

---

Wendy BROWN, *Undoing the Demos. Neoliberalism's Stealth Revolution*  
(New York, Zone Books, 2015)

---

Reviewing Wendy Brown is a humbling task. *Undoing the Demos* pulls together a masterful exposé of Michel Foucault's lectures on neoliberalism; an incisive review of the changing relationship between *homo economicus* and *homo politicus* in political theory; and an analysis of neoliberalism in action, framed by the now ubiquitous vocabulary of governance, benchmarks, or best practices, and finally by the economization of all institutions, most prominently the law, culture and higher education. The core argument throughout is that the institutionalization of neoliberal rationality constitutes a grave political threat. For all its celebration of freedom, neoliberalism expresses no need to guarantee the kinds of freedoms we normally associate with democracy. In fact, we only need to guarantee market freedom and the rest will follow. What replaces democratic *politics* is thus the *economic* argument that the market always knows best. In other words, the neoliberal regime is stripping the popular "demos" from its moral authority, replacing it with the authority of efficiency and the best bang for the buck. And thus the core institutions of capitalism and the state have been redesigned to facilitate what Korey Çalışkan and Michel Callon [2009]<sup>1</sup> call "the economization of everything"—that is, the processes by which individuals are aligned with the demands of the system and become socially, culturally, physically and psychologically efficient. *Homo economicus* is everywhere, and *homo politicus* is nowhere to be found.

*Undoing the Demos* is beautifully crafted and deeply generative for anyone working on this topic, and in many ways I could just leave it at that. Read it! Every word and every page is worth your time. But the job of a book reviewer is to critically engage its object. And so in this spirit I have one quibble, one criticism, and one regret. The quibble concerns the strange invisibility of the neoliberals themselves in this narrative. The criticism has to do with the limited engagement with neo-liberalism on its own terms, both on the social front (the failure to explore new forms of neoliberal social organization) and on the

<sup>1</sup> Çalışkan Korey and Michel Callon 2009. "Economization", *Economy and Society*, 38 (3): 369-398.  
"Economization, Part I: Shifting Attention from the Economy toward Processes of

economic front (the failure to analyze the new dynamics of capitalism, and in particular the role of technology in it). Finally, I regret the absence of a serious consideration of paths of resistance and (especially) subversion.

*Bring back the neoliberals*

In Brown's narrative, neoliberalism emerges as a mysterious and multifaceted force, whose incarnation encompasses the Pinochet regime, the political power of large American corporations, Walmart, Germany's intransigence towards Greece, the rise of finance capital, and more. This is a convenient framing given the book's overall purpose, but it does pose an analytical problem: if neoliberalism is defined by its antidemocratic outcomes, then how can neoliberal rationality also be the cause of these outcomes? In contrast with her erudite discussion of classical liberalism, which, as she shows, was saturated with political concerns, Brown eschews an equally thorough engagement with the political imaginary of her nemesis. Such an engagement might have helped articulate the connection between neoliberal rationality and its practical consequences in a less tautological manner.

Unlike the 19<sup>th</sup> century liberals, whose political world Brown explores in minute details, the neoliberals are conspicuously absent from *Undoing the Demos*. She makes only passing references to Friedman and Hayek, for instance, and cites them mostly through their interpretation by Foucault. Neo-liberalism as an intellectual movement was born in interwar Europe in opposition to the planned economy, which a number of intellectuals, economists, and economic managers feared was creeping up everywhere: in the Soviet Union, Nazi Germany, and in democratic states, such as the United Kingdom. For some of the early writers, particularly the German-speaking ones such as Walter Eucken and to some extent Friedrich Hayek, the difference between the coercion exercised by, say, the British Labor party as it nationalized the coal industry and that performed in the Soviet Union's command economy was merely one of degree, not of nature: both designs constrained individual property rights, and as such they were *both* fundamentally anti-liberal. In other words, *the neoliberal project as it was conceived dissociated individual freedom from the exercise of popular sovereignty*, that is, from the political freedom to collectively constrain individual freedom. This makes neo-liberalism a profoundly "a-democratic" ideology: as Dardot and Laval remark,

democracy in this political imaginary is nothing more than a technical way of appointing rulers [2014: 306]<sup>2</sup>. Brown's illuminating example comes from the neoliberal reorganization of the Iraqi economy by Paul Bremer, which, as she points out had to occur *before* the democratic transition, not after it. The political regime was merely an after-thought of the economic regime.

