

# **The Stickiness of Neoliberal Rationality: The Case of “StrongerBC for Everyone” COVID-19 Economic Recovery Plan**

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### Abstract

This qualitative study examines how neoliberal rationality is reproduced and reinforced—and how certain lives are centered while others marginalized and excluded—in British Columbia’s COVID-19 pandemic economic recovery plan “*StrongerBC 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 were 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 need for more research on radical alternatives to neoliberalism.

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

### Résumé

Cette étude qualitative examine comment la rationalité néolibérale est reproduite et renforcée, ainsi que la manière dont certaines vies sont mises en avant tandis que d’autres sont marginalisées et exclues, dans le cadre du plan de relance économique de la Colombie-Britannique, *StrongerBC for Everyone*, à la suite de la pandémie de Covid-19. En s’appuyant sur l’analyse critique du discours selon Foucault, cette étude révèle que le néolibéralisme est perpétué à travers la centralité discursive accordée aux emplois, aux entreprises et à l’*homo oeconomicus* — le « sujet économique » productif, égoïste et entrepreneur. Cet article suggère également que les réalités des personnes marginalisées et les revendications d’alternatives radicales sont remaniées pour défendre la rationalité néolibérale, voilant ainsi les réalités des personnes les plus marginalisées pendant cette pandémie. Ces remaniements et ces silences renforcent l’hégémonie du néolibéralisme présenté comme l’unique solution logique aux inégalités existantes. Enfin, cette étude démontre la nécessité d’approfondir la recherche sur les alternatives radicales au néolibéralisme.

*Mots clés :* relance économique, Covid-19, inégalité, néolibéralisme, analyse critique du discours selon Foucault

## Introduction

Governments of all stripes in the Global North often tout neoliberalism as the only common sense policy solution to any of the myriad challenges they face. Brown (2005) suggests that this form of political rationality is wholly invested in upholding the *homo oeconomicus*—the ideal, rational, self-interested, and consumeristic citizen-subject—through policies that center the health of the economy above all. In the aftermath of recent global crises such as the 2008 financial crisis and the COVID-19 pandemic, governments across Canada, the US, and the UK chose to privilege neoliberal rationality above other alternatives, implementing post-crisis recovery plans that involved cutting health and social services, weakening labour protection, implementing Open Door economic policies, and deepening corporate deregulation (Apeldoorn & de Graaff, 2017; Cahill, 2011; Ferguson & Lavalette, 2013; Kecskes, 2020; Labonte & Ruckert, 2015; Primrose et al., 2020).

Neoliberal rationality was at the root of the disproportionate impacts these crises had on marginalized communities. Workers, the poor, and those most marginalized by systemic injustices were significantly impacted by neoliberal state policies of health care and social services cuts in response to the 2008 financial crisis (Primrose, et al., 2020), while the weakened health care system and social safety net resulted in the inequitable impacts of COVID-19 in marginalized communities (Michie, 2020; Primrose et al., 2020). Confronted by the COVID-19 pandemic's dire consequences on marginalized communities, growing voices across Canada called for a more just health, social, and economic system—one committed to putting the health of people and the natural world at the centre, grounded in the values of equity, justice, and the interdependence of all living beings (The Chief Public Health Officer of Canada, 2020; Just Recovery, 2020).

Instead, governments across the Global North, including those rooted in progressive and inclusive values, ignored this upswell in public support and the rare window of opportunity to enact radical and meaningful systemic change and chose instead to perpetuate neoliberal rationality in their post-crisis policy responses. The focus of this article is British Columbia's COVID-19 economic recovery plan, *StrongerBC for Everyone* (Government of BC, 2020a), published in 2020 by the NDP government in power at the time. The plan reinforced neoliberal rationality as the common-sense approach to pandemic recovery. This study seeks to illuminate the discursive tactics behind the stickiness of neoliberal rationality in left-leaning governments and to explore how such tactics continue to invisibilize marginalized people's realities while putting the ideal neoliberal citizen-subject at the centre. Drawing from Foucauldian Discourse Analysis and the theoretical frameworks of Brown's (2005) neoliberal rationality and Razack's (1998) interlocking systems of oppression, this article will show how *StrongerBC for Everyone* discursively reinforces neoliberalism through centring jobs, business, the economy, and *homo oeconomicus*. This analysis also reveals how the recovery plan repackaged marginalized people's realities and their demands for radical change to further serve neoliberal reason. The paper turns first to a brief exploration of neoliberal rationality and interlocking systems of oppression as this

analysis' theoretical frameworks and Foucauldian Discourse Analysis as its methodology. It then turns to the in-depth analysis and discussion of the recovery plan's discursive tactics, concluding with a discussion on this analysis' continued relevance to today's crises.

