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Neoliberalism and Democracy – is there no alternative?

Wendy Brown, *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism's Stealth Revolution*, New York: Zone Books, 2015, \$29.95, £20.05 (hbk), ISBN: 9781935408536

There exist, in the academy today, huge numbers of scholars opposed to neoliberalism. In university libraries are hundreds of monographs on neoliberalism, many (if not all) casting a critical eye on this concept, and its perceived deleterious effects on democracy and the social structures of modernity. All this has occurred because, in the words of one such volume, 'we live in the age of neoliberalism' (Saad-Filho and Johnston, 2005, p.1). Nevertheless, what is often effaced in a great many of these volumes is a detailed consideration of exactly what is meant by 'neoliberalism' and 'democracy'. Despite the centrality of the concept of neoliberalism to many critical works, many, like Saad-Filho and Johnston, find it 'impossible to define neoliberalism purely theoretically' (Saad-Filho and Johnston, 2005, p.1). Nor are Saad-Filho and Johnston alone in this matter (Chomsky, 1999; Harvey, 2005). Likewise, democracy is a contestable and contested notion, which has varied meanings depending upon the individual writing about it (Agamben et al., 2012). Democracy means rule by the people. But who are the people, and how (if at all) does democracy operate for their benefit?

Wendy Brown's *Undoing the Demos* is, first and foremost, a critique of neoliberalism and its impact upon democracy. In fact, this is the main strength of Brown's argument in the volume, and the reason why *Undoing the Demos* is a welcome addition to the scholarly literature. It does not provide any blueprint or toolkit for activists wanting to challenge the status quo (p. 28). Her critique of neoliberalism is not a call to rehabilitate liberal democracy, nor to specify a kind of democracy which can resist neoliberalism. *Undoing the Demos* makes clear that even if neoliberal *policies* were abandoned, this would not stop the undermining of democracy through the normative economisation of political life (p.201).

Undoing the Demos makes it clear that accepting the open and contestable signification of democracy is essential to the work (p.20). Crucial to Brown's argument is not just that markets and money are corrupting or degrading an ideal 'democracy'; rather, a form of neoliberal *reason* is converting the distinctly *political* character, meaning and operation of democracy's constituent elements into *economic* ones (p.17).

In the book, 'democracy' is not contained in a particular form; rather, Brown insists on democracy representing political self-rule by the people (p.20). Brown's aims, and concerns, are clear, namely to provide 'a theoretical consideration of the ways that neoliberalism ... is quietly undoing basic elements of democracy' (p.17). Brown does identify certain key conditions of democratic existence: namely, limited extremes of concentrated wealth and poverty; an orientation towards citizenship as a practice considering the public good; and citizens 'modestly discerning' about the ways of the power, history, representation and justice (p.179).

What *Undoing the Demos* provides is a theoretical construction both of the nature and qualities of neoliberalism and of neoliberal reason (a distinct form of rationality which has become preeminent today), as well as how that rationality has shaped ideas of justice,

citizenship, ruling practices and democratic imaginaries. Through a novel way of constructing persons, neoliberalism is evacuating democratic principles, eroding democratic institutions and eviscerating the democratic imaginary (p.28). Both liberal and radical democratic ideas are threatened by this process (p.17), making the task of understanding what this rationality is and how it operates all the more urgent.

What is Neoliberalism?

The first part of *Undoing the Demos* contends that neoliberalism is a distinctive mode of reason, which produces subjects; it is, following Michel Foucault (a major interlocutor for Brown), a ‘conduct of conduct’ (Foucault, 2004). Neoliberal reason, for Brown, means that both persons and states are judged against the model of a business, both persons and states are expected to act to ‘maximise their capital’ through practices of entrepreneurialism and self-investment, and both become projects of management and economics (p.22).

