Neil Vallelly
Futilitarianism: Neoliberalism and the Production of Uselessness
London: Goldsmiths Press, 2021, 234 pp

Utility, Futility, Counter-utility

TIM CORBALLIS

No longer the upbeat era of the hedonistic, triumphant individual, neoliberalism has entered its dark days. Where once structural-adjustment programmes and austerity measures held out rewards for those who could endure their trials and emerge stronger from the ruins of society, now, it seems, the lesson and the ruins are all there is. Tightened belts will stay tightened, jobs will stay scarce and precarious, work and unemployment are equally humiliating, and you—if indeed this summary applies to you—will wonder who you are doing it all for.

In his recent *Futilitarianism: Neoliberalism and the Production of Uselessness*, Neil Vallelly captures the feeling of this darker neoliberalism and gives it a name: 'futility' is the combination of pointlessness, loneliness, and loss of hope that I agree is a predominant mood of the current time. The naming itself is already important, a provocation to see the world under its shadow. Vallelly's book takes it as the occasion to reframe a range of contemporary political and social analyses, taking in neoliberalism itself, network technology, and Covid-pandemic responses and, as such, it deserves a sustained engagement.

The diagnosis of futility is both vague and precise; vague, perhaps inevitably, since it applies across the landscape of a

broad and unspecified West and addresses an equally unspecified 'we'. I will return to the sense of vagueness, insofar as the book seems held together more by a feeling than by a sustained analysis. Hopefully this might prompt further refinements to an analytical category that I think has real merit.

First, however, I will focus on the ways in which the idea of futility is quite precise. Vallelly treats it, in a neat if etymologically unfounded wordplay, as the obverse or negative form of utility, a term upon which rests a whole political philosophy and, indeed, the economic thinking that still dominates and colonises our time. This connection gives it a genealogy in European thought, beginning specifically with Jeremy Bentham and utilitarianism, the once radical philosophical idea that ethics should be understood in terms of the consequences of actions rather than the character of the person performing them. In a move that reflected the waning influence of Church and Court, of priests and nobles held to be good by virtue of role and position, Bentham proposed that a good act is one that leads to good or useful consequences—to utility—irrespective of who does it and their intentions.

If utility names the useful or good, futility attaches to acts without utility, useless acts, performed with no good outcome in sight. Between utilitarianism and futilitarianism there is a history of ideas and of their deployment, especially by the more notorious and influential economists of the 20th century. The political history of utilitarianism is a history of contest, in effect, over who gets to define a good or useful consequence: good in what sense, and for whom? In particular, is a good act good for a community or society in general, or just for the individual performing it?

The story of neoliberalism is partly the story of how utilitarianism was hijacked by the usual suspects from Mont Pélerin: Hayek, von Mises, and co. It is the story of how utility was redefined: if utility had incorporated an element of social good for Bentham, and retained it through the post-war Western consensus defined by economists such as John Maynard Keynes, Hayek and colleagues pushed for the application of a strictly individual notion of utility at the foundation of the economic order. Any socially or communally defined good would be tantamount to totalitarianism, leaving

individuals without the freedom to decide for themselves. The only answer was the thoroughgoing rejection of the social that has become so familiar since the 1970s and '80s.

Futility, in a way, already sets in at this point, with the erosion of any sense of a 'greater good'. The triumph of the neoliberal agenda, its influence in treasuries and economics departments, and the capture of political leaders from Thatcher and Reagan to Roger Douglas, meant that states began in practice to leave it up to citizens to determine the values of their actions, which meant, largely, to measure them in monetary terms (something, Vallelly points out, that was already seeded in Bentham's thought). The 'why bother' of futility was already present in the heady, entrepreneurial ethos that set in through the 1980s: why bother with anything but money?

Then, in 2008, it seemed to many like neoliberalism was over: hopes for individual betterment soured as debts turned bad, repayments proved impossible, and investments collapsed; much of the world's money supply disappeared altogether, and the promise of individual enrichment was revealed to rest on shaky foundations (unless you were among the few lucky enough to have made the right bets, or better, to have been bailed out by the state). One of the incidental debates that Vallelly enters into is terminological: does the word 'neoliberalism' still apply when its promise is reversed? But he makes a convincing argument that nothing fundamental has changed except that even individualised hopes have been annulled. The entrepreneurial individual, thriving without state or social support, is replaced as society's representative type by the lonely individual, devoid of hope and struggling under the same conditions. Their tasks are not justified even by the appeal to individual utility; now, there is no utility at all, just the pointless and endless task.

