



# Disciplinary Neoliberalism and the Simulation of Freedom

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## ABSTRACT

If we take seriously François Debrix's position in *Re-Envisioning Peacekeeping* that it is the "disciplinary" part of disciplinary neoliberalism that matters, then we can turn our attention to something that is still largely missing in studies of neoliberalism: an examination of neoliberalism, not on the level of the state and its actors, but on the level of the day-to-day minutiae of neoliberal subjects. Drawing from Baudrillard, Foucault, and Althusser, Debrix uses simulation, discipline, and ideology as analytics through which we can make sense of hegemonic world orders like neoliberalism. He offers provocation and destabilization as methods for disrupting hegemony when he reads the real/visual as simulation rather than as representation. This essay will focus in particular on Debrix's use of simulation, ideology, and discipline to consider how his deployment of these analytics can help us examine neoliberal subjectivity and its everyday practices understood as freedom. And I will consider the productive and disruptive paths that Debrix's deployment of visual simulation and destabilization can offer critical IR studies and political theory. I suggest here that we need to consider the ways in which neoliberal subjects do the work of neoliberalism, often understood as techniques or strategies of the state, as they simulate a core requirement of disciplinary neoliberalism: freedom.

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If we take seriously François Debrix's position in *Re-Envisioning Peacekeeping* that it is the "disciplinary" part of disciplinary neoliberalism that matters then we can turn our attention to something that is still largely missing in studies of neoliberalism: an examination of neoliberalism, not on the level of the state and its actors, but on the level of the day-to-day minutiae of neoliberal subjects. Drawing from Baudrillard, Foucault, and Althusser, Debrix uses simulation, discipline, and ideology as analytics through which we can make sense of hegemonic world orders like neoliberalism. He offers provocation and destabilization as methods for disrupting hegemony when he reads the real/visual as simulation rather than as representation. This essay will focus in particular on Debrix's use of simulation, ideology, and discipline to consider how his deployment of these analytics can help us examine neoliberal subjectivity and its everyday practices understood as freedom. And I will consider the productive and disruptive paths that Debrix's deployment of visual simulation and destabilization can offer critical international relations (IR) studies and political theory. I suggest here that we need to consider the ways in which neoliberal subjects do the work of neoliberalism, often understood as techniques or strategies of the state, as they simulate a core requirement of disciplinary neoliberalism: freedom.

Neoliberalism functions, in part, through the simulation of freedom. The dominant vision/narrative of neoliberalism only allows for the individual; we can all only be free individuals. Debrix's critique of peacekeeping by way of simulation offers an analytic that, when extended into an examination of notions of freedom, can highlight how individuals do neoliberalism. This analytic emerges out of Debrix's intervention in conceptions of simulation. Debrix fills what he considers to be a gap in the study of simulation and a "conceptual blind spot"<sup>1</sup> in Baudrillard's reflections on simulation. This gap/conceptual blind spot is the co-productive relationship between simulation and ideology. That is, ideology as a mode of discursive reproduction plays a role in producing simulations. In the case of Debrix's study, the focus is on simulations of peacekeeping as they are produced and managed by the ideologies of disciplinary liberalism and disciplinary neoliberalism. Debrix makes it clear that simulation is not innocent; it is not free from the discursive modes of power that produce and exceed the state. Simulation is a way to make sense of reality, but unlike representation, simulation does not try to bypass the senses in order to retrieve or perceive reality.

By connecting ideology and discipline to simulation and by highlighting the ways visual simulations construct and perpetuate hegemonic world orders like neoliberalism, Debrix concretizes Baudrillard's notion of simulation. Debrix argues that simulation is not just a matter of "recuperating reality" or of recuperating actual referents "in the absence of clear representations."<sup>2</sup> For Debrix, simulation, then, no longer operates on the level of the imaginary, of the abstract, or of "subjective representation."<sup>3</sup> Rather, simulation has a "reality principle" in the form of the ideologies and disciplinary powers that depend upon visual simulations for meaning. That is, the "reality principle" of simulation can be found in the socio-political modes of power (neoliberalism and liberalism) behind simulations of peacekeeping and, in the case of this essay, freedom. These socio-political modes of power have a materiality in the form of the state, sovereignty, institutions, norms, disciplines, etc., and these modes of power, which produce notions of freedom and require that individuals subjectivize themselves according to these conceptions of freedom, exceed the state as they are made real or material by the individual.