In surveying the literature on neoliberalism, Brown argues that its critics tend to focus on four main deleterious effects: that neoliberalism leads to intensified inequality; the unethical commercialisation of things and activities otherwise considered inappropriate for marketisation; the ever-growing intimacy of corporate and financial capital with the state; and the economic havoc caused by finance capital (pp.28-30). Brown reads all these areas as *consequences* of neoliberal policy. *Undoing the Demos* focuses on different deleterious effects.

Brown joins Foucault in conceiving of neoliberalism as an order of reason, which becomes a governing rationality when in the ascendant, a rationality which extends a formulation of economic values and practices to every corner of human existence. This ‘economisation’ is not necessarily monetary – rather, neoliberal rationality disseminates ‘the model of the market’ to all activities, configuring human beings as ‘market actors, always, only, and everywhere as *homo oeconomicus*’ (p.31). What makes neoliberalism distinctive for Brown is that *homo oeconomicus* is constructed of financialised human capital. Its project is to ‘self-invest’ to ensure its value is increased and investors are attracted (p.33). Humans conceived in terms of human capital do not pursue the good life, but rather are constrained by the market (p.110). We become entrepreneurs of the self, seeking to maximise returns on our investments (Foucault, 2004).

This economisation of subjects by neoliberalism is distinctive for Brown in three ways. First, it means that we are everywhere and only *homo oeconomicus*. Second, that neoliberal *homo oeconomicus* takes shape as human capital seeking to strengthen its position and appreciate its value, rather than as a more traditional figure of exchange or interest. Third, the model for human capital is finance capital, and not only entrepreneurial capital (p.34). As such, Brown sees neoliberalism as having replaced exchange with competition as the market’s founding principle and basic good. This means that, for humans, we all have become little capitals competing with one another, rather than exchanging with each other. This means that citizens are no longer constituent elements of the state, but can either contribute to, or be a drag on, economic growth. The implications of this, for Brown, are grave indeed. This arrangement means that *inequality*, not equality, becomes the medium for competing capitals. What is more, when there is only *homo oeconomicus*, the foundation for

citizenship concerned with public things and the common good vanishes. The further implication of this for Brown is that as the state's legitimacy becomes bound to economic growth, liberal democratic justice concerns recede (p.40). As human capital, *homo oeconomicus* is at once in charge of itself, and at the same time a potentially disposable element of the whole (p.110)

Neoliberalism Beyond Foucault

It would be wrong to cast Brown's construction of neoliberal rationality as Foucauldian in nature. It is certainly influenced heavily by Foucault's work, but in important ways Brown seeks to move beyond and develop Foucault's thought. Foucault's conceptualisation of neoliberalism as an 'art of government' is used by Brown as a springboard for theorising its 'dedemocratising effects' (p.50). Foucault saw neoliberalism as distinctive as it takes 'the formal principles of a market economy', 'referring and relating them to, projecting them on to a general art of government' (p.131). The economy becomes model, object and project: it becomes the model for state conduct, the primary object of state concern and policy, and the marketisation of domains and conduct is the state's main project. This means that the economy actually comes to require state support, and becomes detached from the exclusive association with the production and circulation of goods. Brown traces how the marketisation of social relations involves an inversion of classical liberalism (pp.62-70).

Yet Brown is clear that she has had to move beyond Foucault, and she does so in two important ways. First, she notes that today, there are a large number of ways in which neoliberalism operates that Foucault did not or could not anticipate (pp. 68-70). These include the crises precipitated by finance capital, the austerity politics ensuing from these crises, and the way in which governance transforms economic action so that managed subjects replace free subjects. Brown identifies Foucault's conception of the political as being limited to sovereignty and juridicism. This leads Brown to the argument that Foucault did not connect his work on neoliberalism into its effects on democratic political life and citizenship (p.74).

Contra Foucault, Brown argues that economics is today the science of government. The figure of *homo oeconomicus* is central to Brown's revision of Foucault. This subject is subordinated to the goal of macro-economic growth, meaning its own well-being is sacrificed to these larger purposes. It is also forced to engage with a form of self-sustenance that meshes with the health of the economy (p.84).