The picture is bleak and familiar, for all that futility is a new and useful word to attach to it. It builds on observations by Guy Standing and others about the rise of precarious work but extends them out from situations of unstable employment to include (following David Graeber) those with stable but pointless, unfulfilling, 'bullshit' jobs: the spinning wheels of management, corporate compliance, communications and reporting,

among other occupations.[1] Like precarity, futility is unrelated to wealth or income, but unlike precarity it is also unrelated to economic security. It measures value, or rather the collapse of any measure of value; and, for all that it is taken up and promulgated by neoliberal economists, its values are ethical rather than economic, concerning the judgment of acts rather than the valuing and pricing of commodities, as in Marx. Ethical value tends—especially, we might say, given the neoliberal collapse of common ethical standards—towards the subjective, affective, and intangible, rather than towards quantifiable or codifiable 'objective' measures that can attach to poverty or precarity. Futility, writes Vallelly, 'captures so much of what *feels* wrong about the world we currently inhabit'.[2] Anyone, irrespective of their income or contractual stability, might feel their lives are futile—or, indeed, they might not.

*   *   *

Vallelly's opening narrative of utilitarianism, neoliberalism, and collapse grounds a widening series of riffs on the topic of futility for the remaining chapters of the book. There are good moments throughout: critiques of the persistent association of one's identity in career and work, of the necessity of self-branding and the assumption of an unrewarding sense of responsibility for one's state of affairs—whose fault is it that I am unhappy, poor, sick, etc, other than my own? These are welcome if, at times, familiar points, which combine to give a picture of harried individuals, unable to think of anything but work and the competitive, paranoid upkeep of a curriculum vitae, a task generally without reward or success, in which people need constantly reapply for the job of being themselves. Vallelly makes these arguments with a broad brush and an uneven scattering of

---

1 Guy Standing, *The Precariat: The New Dangerous Class* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2011); David Graeber, *Bullshit Jobs: A Theory* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2018). For a critique of the notion of the precariat, see Jan Breman, 'A Bogus Concept?' *New Left Review* 84 (2013): 130-138.

2 Neil Vallelly, *Futilitarianism: Neoliberalism and the Production of Uselessness* (London: Goldsmiths Press, 2021), 173.

examples, meaning finer analytical points are sometimes lost. He discusses, for example, the branding of political celebrities such as Canadian prime minister Justin Trudeau, presumably a very specific category of branding, requiring an analysis of the long history of electoral-campaign rhetoric that hardly overlaps with considerations of the casual worker obsessively tweaking the font on their resumé. Meanwhile, Jacinda Ardern ('let's do this!') is left very much alone. And although the book aims at our dark, post-2008 moment, it appeals to theorists (Foucault) and figures (Clinton and Blair) of the previous, heroic era of neoliberalism, meaning the specificity of the time begins to blur.

If I am responsible for myself and only myself, then any values attaching to wider political and environmental action collapse. The chapter on Covid-19 responses draws on this line of thinking: arguments against lockdowns and other large public-health measures warned of harmful economic effects, but also insisted that avoidance of, and recovery from, the virus should therefore be a matter of personal rather than state responsibility, with an inevitable, justifiable (and calculable) loss of life. Vallelly also marshals arguments about the pointlessness of consumer activism ('voting with your dollar'), boycotting and lifestyle environmentalism, and individualised human-rights discourse to his cause, diagnosing a suspicion of wider, state-driven or structural change in favour of individual autonomy in groups and movements including Green America, Extinction Rebellion, and Occupy. And at these points, I began to wonder whether the basis of the argument in ethical thought lost its purchase. There is no doubt a general loss of faith in large-scale collective political action, but it is not clear that this loss is best captured only by the rhetorical capture of value by the neoliberal right. That loss of faith might be at least as much to do with feelings about the *effectiveness* of appeals to state and structure as about their worth, and that is a significant if subtle difference. It is arguably less that Hayek and von Mises have persuaded us that it is totalitarian to seek out collective action and more that states are too powerful, structures too embedded, environmental and economic crises too large and complex to even know where to start. In those conditions, it might just make sense to

do what we can in our back yard and hope for the best.

