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Ronald E. Purser

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INTRODUCTION



## Critical perspectives on corporate mindfulness

Ronald E. Purser

Department of Management, San Francisco State University, San Francisco, CA, USA

Over the last decade, corporate mindfulness training programs have become increasingly popular. Companies such as Google, Goldman Sachs, Ford Motor, Aetna, General Foods, among others, have trained thousands of managers and employees in mindfulness-based stress reduction practices. The evangelical promotion of mindfulness as a panacea for all that ails us has begun to give way to a backlash, with questions arising whether its claims for achieving happiness, well-being, and career success have been over-sold. Perhaps even more troubling is the utopian rhetoric among leaders in the corporate mindfulness movement. They believe capitalism and spirituality can be easily reconciled; they want a mindfulness that will ameliorate stress, but without having to look deeper and wider at its political, economic, and social causes.

Take, for example, Arianna Huffington (2015), who is a big fan of mindfulness. She promotes mindfulness meditation in her best-selling book *Thrive: The Third Metric to Redefining Success and Creating a Life of Well-Being, Wisdom, and Wonder* in which she claims there are no trade-offs to have it all – money, power, and well-being. Her book is a classic example of pop capitalist spirituality. It doesn't occur to Huffington that the pursuit of wisdom may conflict and run counter to her two primary metrics – money and power.

According to Slovene philosopher Slavoj Žižek, mindfulness, as a development of a Western Buddhist “awareness movement,” is arguably becoming established as “the hegemonic ideology of global capitalism,” its meditative stance “the most efficient way, for us, to fully participate in the capitalist dynamic while retaining the appearance of mental sanity” (Žižek 2001). No wonder Wall Street traders and hedge fund managers now use mindfulness for “fine-tuning” their brains, “upping their game,” and “giving them an edge” (Burton and Effinger 2014).

Since the “Beyond McMindfulness” article which David Loy and I co-authored first appeared in the *Huffington Post* and subsequently went viral in July 2013, there have been an increasing number of scholars from the humanities and social sciences that have turned their attention to the modern discourses of mindfulness, critically examining how mindfulness as a “self-care” practice is contextualized within the Western frames of corporate capitalism and neoliberalism (Purser and Loy 2013).

Neoliberalism is not only an economic political philosophy but also a cultural project. As David Harvey (2007) has pointed out, free market logic and economic infiltration has extended its reach into everyday reality. Market values now invade every corner of human life. Persons are constituted as free agents within a culture of enterprise. The language of

market discourse and enterprise links economic well-being with individual fulfillment. Michel Foucault (2004) characterized the neoliberal turn in terms of *biopolitics*, where economic and market logic shapes and regulates the conduct of individuals, not through coercion or domination, but by targeting the formation of a distinct subjectivity. For Foucault, this is the image of *Homo oeconomicus* – the self as entrepreneur – a collection of assets and deficits to be managed.

As the McMindfulness critique continues to evolve, new explorations are examining how mindfulness programs are influenced by the dominant ideology of neoliberalism – a regime of truth that fosters what Julie Wilson calls “disimagination” – weakening our powers of discernment, critique and radical thinking (Wilson 2018, p.51). Unfortunately, many proponents of corporate mindfulness programs – especially those who have a financial stake in selling and marketing them – have, more often than not, summarily dismissed or deflected the substance of these critiques, often misrepresenting the main concerns.

Leaders in the mindfulness movement have ignored how the forces of neoliberalism have shaped and corrupted a practice that was originally intended to free human beings from the delusion of being a separate self. This tendency to downplay and minimize the social, political and economic dimension shows up in the contemporary mindfulness movement’s celebration of personal freedom, authenticity, and the emphasis on the primacy of the individual as the sole moral agent and source of authority. Neoliberal mindfulness emphasizes the sovereignty of autonomous individuals who can navigate the vicissitudes of late capitalist society by becoming self-regulating and self-compassionate, governing themselves, and by freely choosing their own welfare, well-being, and security.