### **Neoliberal Rationality, Interlocking Systems of Oppression, and Foucauldian Discourse Analysis**

This research draws on Brown's (2005) conception of neoliberal rationality and Razack's (1998) analysis of interlocking systems of oppression. Contrary to neoliberalism's common conflation with laissez-faire economics and informed by the Foucauldian concept of governmentality, Brown (2005) argues that *actually-existing neoliberalism* requires active involvement of the state and its apparatuses—the law, the economy, and policy—to ensure continuous social dissemination of this political rationality to all spheres of life, striving to discursively produce the ideal citizen-subject: the *homo oeconomicus*. Razack's (1998) theory of interlocking systems of oppression underlines the complex, historically-, and site-specific interrelations of systems of domination, acknowledging the shifting positions of power and privilege, and recognizing that these systems of domination rely on each other to produce subjects that exist both symbiotically and hierarchically. Using both frameworks allows for a better understanding of how BC's economic recovery plan discursively produces the *homo oeconomicus* and upholds neoliberalism, while simultaneously—despite claims of inclusion—rendering marginalized and inequitably-impacted communities invisible and undeserving.

This research utilizes the methodological tools of Foucauldian Discourse Analysis (FDA), grounded in 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). Rather than focusing on *why* policy decisions are made, it asks *how* existing structures of common sense truths, domination, subjugation, and control come to be (Rabinow, 1984). Specifically, FDA requires researchers to “interrogate how power is at work” in how taken-for-granted truths govern the lives of subjects, how they “explicitly or implicitly deny, disavow, or exclude” certain lives while accepting or including others (Macias, 2015a, p. 225). By examining neoliberal discourses of the economy embedded within the economic recovery plan, this research seeks to uncover 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.

### **Research design**

To explore the stickiness of neoliberal rationality, this research examined two key documents: the *StrongerBC for Everyone* (Government of BC, 2020a) economic recovery plan and *BC's Economic Recovery Background* (Government of BC, 2020b), both retrieved from the B.C. government's publicly accessible website. The combination of these two documents, while not exhaustive, provided a more comprehensive account of the discourses of this government and the mechanisms it uses to sustain certain truths. This research utilized a thematic

analysis approach to coding due to its flexibility in providing a rich and complex account of data and compatibility with constructivist paradigms (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Initial coding was completed manually through close reading, guided by several analytical questions, including: *How does this plan discursively produce ideas of deserving and undeserving subjects? Which sector or initiative received the most investment and the least, and which ones were missing entirely?* Codes were visually mapped and grouped to identify themes and sub-themes in an iterative process, before extracting data to Excel by theme. Below, I turn to the analysis of four dominant themes from the documents that illustrate the B.C. NDP government's discursive tactics in upholding neoliberal rationality: the centring of jobs and *homo oeconomicus*; the centring of business and the economy; the repackaging of marginalized people's realities; and repackaging demands for change.

### **The Case of “StrongerBC for Everyone”: Analysis and Discussion Centering Jobs and *Homo Oeconomicus***

*StrongerBC for Everyone* signalled a recommitment to a neoliberal economic system through the discursive production of *homo oeconomicus* and its focus on job creation in the name of fostering economic growth. The late B.C. premier John Horgan did not hesitate in declaring his government's focus on job creation in the recovery period in his welcome message by stating that its 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 was 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 B.C. 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 bolstered by the use of a chart by Statistics Canada's Labour Force Survey (LFS), which details employment numbers in B.C. below (Figure 1). The dramatic dip in the line chart's 2020 employment numbers and the emphasis put on the still-low August 2020 numbers created the effect of an unquestioned truth that job losses were indeed a dire issue in need of government attention.

