

BOOK REVIEW

Wendy Brown, *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism's Stealth Revolution* (New York: Zone Books, 2015) ISBN 978-1-935408-53-6

Wendy Brown's sharp eye and even sharper pen have been used in her previous publications to dissect issues of tolerance, sovereignty and walls, feminism, power, and knowledge. In her most recent book, *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism's Stealth Revolution*, she assembles a number of empirical observations and theoretical accounts into a thoroughgoing analysis of the hegemonic, insidiously spreading rationality that underpins neoliberalism. This work constitutes an important contribution to both the political and the academic debate through its demonstration of how neoliberalism, as a specific form of rationality, reconfigures all aspects of human existence into economic relations. Brown does not simply address the fact that markets and money degrade and corrupt democracy and public life, but rather builds her analysis upon the Foucauldian approach of governmentality in articulating how the rationality of neoliberalism converts "the distinctly political character, meaning and operation of democracy's constituent elements into economic ones" (17). She also draws important empirical and analytical connections between Foucault's analytical approach to governmentality and a complementary Marxist critique of the material inequality that follows from neoliberal market reforms as she constructs a rich empirical analysis of how neoliberalism creates economic inequality, undoes the demos, and breeds populism instead of political and public engagement. In addition, Brown shows how such developments are reinforced by widespread acceptance of the concept of human capital and the subjectivization of *homo oeconomicus*.

The book is divided into two sections of three chapters each. The first section, "Neoliberal Reason and Political Life," is theoretically oriented, while the second, "Disseminating Neoliberal Reason," displays the rationality of neoliberalism through a number of case studies. The discussion concludes with an epilogue, "Losing Bare Democracy and the Inversion of Freedom into Sacrifice," instead of a conventional summary of the argumentation.

In the first chapter, Brown challenges the dominant understanding of neoliberalism as an economic doctrine, maintaining that it is necessary to instead examine its governing rationality in order to understand its undoing of the demos. She argues that although most critics of neoliberalism focus on the economic effects of intensified inequality, unethical commercialization, and market reforms (28-29), it is difficult to fully grasp its underlying rationality from this perspective

because neoliberalism is in fact heterogeneous being elusive and difficult to grasp in certain contexts while obvious and clear-cut in others. Brown makes the case that the “distinctive signature of neoliberal rationality” is its “widespread economization of heretofore non-economic domains, activities, and subjects,” although this does not necessarily involve their “marketization or monetization” (31-32). She proceeds to expand upon Foucault’s analysis of the entrepreneurial and competitive subject, not merely relying upon the subject of exchange, as she underlines the fact that people today identify themselves in respect to the notion of human capital.

Brown states that “Human capital’s constant and ubiquitous aim, whether studying, interning, working, planning retirement or reinventing itself in a new life, is to entrepreneurialize its endeavor, appreciate its value, and increase its rating or ranking” (36). These detrimental consequences of the pursuit of human capital serve to reveal that neoliberalization is “more termitelike than lionlike” – more stealthlike in Brown’s terms – in that its “mode of reason bor[es] in capillary fashion into the trunks and branches of workplaces, schools, public agencies, social and political discourse, and above all, the subject” (35). This economization of all aspects of human life weakens and pushes aside *homo politicus*, the central figure of potential resistance to such changes.

The rendering of human beings as human capital has a number of important ramifications. First, we are no longer human beings only for ourselves, but also for corporations, states, and post-national constellations. This leaves us both vulnerable and without protection since we are now responsible for own wellbeing even though social welfare programs are being dismantled for the sake of neoliberal market reforms. Second, inequality becomes the natural medium for relations between competing capitals, with equality ceasing to be an ideal of neoliberal democracy. Third, labor disappears as a meaningful category when everything is capital, which eliminates the basis for collective class-based action even as alienation, exploitation, and solidarity are growing among workers. Fourth, when only *homo oeconomicus* exists, and when the domain of the political itself is defined in economic terms, the foundation for a type of citizenship that is concerned with public matters and the common good is removed. Fifth, when the legitimacy and function of the state become exclusively bound to economic growth, then global competitiveness and a strong credit rating are given priority over liberal democratic justice (37-40). The notion of human capital thus forms the foundation for the analysis presented in the remainder of the book insofar as it upholds the subjectivity of *homo oeconomicus* over the potential alternatives of *homo juridicus* and *homo politicus*.

Brown engages in the second chapter with Foucault’s lectures on the “Birth of Biopolitics” as she charts neoliberal political rationality. She provides a summary and contextualization of these lectures and of the subtle differences that mark the various modes of liberalism and neoliberalism, adopting Foucault’s perspective that neoliberalism is “a normative order of reason that would become a governing rationality, a distinctive art of government, a novel reasoned way of governing best” (49-50) that involves a change in subjectivity. Brown concludes that Foucault’s theory of neoliberal political rationality needs to be updated in light of recent empirical developments that he could not have anticipated given the early date of his encounter with the neoliberal ideational foundation of the 20th century. She also maintains that his account should be supple-

mented by an explicit engagement with the political sphere, capitalism as a form of domination and the manner in which neoliberalism has eclipsed constitutional democracy and the democratic imaginary (73). These views are further explored in chapter three, which comprises a rich theoretical discussion that connects Foucault's reasoning with a more traditional canon of political theory. Brown argues that we need to take into consideration both the potential role of *homo politicus* that Foucault left behind, as well as the gendered character of *homo oeconomicus* (99). It is perhaps at this venture that we first glimpse an antidote to for the neoliberal stealth revolution, for even if the subject of *homo oeconomicus* is "eminently governable," a reinvented *homo politicus* is not.