As I suggested above, neoliberalism functions, in part, through the simulation of freedom. What do I mean by "the simulation of freedom?" To answer this question, I will first define freedom under neoliberalism and then examine what I referred to above as the quotidian practices and the minutiae of neoliberal subjects or of the individual. According to Byung-Chul Han, freedom under neoliberalism means "being free from constraint."<sup>4</sup> Freedom is intimately tied to competition. It means not only being free from constraint, but also that in the absence of constraint one is free to compete. This definition of freedom (being free from constraint) is a negative liberty. In the absence of constraint, individuals must depend upon their will

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1 François Debrix, *Re-Envisioning Peacekeeping: The United Nations and the Mobilization of Ideology* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 21.

2 Ibid., 13.

3 Ibid., 25.

4 Byung-Chul Han, *Psycho politics: Neoliberalism and New Technologies of Power*, trans. Erik Butler (London: Verso, 2017), 2.

to compete, to endure, to remain resilient. Freedom then is a matter of individual will. This negative freedom is a neoliberal ideal, and it requires a subject that accepts this notion of freedom as self-evident.

Debrix's position that peacekeeping does not exist (it is nowhere to be found)<sup>5</sup> outside of its virtuality and his acceptance that power "...is perhaps nothing more than a play of appearances" can lend us insight into the ways neoliberalism is made real through the simulation of freedom. I want to suggest that the freedom of disciplinary neoliberalism is no more than a play of appearances. That is, through their day-to-day practices of self-monitoring, including tracking their sleep, calorie intake, and levels of contentment and anxiety, and of self-maximization, including biohacking, exercising, learning new skills, and engaging in acts of self-care, all of which are very much about the ability to visually display a healthy, thin, and resilient body, individuals simulate freedom. Self-monitoring and self-maximization are plays of appearances, of appearing responsible, resilient, and competitive, and therefore, of appearing free. Much of this day to day self-surveillance or monitoring is made visible in the virtual realm of the internet.

These visual plays of appearing free make it seem like individuals are actually free from constraints, from the nodes of knowledge/power that shape ideologies, discipline, and simulations. But these visual plays of appearing free hide the reality of neoliberalism, which is that "[a]lthough the [neoliberal subject]<sup>6</sup> deems itself free, in reality it is a slave. In so far as it willingly exploits itself without a master, it is an absolute slave."<sup>7</sup> Freedom under neoliberalism is no more than a play of appearances. An appearance of being free is the result of the day to day disciplining of the self as an individual. A turn to disciplinary power highlights the fact that under neoliberalism control, constraint, compulsion, prohibitions, limits, and governance, etc., do not necessarily need a state enforcer. Individuals are free to control, constrain, compel, prohibit, limit and govern themselves. Individuals want to control, constrain, compel, and govern the self. In many ways, the state is internalized by the docile subject of disciplinary power. As individuals turn inward and become their own exploiters, as they become a particular thinking subject that is always reflecting on and governing the self, they display their freedom. A particular kind of free individual comes into being because it is required by liberalism and neoliberalism. That is, liberalism is a reality building project that understands the state, institutions, discipline, and sovereignty as ordered around and for the individual: an individual that is rational, autonomous, free, and competitive. Neoliberalism is a reality building project that understands the state, institutions, and sovereignty as ordered around competition and that requires and produces an individual that is more than anything else free to compete. Disciplinary neoliberalism is "highly efficient" at "exploiting freedom. Everything that belongs to practices and expressive forms of liberty – emotion, play and communication – comes to be exploited."<sup>8</sup> But this does not mean that the modus operandi of neoliberalism is exploiting people against their will. Rather, as I argued above, individuals willingly do the work of exploitation as they exploit themselves, and it is out of this self-exploitation that the play of appearing free, of simulating freedom, emerges. Thus, it is through a turn to the quotidian modes of self-exploitation that we can see how neoliberalism exceeds the state. If studies of neoliberalism want to consider what is beyond this hegemonic reality building project, then they must consider the work that individuals do to make neoliberalism possible. Policy change and reform will not tackle the problem of the docile subject.