## The Stickiness of Neoliberal Rationality

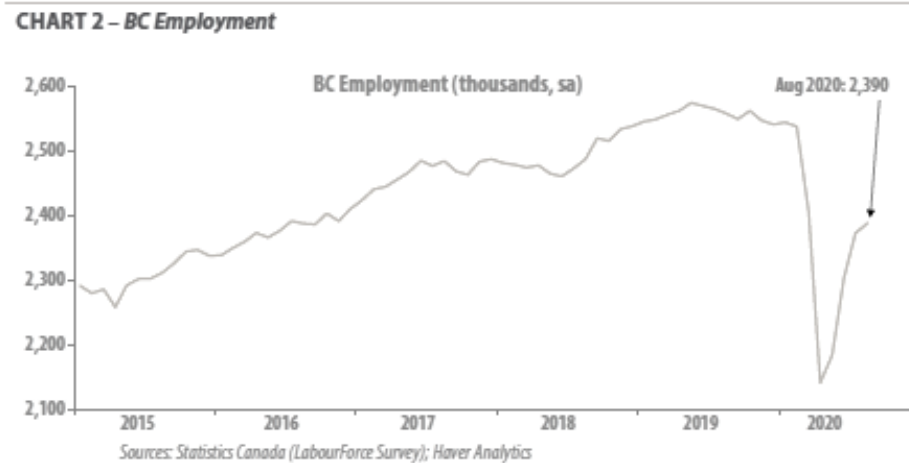


Figure 1. BC Employment. *The Economic Impact of COVID-19*, Government of BC, 2020a

The neoliberal fixation on economic productivity and putting social value in a person's participation in the economy through work (Ferguson & Lavallette, 2013) was apparent in the B.C. government's pandemic economic recovery plan. In its section *Restoring Growth: Budget 2021 and Beyond*, the plan asserted that:

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

People throughout this plan were primarily configured as “hard working British Columbians” eager to participate in the economy. Various measures were dedicated solely to upskilling programs to retrain 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). Indeed, the discourse of “hard working British Columbians” was the most prevalent in the images included in the plan (see Figure 2).



Figure 2. *Untitled*. (Government of BC, 2020a, p. 7)

Out of 16 images containing people in *StrongerBC for Everyone*, 12 were images of people at work: racially diverse, age-diverse people of various genders appearing to be in action at their respective workplaces. The subjects in these images appeared to work in industries that garnered specific attention in the recovery plan, such as retail, trades, food and beverage, film, technology, and health care. Following Waitt's (2013) urging to pay attention to the devices used to persuade in Foucauldian Discourse Analysis, I argue that these images served as tools to reproduce the ideal human subjects as workers participating in the economy and job creation as the primary 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 why measures are implemented:

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. (Government of BC, 2020a, p. 13)

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, rising demands for a just and equitable recovery (Just Recovery, 2020) and effective public health measures (The Chief Public Health Officer, 2020) did not attempt to legitimize their calls through the economic lens of job-creation. Instead, they were simply founded upon the understanding that better health and social services are basic human rights, and that health measures were key in saving lives during a global pandemic (Just

Recovery, 2020; The Chief Public Health Officer, 2020). Yet, the choices made in this recovery plan showed the opposite.

The perpetuation of *homo oeconomicus* was also evident in the additional document to the recovery plan titled *Background: Investing in Technology and Innovation*. In the discussion on the InBC strategic investment fund embedded in this document, the plan talked about how, despite the government's investment of yearly funds into new technology and innovation companies, many new ventures still failed to grow or were bought by bigger companies outside the province, which meant

[...] 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]. (Government of BC, 2020b, pg. 2)

Here, British Columbians were configured to be rational market actors who pay taxes in order to obtain returns on investments in the form of jobs and revenues. In effect, the government's role is no different than a financial manager, concerned only about maximizing the value of their investors' portfolio. 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). In neoliberal rationality, the primary interest of its ideal subjects is the enhancement of their present and future capital through practices of strategic investments, and this, too, must be the primary goal of government. And yet, the B.C. NDP government chose to reproduce this discourse anyway.

### **Centering Business and the Economy**

Given the opportunity for meaningful systemic change provided by the otherwise devastating pandemic, the supposedly social democratic B.C. NDP government could have highlighted how decades of neoliberal erosion of the social safety net has harmed human lives and the natural world and then chosen to implement meaningful change. Instead, it chose to lay out a story of how businesses and, by extension, the economy, were the ones experiencing the most harm. 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 in retail sales in 2020, as shown in Figure 3 below (Government of BC, 2020, p. 9).