Neoliberal writers were also quite explicit about the homology of form between democracy and the market. Milton Friedman, for instance, makes the point very straightforwardly in *Capitalism and Freedom*: "freedom in economic arrangements is itself a component of freedom broadly understood." In other words, market "choices" are a form of free expression. A natural corollary is the idea that empowering markets empowers people: the market is the economic analog to democracy and consumer sovereignty is political freedom in another guise. But Friedman goes further. Market competition, he argues, is the best defense *against* the concentration of economic power in the hands of the few and, consequently, against the undue influence of powerful vested interests on the state. Why worry about elaborating properly political guarantees against the exercise of power since market liberalism is actually the best way to realize democracy in practice? Brown's incisive analysis of the US Supreme Court's "Citizens United" decision provides a wonderful illustration of Friedman's generic, analytical point. For Justice Anthony, who wrote the majority opinion, the existence of a "marketplace of ideas" is reason enough to dismiss considerations of power, because people can "invest" in their preferred political position.

#### *Dealing with neoliberalism on its own terms*

Under a standard University of Chicago interpretation, where market failures are rare, Friedman's injunction also means that the pursuit of public goods, which normally stands at the core of the political process, is best left to emergent forms of individual voluntarism (which express people's revealed preferences). Margaret Thatcher famously said: "there is no such thing as society." But the full sentence was actually much more poetic and much more instructive: "there is no such thing as society. There is living tapestry of men and women and people and the beauty of that tapestry and the

<sup>2</sup> Dardot Pierre and Christian Laval, 2014. *The New Way of the World: On Neoliberal Society*, Verso.

quality of our lives will depend upon how much each of us is prepared to take responsibility for ourselves and each of us prepared to turn round and help by our own efforts those who are unfortunate.”

For all its economizing drive, neoliberal rationality, not so paradoxically, has gone hand in hand with the celebration of social capital, community development, certain aspects of associational life, and most of all philanthropy. We are still lacking, and this book does not offer, a proper theory of these forms of social organization, which have flourished in a strange symbiosis with the market. We might of course dismiss them as ersatz democracy, as Margaret Somers does brilliantly when she remarks that neo-liberalism has turned “Gdansk into a Bowling Alley” [2005]<sup>3</sup>. But whatever our political position on these social actors may be, we cannot dispense ourselves from analyzing them on their own terms. Recent work on charities, for instance, shows how benevolent ethics actually entrenches neoliberalism but also helps subvert and possibly displace it [Tugal, n.d.].

Similarly, we need to have a better appreciation of the intrinsic (if toxic) appeal of neoliberal technologies. Neoliberalism has an interest in governing human conduct. In some ways this is an extension of the classical liberal view, where the market was seen as a civilizing force. Engagement with the market, Adam Smith remarked, develops the bourgeois virtues of prudence and punctuality. It fosters cooperation and politeness. The new market logic promises all that, and more. It demands our fitness, our self-love, our narcissism even, and most of all, the constant cultivation of our human capital. In Foucault’s vocabulary, we have become entrepreneurs of ourselves. It is much worse, and much less exciting: we have become *accountants* of ourselves.

The metrics are everywhere: on social networks, in our credit reports, in the Uber database, in our fitbits and our dating history. Our medical, legal, financial trajectories are being integrated, recombined, reorganized, made sense of and fed back to us in the form of implicit moral injunctions. The numbers compel us to be healthy! Keep on track! Pay your bills! *Our freedom to choose is in fact an obligation to optimize*. In some way this is the extreme, Kafkaesque formalization of the civilizing drive identified by the 18<sup>th</sup> century moral philosophers. The state and the market are reorganizing themselves so as to keep us on our toes, all the time.

<sup>3</sup> Somers Margaret, 2005. “Beware Trojan Horses Bearing Social Capital: How Ideational Power Has Turned Gdansk into a Bowling Alley”, in George Steinmetz (ed.),

*The Politics of Methods in the Human Sciences. Positivism and Its Epistemological Others.* (Durkham, Duke University Press: 233-274).

This kind of prosthetically assisted surveillance feels terribly oppressive, but the fact is that it has become second nature, a part of our economic habitus. Who today, if given the opportunity, would give up the convenience of a credit card in favor of carrying cash in their pockets? We don't think twice about avoiding a used books seller with a two-stars rating. And anonymous votes of confidence from hundreds of riders as well as the certainty of monitoring and accountability provide relief to our anxieties when we step into a stranger's car.