The simulation of freedom brings me to the work that Debrix does with the visual in *Re-Envisioning Peacekeeping*. Neoliberalism is okay with contradiction. It is good at absorbing potentially radical forces and at the same time there are visual and virtual processes that continually produce a "dominant vision."<sup>9</sup> This critical engagement with post-modern critiques has opened several important avenues, including legitimizing critical theoretical engagements with visual processes as productive forces. Rather than working towards diagnosing or reflecting the present, works like *Re-Envisioning Peacekeeping* do more than describe the postmodern condition and lament the loss of a self rooted in instrumental rationality and/or

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5 Debrix, *Re-Envisioning Peacekeeping*, 218.

6 "neoliberal subject" is my own addition.

7 Han, *Psychopolitics*, 2.

8 Ibid., 3.

9 Debrix, *Re-Envisioning Peacekeeping*, 218.

an idealized modern past, which is what happens in the anti-postmodern anxieties of Žižek, Virilio, Jameson, and Lyotard. Instead, if we think of visual processes, including films, as a productive force of neoliberalism, liberalism, or any dominant system, that it furthers reality, or that visual processes are reality or do reality, then the historical, social, political, and economic contingencies of dominant discourses, hegemonic ideologies, and global governmentalities can become more apparent. In other words, rather than think about art as though it functions as a mirror image of the real, as a representation (the real here is often the postmodern condition of late-capitalism), the work this text contributes to looks at the co-productive relationship between narratives/discourses/ideologies, whether visual or written, and hegemonic reality projects. Works like *Re-Envisioning Peacekeeping* open the door for treating philosophical and political texts as though they are narrative fiction in order to make disciplinary and hierarchical distinctions more difficult to hold onto. In other words, it opens the door for antagonizing “the construction of virtual worlds.”<sup>10</sup>

To conclude, I will consider an example of the co-productive relationship between discourse, in this case visual discourse, and neoliberalism. I think it is in looking at this co-productive relationship that the disruptive possibilities of Debrix’s deployment of visual simulation and destabilization become apparent. A parallel can be drawn between destabilization and cognitive estrangement since both can be about the ways we think about the visual, including images and film. Similar to cognitive estrangement, Debrix’s deployment of simulation offers a way to destabilize the reality building processes of neoliberalism by bringing attention to one way it constructs its reality.<sup>11</sup> Debrix thinks about peacekeeping in a way that moves against the grain, that is to say, that makes UN peacekeeping more than a futile endeavor or a failure to recognize the realities of a postrealist landscape. If we accept that power is not much more than a play of appearances, peacekeeping as a visual simulation becomes more than a futile endeavor. Peacekeeping becomes a reality; it, as a visual simulation, actively produces a reality where peacekeeping is real. Debrix’s *Re-Envisioning Peacekeeping* highlights the need for Critical IR studies to consider the narratives, discourses, or ideologies that shape the power forces at play in international relations. If we accept freedom as no more than a play of appearances, if we think about films and neoliberalism as visually co-productive forces behind a certain notion of freedom and behind a reality where freedom is necessary, then we can disrupt the virtual and visual processes that make neoliberalism possible. As an illustration, we can think about a film like *Blade Runner*. As a film, *Blade Runner* incites the individual to live without a community. The world of *Blade Runner* is organized around competition, and freedom is understood as the freedom to compete. In other words, *Blade Runner* tells us that freedom is to be free of constraint. It simulates a kind of freedom that is highly exploitable under neoliberalism; a freedom that is about self-governance. In the end, freedom without constraint is part of the way disciplinary neoliberalism becomes real and material.<sup>12</sup>

## COMPETING INTERESTS

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 220.

<sup>11</sup> Caroline Alphin, *Neoliberalism and Cyberpunk Science Fiction: Living on the Edge of Burnout* (New York: Routledge, 2021), 93.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 93.

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