Such a figure invokes another author who was influenced by Foucault's writing on neoliberalism – Maurizio Lazzarato. Brown does not cite Lazzarato's work in *Undoing the Demos*, and it is useful to invoke some of Lazzarato's ideas and arguments here to complement Brown's positions. In a vein similar to Brown, Lazzarato argues that neoliberalism has led to a new conception of work, 'immaterial labour'. This labour creates immaterial products, 'the informational and cultural content of the commodity' (Lazzarato, 1996, p.133). This immaterial labour involves activities not normally recognised as 'work' – what Lazzarato terms 'mass intellectuality', which involves defining and fixing cultural and artistic standards, fashions, tastes, consumer norms, and public opinion, and includes linguistic and intellectual activity.

Likewise, Lazzarato's recent work focusing upon how debt controls and orders every aspect of the lives of states and their citizens is an argument which complements Brown's argument that the political sphere has become economised (Lazzarato, 2015; Lazzarato, 2012). *Undoing the Demos* could have usefully referenced these works to illustrate how others have similarly been influenced by and moved beyond Foucault in considering contemporary neoliberalism.

Brown's second departure from Foucault is one that much literature has overlooked. Brown also sees the formation of human capital as altering roles of gender subordination. This occurs through the shrinking and privatisation of public infrastructure which supports families, children and retirees (p.105). The result of the shrinking of the public sphere is that the work and costs of supplying public services are returned to individuals, and disproportionately to women. The freedoms promised by the free market are, in fact, inverted into new forms of gender subordination as women remain providers of unremunerated core work outside the market. Throughout the social body, women become responsible for provisioning care of every sort. They both require the visible social infrastructure that neoliberalism aims to dismantle through privatisation, and themselves *are* the invisible infrastructure sustaining a world of self-investing human capitals (p.107). Gender was an area in Foucault's work on neoliberalism which was left unspoken, and Brown's interventions here are welcome in illustrating how the perceived neutrality of the market actually works to entrench division and stereotypes.

Disseminating Neoliberal Reason

In the second half of *Undoing the Demos* Brown engages with examples of exactly how this neoliberal rationality, in her view, has recast democracy, showing (drawing on examples) exactly how an economic rationality has become a governing rationality (p.121). Chapter Four explores how neoliberalism has mobilised and saturated the formulation of 'governance', which reconceives the political as a field of management (p.127). Public life is reduced to problem-solving and programme implementation; democracy becomes purely procedural, and absent all concern with justice. Governance involves consensus policy-making, and stakeholders, guidelines, best practices and 'facilitation'; this, for Brown, is a *depoliticising* enterprise (p.131). Authority is 'devolved', which is not equivalent to decentralisation, but is a mechanism that allows large-scale problems to be sent down the pipeline to small units unable to cope with them (p.132). Through this process, the individual becomes doubly responsabilised – it is expected to fend for itself (and blamed for its failure to thrive), and at the same time expected to act for the well-being of the economy (and blamed for *its* failure to thrive (p.134).

Brown draws on the reforms to Iraqi agriculture made by the Coalition Authority after the 2003 invasion to illustrate the deleterious effects of this form of governance (pp.142-150). Paul Bremer, then head of the Coalition Provisional Authority, passed orders, based on agricultural 'best practices', which led to Iraqi wheat farmers having to buy genetically modified seeds and specific fertilisers from multinationals. This ended the thousands of years of sustainable wheat farming in the fertile crescent, and farmers became beholden not just to the multinational companies who had the patents on the seeds, but also to the volatility of world markets. Bremer's aim was to 'neoliberalise' agriculture, and his orders did so, to

ensure that any future democratic government would be constrained by competition and the market in their actions to help Iraqi agriculture (pp.149-150). The examples of Iraqi wheat growing is certainly powerful, but its invocation does potentially reify the previous practices of wheat growers in Mesopotamia. It could be interpreted as Brown generally critiquing Western engagement in, and destruction of, 'traditional' ways of life, and in this manner does come close to an Orientalist argument.

