emphasizing the need for a balanced integration of their strengths.

Neoliberalism is a variance ideology which was derived from classical liberalism, which emerged during the Enlightenment (17th-18th centuries) with philosophers like John Locke and Adam Smith. Classical liberalism flaunted ideas of individual freedom, property rights, free markets, and limited government intervention in economic affairs. Adam Smith's highly regarded work, *The Wealth of Nations* 1776, argued that individuals pursuing their self-interest would lead to efficient market outcomes, often referred to as the "invisible hand" of the market. This concept set the stage for neoliberalism's future promotion of free-market capitalism, an approach modern economists like Konczal critique as having led to "slower growth, greater income inequality, wage stagnation, and decreased labor market mobility" rather than the promised economic benefits (Konczal et al., 1). Neoliberalism's emergence in the 1930s formalized a revised liberal approach, allowing only limited government intervention to maintain competition (Abernathy et al., 3). Though outside of the scope of this research, it is important and formally correct to mention that Adam Smith's work can also be directly correlated with decisions seen enacted in our constitution, suggesting that his philosophies played some role in shaping the world we live in today. The term "neoliberalism" was coined during a 1938 colloquium in Paris, attended by highly regarded economists that argued for a revision of liberalism and set new market principles while allowing minimal government intervention to protect competition.

To evaluate neoliberalism's impact on society, we must also consider the evolution of collectivist ideologies, which far predate neoliberalism and are rooted in observable history. Collectivism can be traced to ancient societies that depended on cooperation and shared

responsibilities for survival. Plato's *Republic* exemplifies early collectivist thought, proposing a communal life for the ruling class that focused on the welfare of the collective. This early collectivist framework laid the foundation for the concept of "utilitarianism," where actions are morally justified when benefiting the majority (Plato). After World War II, many Western nations adopted moderate collectivist principles by merging social democracy with capitalist systems to provide public healthcare, education, and social safety nets (Flynn 7). The persistence of modern applications of collectivism, especially in welfare states, points to its role in addressing economic inequality, healthcare access, and education. These applications contradict the opposing belief in individualism. Its earliest origins began in pre-17th century Greece, when Plato's *Republic* proposed a communal way of living for the ruling class. A way of life that promoted the welfare of the collective over individual desires.

The foundations of collectivist ideology can be traced to utilitarianism, which holds that decisions are morally just when they benefit the majority. This principle evolved through societal and religious practices, including the Christian emphasis on community and charity, which promotes shared responsibility and support for others. These values align closely with collectivist ideals. Following World War II, collectivism gained prominence as Western nations established welfare states, combining collectivist principles with capitalist frameworks in what became known as "social democracy." This shift significantly influenced social structures. Governments took a more active role in ensuring access to healthcare, education, and social security, providing essential services to all citizens. Research indicates that nations with higher income equality, often due to these policies, tend to experience more stable economic growth, with studies showing that "lower inequality...is correlated with faster and more durable growth" (Berg et al., 2014).

Today, collectivism appears in global movements focused on economic equality, education reform, and climate change. These movements frequently advocate for redistributive policies and increased state intervention to reduce wealth gaps and promote equal access to more resources. This approach contrasts with neoliberal policies that emphasize deregulation and privatization, which often lead to economic inequality and reduced social mobility. For example, studies on neoliberal outcomes reveal that these policies “have resulted in slower growth, greater income inequality, stagnant wage growth, and decreased labor market mobility” (Konczal et al. 2020). The progression of collectivism, from its philosophical roots to its application in modern policy, shows its lasting relevance in addressing societal challenges. These developments indicate that collectivist principles continue to be essential to public policy efforts aimed at building a more equitable and inclusive society.

The history of both ideologies may suggest an inherent conflict upon closer analysis. Their origins on the surface do not seem problematic, but their progression into modern society presents a different picture. Neoliberalism, in its contemporary form is a philosophical stance that many have embraced while building on the idea that individuals should be free to pursue their own interests without interference. This stance asserts that individuals, or groups of individuals, should operate with freedom from the intervention of larger powers, particularly in markets and industries. As Hayek argues, “the more the state ‘plans,’ the more difficult planning becomes for the individual” (Hayek 85). Additionally, neoliberal thought holds that state powers themselves should be limited by minimal government intervention. This should be done while attempting to limit constitutional authority while avoiding excessive amendments that could diminish autonomy at the state level.

Collectivism advocates for a structure in which larger powers, such as the state, exercise significant control over the actions of individuals, markets, and industries. This control is framed as essential for ensuring fairness and equality, especially within systems where resources are intended to benefit all members of society. According to Rawls, “inequalities are just if and only if they improve the lot of the least advantaged members of society” (Rawls 75). Collectivist ideals trace back to early practices of managing resources jointly, reflecting basic principles like shared responsibility and mutual support. These values echo the communal principles many are taught from a young age, such as sharing and caring for others, which collectivism formalizes within structured governance aimed at societal equality.