The moment where the question of value most clearly gives way to an analysis focusing of ineffectiveness is in a chapter on linguistic futility: the pointlessness of speech, and its loss of meaning. The chapter offers nice explorations of 'post truth', 'fake news', and the slippage in meaning of specific terms in public discourse. This slippage is not only a matter of which audiences our words reach. It is to do, in some cases, with a challenge to the very definition of terms, as with Simon Bridges's response to the idea of a housing crisis: 'You can call it what you like'.[3] The frustration extends to a more general point, the futility of relying on the truth or meaning of one's words in the context of communicative overproduction and the attention economy, which troubles the stable communicative background against which meaning can be fixed. Futility is a good word to capture the frustration of talking, writing, publishing, and posting without one's words reaching an audience or having an effect—but, again, this is to do with effectiveness rather than value.

In this chapter, the culprit is no longer the history of ideas and their capture by the neoliberals, but the impact of network technologies, with arguments based in theories of 'semio-capitalism' and the 'language economy' mobilised to suggest that words have been removed from the material body and the immediate physical context in which they are used. It is unclear whether and how this account of 'semio-futility' relates to the analysis of futility in the discussion of utilitarianism. There may be a case to be made linking the ethical value of acts with the material uses and meanings of words, though I suspect it would be a somewhat desperate stretch. A better case might be via Wendy Hui Kyong Chun's work on how code, network, and interface embody neoliberal assumptions about governance and control.[4] Vallelly, for his part, makes no attempt to link this account of futility back to the context of neoliberalism and ethical theory. He asks, 'what happens when communication is separated from the

---

3 Vallelly, *Futilitarianism*, 108.

4 Wendy Hui Kyong Chun, *Programmed Visions: Software and Memory* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 2011).

human body, as is increasingly the case in digital communication?'.[5] No longer neoliberalism but digital technologies, platforms, and devices are now seemingly to blame, removing language from meanings anchored in the flesh-and-blood body.

There is a hint of moral panic about this line of thought—TikTok corrupting the youth! Although Vallelly nods to the fact that 'the human body both makes language and is made by language', there is no room here for an extended body made in relationship to a digitally extended language.[6] This seems a restricted, even romantic, idea of the body, a flesh-and-blood body that forgets all those discussions in McLuhan, say, or differently in Marx, about tools and machines and technology as extensions of the human. Machines may, of course, alienate and enslave their users, but there is no reason to think that the human body, and the various uses and goods it enjoys, must end at the fingertips.

And 'post-truth' does not signal a general loss of meaning but a shift in whose language has meaning in what context and what bodies can be formed and mobilised by it. The force of language in the post-truth milieu is able to gather huge rallies of Trump supporters, attacks on the US Capitol, and vaccine-mandate protests; it is able to re-form extended social bodies through social media itself. Even online, words are connected with bodies. 'Our' language—the language of the left, say, or alternatively, the reasonable language of deliberative democracy—might not have the same effects, and this is, for sure, something to get us thinking, if not just looking for better words. It certainly should not inspire an abstract rejection of network technologies and a romantic return to the un-extended flesh-and-blood body.

<p style="text-align:center">*   *   *</p>

Vallelly's opening analysis tells a particular origin story about neoliberalism, but it is not the only one. Indeed, as Javier Moreno Zacarés has recently

---

5 Vallelly, *Futilitarianism*, 113.

6 Vallelly, *Futilitarianism*, 113.

noted, the genealogy of our times remains undecided, with competing diagnoses emphasising the ideological capture of common sense by the right (as Vallelly prefers), the political dismantling of union and party, the role of network technology (as in his semio-futility chapter) or automation, or financialisation driven by diminishing labour productivity or by the concentration of monopoly power in corporate hands.[7] While Vallelly describes his book as a work of political economy, it is only political economy in a restricted sense: it explores how economic theories, ideas, and systems are politicised or, indeed political, from the ground up—how the right in particular played a long political game to establish a form of economic common sense—but not how working-class politics, say, has engaged in and through economic power. By choosing to focus on the history of ideas and ideologies, Vallelly misses the opportunity that other stories offer for a more unified analysis.

One story that is missing, then, is the history of class-based political organising, which is also a history of the waning of the proletariat as a term and a class and the subsequent search for 'replacement' class terms (including precariat and, indeed, 'futilitariat') to fill the void of political subjectivity. To start with, what distinguishes the category of the proletariat from other terms is its relational nature. The working class worked because its members lacked other forms of subsistence and, importantly, capital needed workers. It was the necessity of workers for capital that defined the proletariat as a class; work itself might offer shared experience and wider social value, but the situation of workers within the capitalist economy gave them a shared predicament of exploitation and the possibility of extracting concessions from capital through collective action. The factory, like all its industrial descendants, was ideally a place for union organising and industrial 'muscle' based in the threat of strike action or factory occupation.