In Chapter Five, Brown considers the way in which the law can disseminate neoliberal rationality beyond the economic sphere. Specifically, Brown considers decisions of the United States Supreme Court, arguing that these decisions actively remake the demos, and show how popular power is eliminated from the democratic imaginary (pp. 153-154). The law thus recasts support for popular power as an unacceptable blockade in a free market. Foremost amongst these decisions is that of *Citizens United v Federal Election Commission* (2010). This split decision, decided 5-4, lifted restrictions on corporate expenditures for all types of election communications. Brown argues that it recast formerly noneconomic spheres, such as a political election, as markets (pp.155-156).

In *Citizens United*, Justice Kennedy, writing for the majority, deployed the language of civil rights to protect the speech of corporations (p.167). What Brown argues is that the decision, in its insistence that the corporation must share in the rights of man, its heralding of corporate speech as vital to democracy, and its jettisoning of concerns with respect to the effects of political speech, the Supreme Court subverted key components of liberal democracy, including popular sovereignty, free elections, political freedom and equality (pp.172-173). Every actor becomes case in market terms, and the court vanquished the political meaning of citizenship, erasing the distinction between economic and political orders which Brown sees as essential to even the most modest vision of popular sovereignty. By rendering government intervention the enemy of freedom, the Supreme Court blended the flow of capital and speech into one system; this 'scorches the ground' of any other democratic form, threatening to extinguish any conception of democracy where this would matter (p.173). Brown certainly makes a persuasive argument here. The resistance shown by the US Congress following the death of Justice Scalia in February 2016, and President Obama's attempt to nominate a more liberal justice to the court (Justice Scalia was in the majority in *Citizens United*), does illustrate the ways in which even potential government action to limit corporate speech has been recast as an affront to freedom.

In Chapter Six, Brown turns her attention to higher education. For her, broadly accessible and affordable higher education is one of the great casualties of neoliberalism's ascendance in the Euro-Atlantic world. This casualty, Brown argues, threatens democracy itself. For Brown, citizens cannot rule themselves without understanding the powers and problems they are engaging with (p.175). In formulating everything in terms of capital, neoliberalism leads to public goods being increasingly difficult to secure, as citizens are considered consumers; democracy becomes something requiring technically skilled human capital, not educated participants in public life; subjects as self-investing human capital are not concerned with acquiring the knowledge needed for intelligent democratic citizenship, and knowledge, thought and training are desired almost exclusively for their contribution to capital enhancement (pp.176-178).

Certainly it is the case that Anglo-American universities have been recast in the model of the market. The capture of consumer markets (seen in the positioning of students as ‘consumers’ that need capturing through recruitment) is now the main business of universities (Muldoon, 2012). The ‘neoliberal academy’ is one which increases tuition and degrees are valued in terms of their ‘worth’. In addition, norms and metrics for academic success, such as the Research Excellence Framework (REF) in the United Kingdom, are ‘unsustainable over time’ (p.193). All these changes are deleterious for Brown. University life becomes stratified. Academics, knowing that research enhances their own scholarly value as *homo oeconomicus*, focus their attention there, and not on teaching.

Brown’s defence of the importance of higher education is also likely to be received warmly. In arguing that just as democracy does not require complete equality, but cannot survive its opposite, the same holds true of an educated citizenry, Brown is evoking a long tradition of defending the ‘public good’ of universities. Her argument that the effects of the privatisation of higher education are felt most acutely on democratic citizenship (p.184) can be compared to Cardinal Newman’s idea of the university as a community of thinkers engaged in a free sphere of thinking, not for any specific end, but rather, as an end in itself (Newman, 1996). Likewise, Thomas Jefferson wrote that the purpose of a university was a civic one, and the students at such a school of learning would form the statesmen, legislators and judges of the future (Jefferson, 1984).