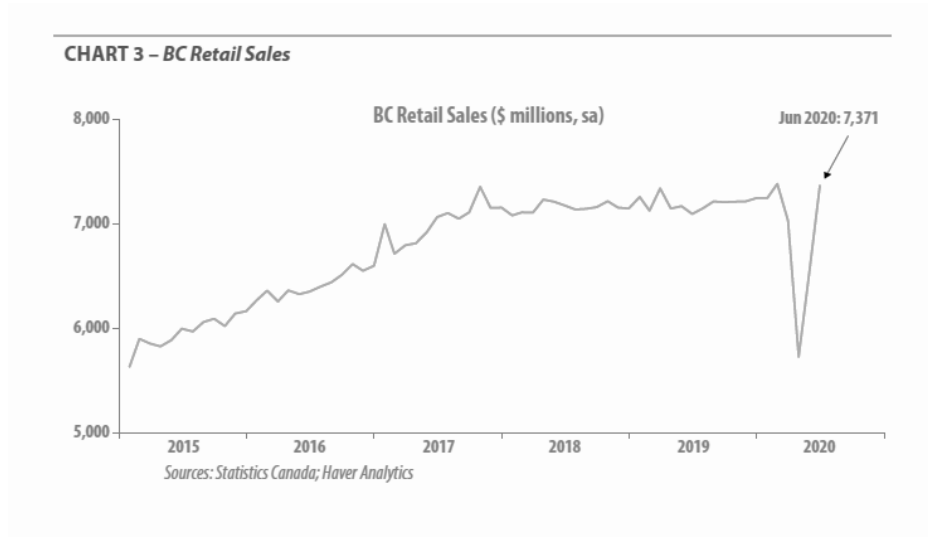


Figure 3. BC Retail Sales. (*The Economic Impact of COVID-19*, Government of BC, 2020, p. 9)

The graph above underlined the dire effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on retail and other businesses. Similar charts showing significant declines in employment and private sector outlook could be found in the 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 B.C. businesses were still reeling from the lockdown in the pandemic's first wave, the quote below captured 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 exemplified a seemingly nationwide, if not global, concern about 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 of discourse needs to pay close attention to the strategies of conviction deployed to establish an “unquestionable truth” by invoking voices of a discipline, statistics, or expert spokesperson. The chart in Figure 3 presented a seemingly objective method of economic measurement, the retail sales volume, while the quote invoked the voice of a ‘trustworthy’ body, the Bank of Canada, to not only persuade the reader of

the dire state of business in B.C. but also of the economy. Of utmost importance is the quote's focus not on the health of human beings or the natural world, but on the health and survival of businesses – a notion that was prevalent across the recovery plan. This particular focus was similarly commonplace in the discourses used by various other governments 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 were imagined as the real victims of this pandemic, it is unsurprising that they became the primary beneficiaries of the recovery plan in the name of saving the economy. Pages of the B.C. government's strategy dedicated to supporting businesses outlined a myriad of supports from payroll "tax credit" to "Business Recovery Grant" and e-commerce supports. This wide variety of supports for businesses made 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, was the fact that the economy became the justification of measures that did not have anything to do with the economic sphere. Public health measures, key to curbing the spread of COVID-19 and saving lives, were described in this plan not only through an economic lens, but also as a tool of economic growth:

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, 2020a, p 21)

Saving lives and protecting the health of British Columbians were not good enough reason to justify effective public health measures to curb COVID-19 infection. Instead, they were tools, alongside a series 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 victims of the pandemic justified the intense focus on business supports in the plan's spending measures. Most importantly, its repeated storytelling throughout the recovery plan created the effect of an unquestioned truth of the common-sense approach of saving the economy as the primary focus of post-COVID recovery plan. This approach was not surprising, given that "the contemporary firms" are always at the centre of neoliberal reason (Brown, 2015), and in neoliberal common-sense the health of businesses is equal to economic growth, and economic growth will, in turn, benefit "everyone". However, such trickle-down assumption continued to uphold a political rationality that was at the very root of a deeply inequitable crisis. Moreover, as the next section will explore, the meaningful inclusion of community-based calls for a more just and equitable eco-social-economic system (Just Recovery, 2020; van Barneveld et al., 2020) was missing.