Corporate mindfulness has become the new brand of capitalist spirituality, a disciplined but myopic self-help doctrine, that transfers the risk and responsibility for well-being onto the individual. As individuals are compelled to constantly self-monitor and self-regulate their internal states and “destructive emotions” by “being mindful,” they become as Foucault warned “docile subjects.” The formation of a neoliberal self is one that is autonomous and free to make rational choices that enhance human capital, bearing sole responsibility for its own welfare and happiness.

It’s clear that millions of people in corporations are suffering from stress. That fact is nothing to negate or dispute. In fact, a Gallup study (Sorenson and Garman 2013) that estimates nearly \$550 billion in losses are due to a lack of “employee engagement.” Now corporate mindfulness programs are promoted and marketed as the solution to the employee disengagement epidemic. However, questions as to the root and systemic causes of disengagement are rarely raised among corporate mindfulness proponents. By subscribing to a biomedical explanation for the causes of stress, individual-level training in mindfulness becomes the remedy and selling-point. This essentially depoliticizes stress by pathologizing and psychologizing it, placing the burden squarely upon the individual employees to adapt to the existing material and structural conditions that are precursors to their disengagement in the first place.

The privatization and medicalization of stress is a relatively recent phenomenon that did not gain cultural currency until the 1950s with the publication of the book *The Stress of Life* by endocrinologist Hans Selye (Selye 1978). Stress as a cultural concept now dominates the public imagination; Dana Becker has likened stress to the “New Black Death” (Becker 2013). She (2013, 18) has coined the term *stressism* as a way of encapsulating the overarching belief

that the tensions of modern life are “primarily individual lifestyle problems to be solved through managing stress.”

This special issue, “Critical Perspectives on Corporate Mindfulness,” is composed of five articles. The first article, “Neoliberal governmentality: critiquing the operation of biopower in corporate mindfulness and constructing queer alternatives,” by Zack Walsh, explores how Foucault’s concept of governmentality produces neoliberal subjects. Walsh shows how corporate mindfulness programs extend neoliberal logics, while also offering new alternatives for mindful resistance.

Next, Bee Scherer and Jeff Waistell, in their paper, “Incorporating mindfulness: questioning capitalism,” engage in Buddhist critiques of capitalism and consumerism. They describe how Buddhist modernism and Marxist socialism can complement each other, offering a counternarrative that supports revolutionary impulses for sustainability and ecological responsibility. Their article provides a case study of a Thai Buddhist community that exemplifies new forms of social, civic and communal mindfulness in practice.

The next article by Mai Chi Vu and Roger Gill, “Is there corporate mindfulness? An exploratory study of Buddhist-enacted spiritual leaders’ perspectives and practices” argues that mindfulness is fundamentally a wisdom-based practice. Their qualitative study examines 24 Vietnamese organizational leaders who are practicing Buddhists, revealing how these leaders viewed mindfulness at both a personal and organizational level.

Antti Saari, in his article “Emotionalities of rule in pedagogical mindfulness literature,” considers how mindfulness discourse influences the regulation of emotions in pedagogical practices and corporatized educational institutions. Drawing on the work of Foucault and Deleuze, Saari analyzes the literature on teaching and parenting, showing how “emotionalities of rule” are shaping responsible and entrepreneurial subjects.

The last article in this special issue by Mette Lund Kristensen “Mindfulness and resonance in an era of acceleration: a critical inquiry,” extends the McMindfulness critique by drawing upon the work of German sociologist Hartmut Rosa. Kristensen provides a critical examination of mindfulness within the context of the digitalization of temporality and societal acceleration. While mindfulness is often promoted as method for detoxing from our temporalities of distraction, or what Jon Kabat-Zinn has referred to our “ADD society,” Kristensen argues that such practices can also aid and abet imperatives for higher performance and productivity, further enabling acceleration.

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