In one sense, the tasks of the worker in the factory always belonged to capital: they were already done for someone else. Futility, as Vallelly observes, has always been with us, but he doesn't delve into the ways in which even the idealised, nascent, 19th-century European industrial worker was already

---

7 Javier Moreno Zacarés, 'Euphoria of the Rentier?' *New Left Review* 129 (2021): 47-67.

in a bullshit job, doing stuff for the pay and for someone else's profit. What's the point in that? But relationality—which is to say, the necessity of the worker for capital—also means that the worker, by threatening to walk out, can cripple the firm or, in the case of the general strike, the economy as a whole. In this other sense, then, the ideal proletariat's work was not futile. The proletariat, again ideally and insofar as it could operate in unison, was irreplaceable, and it was responsible for everything the capital–labour relation produced. The Marxist-feminist observation that reproduction is similarly necessary for capital extends the argument to the home, provided widespread-enough feminist organising: give us wages for housework or we stop feeding your workers and raising their next generation.

The rise of neoliberalism is imbricated with the waning of union and party organising. This story is, of course, a neat fit with the story of the capture of economic common sense by the right that Vallelly tells; the neoliberal takeover of political regimes came with a sustained attack on unions in particular and subsequently undermined associated labour parties where they existed. Emphasising the loss of this form of organising offers ways to think about those aspects of futility that Vallelly doesn't tie together analytically. Political disillusionment and the reduction of politics to small, ineffective acts can be linked, as Peter Mair has shown, to the dwindling of mass-party memberships that offered channels of communication, relevance, and influence between leaders and members outside of the simple act of voting.[8] Similarly, even an advocate of environmental action like Andreas Malm admits that any environmental act, up to and including sabotage, achieves little without a mass movement.[9] Political organisation, as Campbell Jones and Shannon Walsh write in their introduction to *New Forms of Political Organisation*, 'involves giving form to politics'; it involves 'coordinating . . . demands and strategising to produce real change'.[10]

---

8 Peter Mair, *Ruling the Void: The Hollowing of Western Democracy* (London: Verso, 2013).

9 Andreas Malm, *How to Blow up a Pipeline: Learning to Fight in a World on Fire* (London: Verso, 2021), 155.

10 Campbell Jones and Shannon Walsh, 'What is Political Organisation?' in *New Forms of Political Organisation*, eds., Campbell Jones and Shannon Walsh (Tamaki Makaurau: ESRA, 2018), 9.

The dwindling of union and party organising also offers a better explanation for the futility of speech than Vallelly is able to give. It is an explanation that derives specifically from the necessity of labour to capital. The political organisation that (ideally) found its place in the (ideal) factory was a place where words had embodied meanings: 'pay us more, or we walk out'. A strike threat is empty language indeed without the ability to pull off a strike. Labour organisation, in this context, ideally forms a labour body capable of making its political words meaningful in practice—a perfect example of meaning attaching to the embodied use of language. Such a social body is currently absent, or weak at best. As Gabriel Winant writes of the small-scale resurgence of strike action in the US, 'the present strike wave . . . is a matter of only tens of thousands, not the millions of earlier episodes of US labour history'. Attempts by the AFL-CIO to gain momentum by 'means other than direct economic power' (political campaigns of various forms) 'counted some major successes . . . but none generated movement on the scale of the class as a whole, or even a significant fraction'.[11]

I am by no means committed to the idea that effective change requires economic power as such, but it certainly requires more than language, lest the left remain (as Žižek has diagnosed repeatedly) 'predestined to continue to play the role of those who . . . convince but nevertheless still lose'; who make arguments, write books, and stage protests while business carries on happily as usual.[12] The point here is not to hope for a return to the days of class-based organisation but to suggest that what underlies common feelings of futility is not just a loss of ideas' shared value, but also an undermining of organisation based on the necessity of labour to capital—including through technical means as well as the outsourcing and reorganising of labour. Theodor Adorno's translator Robert Hullot-Kentor (drawing on points Adorno was making already in his 1950s lectures) links this economic shift directly back to the decline in ethical value with which Vallelly begins: ethics, he writes, 'has been made obsolete by the ineluctable experience of the arbitrariness of each in an economy to which no one is

---

11 Gabriel Winant, 'Strike Wave', *Sidecar*, 25 November 2021.

12 Slavoj Žižek, *First as Tragedy, Then as Farce* (London: Verso, 2009), 7.

necessary'.[13] This is, if nothing else, a definition of futility, one linked to a longer political-economic story than the right's capture of ethical measures of value.