Instead, the B.C. NDP government chose to utilize discursive tactics to repackage marginalized people's realities and demands for change to render them visible only through a neoliberal lens – all in the name of upholding the health of the economy.

### **Repackaging Marginalized People's Realities**

The COVID-19 pandemic significantly harmed the lives of those most marginalized in society. For example, in B.C., neighbourhoods with a high percentage of poor, Indigenous, and racialized people had a higher rate of COVID-19 infection than other areas (BC Centre for Disease Control, 2021; St. Denis, 2021). A justice- and equity-oriented commitment to a pandemic recovery plan, called for by community-based advocacy groups such as Just Recovery (2020), was therefore needed. In this recovery plan, COVID-19's inequitable impacts on marginalized communities were mentioned, albeit only through the lens of the labour market. In a section titled *BC's Economic Framework*, which laid out the guiding principles of the economic recovery, the importance of an equal distribution of economic growth was 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 was an acknowledgement that this pandemic disproportionately harmed certain groups. However, it was implied that such harm was due to the loss of jobs, substantiating the plan's overall focus of job creation as the silver bullet. The recovery plan did not mention how young people in B.C. had been increasingly forced into precarious labour, and women and people of colour were overrepresented in precarious work due to neoliberal policies (Bernhardt, 2015; CUPE BC, 2016), rendering them more vulnerable to the pandemic's economic impacts. It was no surprise that in a section titled *Breaking Down Barriers*, the chosen measures to address this inequity were 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). The title of *Breaking Down Barriers* alone implied that marginalized groups are left behind in enjoying the benefits of economic growth due to certain systemic ceilings or barriers; therefore, the solution was to simply break these ceilings by providing more opportunities to join the workforce. Such tactics, I argue, continued to valorize the *homo oeconomicus* and, therefore, neoliberalism—the political rationality at the root of the deep inequities and injustices we face today.

Where did those who did not fit the ideals of *homo oeconomicus* appear in this recovery plan? There were several mentions of support for "the most vulnerable populations", albeit primarily indexed under the appendix pages (Government of BC, 2020a, pp. 26-27), and a single mention of "vulnerable populations" on the backgrounder document (*Safe Restart Funding for Local Governments*, Government of BC, 2020b). As evidenced from the quote below, this term acted as a catch-all phrase for those who did not fit the ideal subject of *homo oeconomicus*, such

as people experiencing homelessness, drug users, 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 was 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 above quotes is how the temporary nature of measures for those deemed as vulnerable populations was emphasized. Housing and meal support for those who are unhoused were clearly marked as temporary, while increases to income and disability assistance rates only lasted until December 2020, less than a year into the devastating pandemic. In the meantime, as evident from my previous discussion on the centering of business, there was no distinct talk of the end date of myriad government measures to help businesses. This difference again focused attention on businesses and economic growth, which further perpetuated neoliberal reason.

I argue that the oft-unquestioned term “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 B.C. As I have stated above, there is rich data which points to neoliberalism’s part in marginalizing, among others, poor, racialized, Indigenous, disabled, and elderly communities. However, governments’ framing of those most marginalized as the most vulnerable masks the issue’s deeply systemic roots and individualizes issues such as poverty (Murray, 2004). Throughout this recovery plan, there was little critical analysis of neoliberal policies and interlocking forms of oppression as roots of the pandemic’s inequitable health, social, and economic impacts on the most marginalized communities. In addition, there was a troubling connection made between unhoused people and drug users with “street disorders”, an issue which arose in mainstream discourse in B.C. cities during COVID-19. This connection could be seen in the following passage from the background 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 unhoused people and street disorder here further validated the troublesome neoliberal discourse, which not only individualizes the systemic issue of homelessness but also casts unhoused 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, might 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 the 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). Ultimately, the government could have taken a bold stance and pointed out how this pandemic showed how interconnected our lives are and made a case for providing meaningful and permanent supports for communities experiencing deep poverty and chronic homelessness. Instead, neoliberal reason was sustained through discourses that bolster individualism and economic productivity while setting aside measures for those most marginalized in the appendix, as if they were a mere afterthought.