What made Marx's genius critique of capitalism so compelling was a deep understanding of the economic and technological forces that powered the system, which drew in *both* capitalists and workers. Similarly, this economy has a dynamic of its own, propelled by new technical possibilities, new social relations, and of course new ways of extracting value. Digital technologies, importantly, are at the center of this profound reorganization of the mode of production. In Western economies, the extraction of personal data is increasingly displacing the traditional extraction of labor power as a source of value. (Of course this data-ification of Western economies is made possible, in part, by low cost global labor.)

This new technological regime is reconfiguring us very deeply, too. Watching teenagers obsess over their Instagram likes is frightening. Knowing that the algorithms are designed to keep them hooked—the way the conveyer belt kept workers hooked to the machine—is even more frightening. But understanding the social life they build within and through this world—the way Marxist scholars tried to understand how workers could work as hard as they did in industrial capitalism—, and how this life contributes to sustaining the system economically, *that* is an intellectual challenge that must be met [Fourcade, forthcoming]<sup>4</sup>. The vocation of today's social theorists is not simply to reflect back on the world that is no more. It is to analyze in depth the processes of social differentiation, exploitation, and exclusion that structure a society regulated by self-optimization, and the locations in this society where political mobilization is possible. Such an understanding—of neoliberal society from within—is perhaps the only path that will lead us to re-imagine and reconstruct the very terrain of political struggle.

<sup>4</sup> Fourcade Marion, Forthcoming. "The Fly and the Cookie. On the Moral Economy of 21<sup>st</sup> Century Capitalism" (SASE Presidential address) *Socioeconomic Review*.

*The subversive uses of neoliberalism*

Is progressive politics possible in the neoliberal society? *Undoing the Demos* does not provide many answers, barely three pages, under the title: “despair.” But as James Ferguson writes in “The Uses of Neoliberalism”: “What if politics is really not about expressing indignation or denouncing the powerful? What if it is, instead, about getting what you want? [...] Can we find ways of thinking creatively about the progressive possibilities (and not only the reactionary dangers) of this new terrain?” [2009: 167]<sup>5</sup>. It is useful, perhaps, to call on Polanyi, and to remember that social insurance and the welfare state grew out of a delayed reaction against the violent dis-embedding of the economy in the liberal period (the first reaction was, as in the neoliberal period, a dangerous police state). Society became re-embedded in a different way in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, with new actors. Now these forms—unions for instance—have come undone again. The signs of the “double movement” that will transform neoliberal reason are all around us, in both the most dreadful (i.e. the rise of outright proto-fascism) and most hopeful (i.e. the return of progressive politics) forms. True, this movement may not offer the kind of radical change that some—and perhaps Brown herself—would rather favor. But there is a path of resistance.

Perhaps the best-known example is the wave of basic income reforms and proposals throughout the world, for instance in South Africa, Iran and Brazil; basic income movements are gaining steam in Europe as well, and the idea is galvanizing Silicon Valley elites. Milton Friedman unsuccessfully promoted basic income, in the form of a negative income tax, back in the 1970s as a more efficient and less stigmatizing way of attacking poverty and labor market instability. Thus the neoliberal lineage, so to speak, is clear. So is the language surrounding these initiatives, which (1) recognizes the “flexible” demands of the new economy, (2) appeals to the vocabulary of human capital investment, and (3) does not assume that wage earning is the norm. But the neoliberal origins and language of the policy should not obscure the fact that—as they build broader constituencies—unconditional cash transfers are morphing into a different kind of political animal, opening up new progressive possibilities. James Ferguson refers to this new terrain of political struggle as “the politics of the rightful share.”

<sup>5</sup> Ferguson James, 2009. “The Uses of Neoliberalism”, *Antipode* 41 (1): 166-184.

More openings for internally-driven forms of subversion are popping up elsewhere, in close dialogue with neoliberal rationality itself. The penal apparatus, whose expansion was tightly coupled with that of the neoliberal state, is being challenged in a way that was unthinkable just ten years ago. This is due, in part, to reasons that lie at the heart of neoliberal rationality: the penal state is costly, and profoundly inefficient. One final example: in their proactive and narcissistic orientation toward self-quantification, people are also subverting the dynamics of self-tracking in subtle ways. As Goodhart's law predicts, when people start strategizing around measures, when measures become commodities, or the targets of social struggles, they cease to be good measures.

Despair we may. And in her incisive book Brown gives us many reasons to. But out of the creativity of human agency and the dialectical unfolding of neoliberal rationality many social worlds are still possible.

M A R I O N F O U R C A D E