The second section, comprising chapters four through six, provides us with examples and case studies of how the governing rationality of neoliberalism operates in the contemporary world, particularly within the Western context. Brown connects neoliberal governmentality with governance as a popular analytical approach and growing practice, arguing in chapter four that while the idea of governance may initially seem appealing, it is in fact a form of public engagement that is emptied of political power and instruments. She adds that although governance appears to encourage increased participation in public affairs, stakeholders and governance networks have nevertheless "been separated off from the powers and the unbounded field of deliberation that would make them meaningful as terms of shared rule" (128). Brown's position is that governance in fact directs the language of democracy against the demos, and that even though neoliberal governance emphasizes the devolution of authority, the latter results in what she terms the "responsibilization" of stakeholders and individuals (131-132). This often leaves large-scale problems and structural political issues out of consideration, with governance tending to provide apparently non-political solutions to emergent problems on the basis of such concepts as "benchmarking" and "best practices" (135). The seriousness of such difficulties is illustrated in a case study that closes the chapter which reveals how the use of the non-political language of collaboration involving public and private actors associated with post-war agricultural reforms in Iraq apparently emulates classical forms of corruption (150). We are left with the impression, however, that Brown's argument for the existence of a direct connection between neoliberal governmentality and governance requires further elaboration to be fully convincing.

Brown turns her attention in chapter five to the ways in which legal argumentation complements governance practices in the elimination of democratic life and imaginaries. Four separate judicial decisions are analyzed in order to reveal how:

legal supports for popular power are discursively identified in neoliberal reason as unacceptable blockades in a (mythical) free market, parallel to the ways that welfare provisions such as health care and Social Security, and even public services and public institutions, come to be coded as socialist and cast as market democracy's antithesis (154)

Because legal reasoning now values market actors and principles over political rights and concerns, it submits "politics, rights, representation and speech to economization" and subverts "key components of liberal democracy – popular sovereignty, free elections, political freedom, and

equality... [thereby] erasing the crucial distinction between economic and political orders" (173). Brown's position is that this type of judicial decision, coupled with the broader discursive shifts that have taken place, hollows out the practices and institutions of liberal democracy and "scorches the ground of any other democratic form" (173).

Brown focuses in chapter six on the domain of higher education, which no longer promotes collective effort after its transformation through neoliberal market reforms, neoliberal rationality, and the appeal to individual and human capital. This involves both the institutional environment and the motivation for students and scholars to pursue knowledge, and it leads students, scholars, and teachers to be more concerned with their own human capital than with knowledge and the liberal arts. This is particularly disturbing since "democracy in an era of enormously complex global constellations and powers requires people who are educated, thoughtful, and democratic in sensibility" (199). Brown finds it remarkable "how quickly all the strata in public universities – staff, faculty, administration, students – have grown accustomed to the saturation of university life by neoliberal rationality, metrics, and principles of governance" (198).

This chapter spoke to me strongly in the way it describes my own professional environment, which has placed me, not altogether unconsciously, under the neoliberal spell, with a desire to engage in academic debate in order to develop my human capital as a scholar. Brown's book thus not only provides tools necessary for analyzing how neoliberalism's stealth revolution has economized political life beyond the implementation of market reforms and austerity, it also provokes introspection concerning one's own position as a subject within the system she is investigating and draws the reader's attention to their own role in the larger process.

The epilogue neither comprises a sentimental portrayal of a lost golden age of liberal democracy, nor presents a ready cure for how to break the spell of neoliberalism's economization and subjectivization on the basis of human capital. One can read between the lines that the most obvious solution is for *homo oeconomicus* to be replaced by a type of subject that does not feed into the social mechanisms that sustain neoliberal governance. However, this change would be primarily discursive today rather than material since "NGOs, nonprofits, schools, neighborhood organizations, and even social movements that understand themselves as opposing neoliberal economic policies may nevertheless be organized by neoliberal rationality" (202).

Although this book is accessible to a wider audience and possesses a broad appeal, even scholars familiar with Foucault's analysis are well advised to read this insightful study. Brown provides many up to date examples of the perverse and dangerous effects of the economization of ever more aspects of both public and private life, and she obviously remains indebted to Foucault's legacy in spite of her effort to criticize his original and almost prophetic analysis of neoliberalism. *Undoing the Demos* is unique in comparison to much of the previous criticism of neoliberalism, not least in that its author does not seek to participate in solely scholarly discussion, but rather places an importance upon displaying in political terms the detrimental effects that neoliberal rationality has upon democratic life and public concerns. Brown is clearly convincing in this endeavor, and her book is both timely and important for gaining an understanding of the disman-

ting of democracy and the rise of moral critique in the form of populism, which does not question the foundations of neoliberal rationality.

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