### **Repackaging Demands for Change**

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

However, when analyzed closely, the details of these demands were repackaged to fit into the governing neoliberal rationality instead of supporting radical calls to reject it. Numerous examples were found in *StrongerBC*, 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 highlighted the need for meaningful government commitment to address climate change and reverse the severe cutbacks in health care and other public services; however, these demands were not founded upon the logic of job creation or economic growth (van Barneveld et al., 2020; Just Recovery, 2020). The B.C. government’s focus on job creation as a justification for health care investment and climate action 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 was further evidenced in then-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* [emphasis added], and is more resilient than before. (Government of BC, 2020a, p. 3)

The phrase “unlocks the economic potential of reconciliation” (Government of BC, 2020a, p. 3) signalled the potential underlying assumptions that drove this government’s promises of reconciliation. It presented 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 could be found in specific programs in this plan targeted for Indigenous Peoples and communities. They included 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 secure work opportunity and training to 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 was important to note that young people made up a significant proportion of Indigenous population in B.C. (Ministry of Advanced Education, Skills and Training, 2018). In this context, the repeated promise of government investments in job skills training signalled that the economic potential mentioned refers to current and future Indigenous workers. This is reminiscent of former U.S. President Barack Obama’s State of the Union address which asserted 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 *StrongerBC*, reconciliation with Indigenous Peoples was not important due to the need to account for the ongoing colonization of Indigenous Peoples and the Land. Instead, it was 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 relations, 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 are, in fact, the exact objective of Canada’s ongoing colonial project, which entails assimilationist policies and the removal of Indigenous sovereignty (Raju & Penak, 2019).

A similar discursive tactic to center neoliberal rationality occurred in mentions of government action to address climate change. Before the start of the pandemic, British Columbia became the centre of the struggle for climate justice and Indigenous sovereignty as Indigenous and climate leaders staged mass demonstrations and blockades in opposition to the Coastal GasLink pipeline project on Wet’suwet’en land in Northern B.C. (Brown & Bracken, 2020). Discourses on climate action took center stage in B.C. in 2019 and 2020 as the 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 NDP government

featured climate action throughout *StrongerBC*, particularly within the CleanBC plan, touted as the “government’s pathway to a cleaner, better future” (Government of BC, 2020a, p. 25). However, climate action was 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 was important in B.C.’s climate plan due to the immediate threat of a climate emergency, this recovery plan argued that it is important because it created jobs. This tactic was 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” was also featured prominently in the recovery plan, combining the government’s support 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 the climate crisis we face today. 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 *StrongerBC* not only fell short of that call, but it further deepened the focus on individualism and putting social value on one’s ability to work and, therefore, contributing to economic growth.

### Conclusion

Analyzing the workings behind actually-existing neoliberalism is imperative to better understand the stickiness of this political rationality, especially given that such logic is at the root of the deep inequities we face today. Through this critical analysis of the B.C. NDP government’s pandemic economic recovery plan, we see how neoliberalism continues to be reproduced through the centring of jobs, business, the economy, and the ideal subject-citizen, the *homo oeconomicus* while simultaneously, through discursive tools, repackaging marginalized people’s realities and calls for meaningful systemic change to serve the health of neoliberal logic. Understanding these discursive tactics is crucial to preventing the perpetuation of the very political rationality that has weakened health care and social safety nets, disproportionately harming communities experiencing interlocking marginalization, as COVID-19 has taught us. This B.C.-based analysis of post-crisis recovery policy—in particular, its COVID-19 pandemic economic recovery plan—continues to be relevant in Canada today. In response to the new crisis posed by American tariffs and threat of annexation, the federal Liberal government’s *Building Canada Act* (Government of Canada, 2025) opens the gates for unprecedented government powers to fast-track infrastructure projects while potentially disregarding Indigenous rights and environmental protection measures – all in the name of strengthening the economy. A critical analysis of neoliberal rationality’s discursive tactics in crisis policy responses by governments of

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all political stripes not only betters our understanding, it also carries the potential to fuel the continuous and collective demand for meaningful systemic change – one that decenters individualism, extractivism, and inequity and moves towards honouring reciprocity, collaboration, and the undeniable interdependence of all things.

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