Before examining specific implementations of these ideologies through policy or law, it is crucial to recognize that personal beliefs are deeply influenced by an individual’s upbringing and experiences. These diverse backgrounds underscore that, when evaluating philosophical ideologies, there is no absolute right or wrong answer, as subjective morality varies widely. In fact, research shows that social conditions and personal backgrounds play significant roles in shaping individual perspectives, often determining how one views economic and social policies (Kozcal et al., 2). The very nature of philosophical discourse ties closely to collectivist origins, which emphasize mutual understanding and societal cohesion over rigid truths. Thus, any attempt to apply absolute certainty to moral beliefs oversimplifies the complexities involved. With this in mind, we now turn to examples within social issues. For instance, neoliberal thought strongly endorses individual freedoms, positioning personal ambition as a primary driver of success. However, empirical evidence suggests that policies favoring deregulation and market freedom often result in increased inequality and stagnation for lower-income individuals, a pattern contrary to neoliberal promises of universal benefit (Konczal et al., 2). By comparison,

collectivist approaches argue for fair income distribution as a means to ensure societal equity, where policies like progressive taxation and social welfare aim to bridge economic disparities rather than solely reward individual achievement.

The debate between neoliberal and collectivist ideologies becomes exceptionally clear when addressing income distribution. Neoliberalism as a philosophy generally discourages heavy redistribution policies. Holders to this idea argue that a market left to its own devices naturally rewards effort, skill, and innovation. These naturally manifesting principles drive economic growth that theoretically benefits society. Friedrich Hayek, a notable economist associated with neoliberal thought, argued that “the more the state ‘plans,’ the more difficult planning becomes for the individual” (Hayek 85). In his view, excessive state intervention shifts the natural order of the market. This shift results in inefficiencies that can be seen paradoxically to lead to greater inequality and reduced individual freedom.

Further, collectivism promotes an approach that aims to alleviate inequality through mechanisms like progressive taxation, minimum wage laws, and social welfare programs. John Rawls, a philosopher who argued for a form of social justice aligned with collectivist values suggested that inequalities are just if and only if the results of that action benefit the majority of society (Rawls 75). Here, we see a clear dispute. A dispute characterized by neoliberalism’s acceptance, celebration of economic diversity as a motivator for innovation, while collectivism seeks to reduce such gaps in pursuit of an equitable society. Both ideologies, therefore, propose different mechanisms of wealth distribution. Mechanisms which through organic market forces and the other through deliberate governmental action.

To explore how these beliefs manifest in practical terms, let’s look at health care as a case study. Tied to opposition for logical reasons, in the United States, neoliberal principles have

historically shaped a largely privatized healthcare system. A system that awards credit based on successions of that individual hospital, credit that constantly shifts due to our allowance of a competitive market. Many argue that this results in industry inequality. The United States spends more on healthcare per capita than any other country, but somehow access to quality care varies widely. This is often based on socioeconomic status. A 2019 study by the *American Journal of Public Health* found that approximately 66.5% of all bankruptcies were due to medical expenses. This serves as a reminder of the high cost of any service operating in a privatized system (Himmelstein et al., 578).

Other evidence suggests that lower costs are common in countries with collectivist healthcare models, such as the United Kingdom's National Health Service (NHS), which provides universal healthcare funded through taxation. While this approach may limit some choices regarding providers or treatments, it ensures that all citizens have access to essential services. Supporters of the NHS argue that a collectivist model fosters a more compassionate system by ensuring that healthcare access is not based on financial status. One analyst noted, "The NHS will in essence be a brand name only and it will not be a national health service" if privatization continues, highlighting the risks associated with neoliberal approaches to healthcare funding (Gerada 3).

The education sector shows a similar ideological divide. Neoliberal policies in education tend to support privatization and school choice, arguing that competition drives better quality. This is evident in the U.S. charter school movement, which operates on the principle that giving families more options encourage traditional public schools to improve. Economist Milton Friedman, a figure of neoliberal thought famously argued that "the government solution to a problem is usually as bad as the problem," advocating for market-based solutions (Friedman 54).

Although many argue that privatization funnels resources away from public schools, often creating disparities based on region and income. In a 2019 report by the *Economic Policy Institute*, it was found that charter schools receive 33% more funding per pupil than traditional public schools in some states, often leaving public schools under-resourced (Garcia et al., 4). Here, the collectivist ideal aligns with the view of health as a fundamental right rather than a privilege. This ideal is attributed by advocating for equality in access and emphasizing shared responsibility for public well-being.

Analyzing these case studies brings these ideals into perspective. A perspective where neoliberalism prioritizes individual opportunity and personal choice, while collectivism emphasizes societal equity and shared responsibility. Both ideologies impact society on scales that range from local communities to entire nations. Neoliberalism's alignment with competitive market structures may create advancements and personal freedoms, but it often leaves those unable to compete at a disadvantage. All while, collectivist principles promote inclusivity for all and societal welfare though critics argue they sometimes stifle innovation and personal incentive as a society.

Ultimately, the "battle" between neoliberalism and collectivism is a philosophical one. Both manifests in practical issues like healthcare, income distribution, and education, showing how deeply ingrained ideology is with our quality of life. Observing these ideologies in action ultimately leads to the notion that neither offers absolute benefits towards a specific way of life. This realization leads us to appreciate subjective values for what they are, while understanding that the challenge lies in striking a balance that considers both individual freedoms and collective welfare. As society continues to attain this balance, we are left with the notion that neither approach alone can address the varying needs of a complex, diverse population. Instead, we are

left to hope that the future lands us in an adaptable system that integrates the strengths of both ideologies. Where a middle ground that captures both the rights of the individual and the needs of the collective.

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