Brown does admit that the twentieth century was a ‘golden age’ for public higher education (p.180). She aims, in a similar vein to other defenders of public education, for a defence of a liberal arts education. Brown argues that the history of liberal arts education in universities can be traced from the fourteenth century, and the extension of liberal arts education from the elite to the many was a ‘radical democratic event’ (p.185). This extension ‘articulated equality as an ideal’ (pp.186-190). Such twentieth-century defenders of higher education as E. P. Thompson made similar arguments. Like Brown, Thompson saw the university as ‘a centre of free discussion and action, tolerating and even encouraging “subversive” thought and activity, [enabling] a dynamic renewal of the whole society’ (Thompson, 2013, p.166).

It is clear that Brown believes that democracy requires people who are educated, thoughtful and democratic in sensibility – and that this is what, for Brown, a liberal arts education long promised. Democracy that is hollowed out by neoliberal rationality cannot be counted on to renew liberal arts education for a democratic citizenry (p.200). However, universities have a long history as corporations, and have been enmeshed in delivering the economic policies of governments for centuries, even during the ‘golden age’ of the twentieth century (Frost 2015). Brown’s defence of liberal arts feels underdeveloped, especially in making the connection between a liberal arts education and a strong and prosperous democratic society. It is too easy to view the university as a refuge. Foucault himself wrote that universities are a form of mass media which should not provide a reserve for scholars threatened by modern capital and information flows (Foucault, 1997).

Is Another World Possible?

Undoing the Demos stands as a powerful critique of neoliberalism. Perhaps the most interesting element of the book is its prologue. It is in the prologue that Brown stakes out the possibilities for challenging the dominant form of neoliberal rationality she sees in the world today. This form of challenge co-opts and subverts neoliberalism, and is based in the idea of ‘sacrifice’. Neoliberalism retains and transforms the idea of ‘citizen sacrifice’, transforming both state and citizen into serving the economy, and fuses self-reliance with a readiness to be sacrificed for the benefit of the economy (p.212).

Sacrifice is premised upon a noneconomic and non-marketised form of exchange (p.215). Brown sketches two forms of sacrifice – religious and moral-political. Religious sacrifice is communal, ritualistic, and oriented towards restoring order and harmony. Moral-political sacrifice involves giving up life (or an aspect of it), but what is given up is one’s own. The austerity politics of recent years has been, for Brown, drawn upon both religious and moral-political meanings of sacrifice.

Brown argues that the logic of sacrifice is *external* to neoliberal reason, working as a supplement to it. This supplementary nature of sacrifice carries the potential for breaking open neoliberal reason. Two features of religious sacrifice provide possibilities to Brown for this breaking open. The first is ‘substitution and displacement’, through which the whole community is called to sacrifice in order to save particular elements of that community. The second is ‘restoration’, through which the refusal to sacrifice in the face of neoliberalism might productively reveal other crises and, in so doing, might challenge their neoliberal form (p.218).

How can this sacrifice be productive? Brown points to the anti-austerity protests in Europe and America as a struggle to revive the image of the nation as *res publica*, and of the people as a public body. These movements aimed to reclaim the *political* voice hushed by the figures of neoliberalism. The movements themselves represent a restorative form of religious sacrifice, which has at least the potential to challenge the prevailing wisdom that ‘there is no alternative’. These social movements, and the progress that they have made, may seem impotent in the face of global finance.

Yet Brown finishes *Undoing the Demos* with a view that ‘the Left’s’ predicament in not offering a realisable alternative future reflects a wider despair in Western civilisation (p.221). The ‘end of history’ has led to a malaise. Brown concludes that the Left’s political work is difficult, bears no immediate reward, and has no guarantee of success. In this she is not alone. Leftist political theory, from Derrida, to Nancy, to Agamben, to Foucault, has always offered tentative forms of future political orders, not least to avoid offering programmatic forms of politics. In drawing our attention to the productive nature of sacrifice, Brown opens up a constructive sphere for future research, one which hopefully will be developed by her and others in years to come. All we have is work of this nature, which affords us a slight hope that things can be better. That is our alternative (p.222).

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