<center>*   *   *</center>

Vallelly deals with issues of organisation and movement most explicitly in his conclusion, which also gives the clearest hints about what he thinks should be done. He evokes the formation of a sense of commonality, and a movement, based in futility—the political organisation of the futilitariat, as it were, beginning with the naming of an experience of pointlessness shared across a wide range of social positions including bureaucrats, unemployed workers, and frustrated environmentalists, people who otherwise share no common economic position or identity. There are swerves and speed wobbles as Vallelly attempts to indicate a way forward and avoid theoretical and political pitfalls: as a reader of Jodi Dean, he is keen to avoid charges of the spontaneism that hampered Occupy, while also steering clear of any commonality of purpose that does not derive from the practical, grounded activity of its membership. And, to be sure, although Vallelly doesn't make this explicit, political organisation is one of the best ways to square that circle, insofar as organisation can tie leaders and members together in structures of close relation, accountability, and representation.

By advocating a 'becoming-common' based in a shared experience of futility, Vallelly seems to hope for the (re-)building of a communal form of ethical utility, something to fill the void of purpose that neoliberalism introduced but which is 'concretely produced through the activity and needs of the common'.[14] What might this look like? Forms of good might emerge from political organisation itself—values such as solidarity based in the experience of struggle and opposition to power. In addition, insofar as political organisation involves mutual aid (the provision of food and other

---

13 Robert Hullot-Kentor, *Things Beyond Resemblance: Collected Essays on Theodor W. Adorno* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), 219.

14 Vallelly, *Futilitarianism*, 181.

support for striking workers while they stay at home, say) it is also oriented to other forms of utility based in the needs of workers themselves, rather than the needs of capital. In organised, mutual aid there is a turn towards the nourishment of bodies and cultures, pleasures and projects that are independent of utility as others might define it for us. The possibility of oppositional values and values oriented towards mutual aid might come under the label of 'counter-utility', and this alternative form of utility reopens ethics itself as a site for struggle over the determination of value.

Marx's value theory and, in particular, the distinction between use and exchange value, might help to sketch out a fuller picture of counter-utility (at the risk of a category error, attaching as it does to commodities rather than acts). Workers' mutual aid in the time of a strike specifically involves a turning away from exchange value—from producing for price and profit, and even for the politics of raising costs for capital—and towards use value, towards producing what is needed to live and thrive. An even better site to think about counter-utility is the factory occupation, concerned as it is with the direct claiming by workers of the organisation of production and, ultimately, of the means of life. Although Marx mostly attaches it to objects, use value comes close to naming a wider approach to value that concerns production for the meeting of material, cultural, and spiritual needs. I suspect it is for this kind of reason that Gramsci—a theorist most interestingly of political organisation, according to a recent provocation by Michael Denning—ultimately preferred the factory occupation over the strike. This preference means eschewing the 'voiced' appeal to the capitalist state or corporation, and the attempt to leverage the necessity of labour to capital, focusing instead on the potential of the working class to organise around its own needs. As Denning glosses it, 'in the factory occupations, one might say, ordinary workers emerged as "organic legislators", creating new norms of conduct, new ways of conducting work'.[15]

Insofar as it aims at use value, counter-utility need not aim for a single, indeed (as Hayek and friends would have it) 'totalitarian', replacement of common forms of utility. Even if a matter of common or organised

---

15 Michael Denning, 'Everyone a Legislator', *New Left Review* 129 (2021): 42.

provision (from each according to their ability), use value remains particular to a context, group, or individual: to each according to their need. The utopian possibility indicated by the transition from exchange to use value, as Malcolm Bull has suggested, lies not in the establishment of shared common values but in their withering away—the withering of the state, to be sure, but also the withering of systems of exchange and equivalence and the forgetting of ethical rules and institutions that determine conduct.[16] Vallelly does not specifically enter into a discussion about the utopian horizon of his work, but Bull's provocation suggests that it might in fact aim at the wholesale dissolution of measures of the good, and that counter-utility might tend in turn towards something very much like futility. For all that futility names, today, a lonely and pointless hell, is there the possibility of a transvaluation of futility in which the pointlessness of life allows us just to get on with living it? Bull, like Paul Lafargue and Jonathan Crary, is an advocate of slack, laziness, and sleep. Pointlessness is, after all, a perfect excuse to enjoy a nap.

---

16 Malcolm Bull, *The Concept of the Social: Scepticism, Idleness and Utopia* (London: Verso, 2021), 40.