
Wendy Brown. *In the Ruins of Neoliberalism: The Rise of Antidemocratic Politics in the West*. Columbia UP, 2019. Pp. viii, 248. US\$25.

Wendy Brown's 2015 book, *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism's Stealth Revolution* (2015), argues that neoliberalism is a threat to democracy. In its relentless economizing of everything, she suggests, neoliberalism undermines principles that differ from economic ones, including principles of justice, equality, popular sovereignty, and the rule of law. Moreover, Brown contends that neoliberalism reshapes contemporary subjectivity and governance in ways that reinforce finance capital's pervasive economization; neoliberalism encourages us to view the human subject—including ourselves—as a form of capital, undermining the morally autonomous subject essential to democracy. Her new book, *In the Ruins of Neoliberalism*, extends the ideas of *Undoing the Demos* but tries to account for political changes that have occurred since its publication—specifically the election of Donald Trump, the emergence of other far-right governments around the world, and the rise of neofascism in Europe.¹ To do so, she reevaluates her arguments about the relationship between neoliberalism and politics.

Brown does not conclude that neofascism today is a direct consequence of neoliberalism's erosion of democracy. She sees too many contradictions between neoliberalism and the rightward turn in contemporary politics. Theories of neoliberalism, for example, directly oppose many components of Trump's campaign rhetoric and politics, including his nationalism, appeals to conservative Christian morality, populist anti-elitism, and willingness to allow state intervention in the economy. Brown concludes that neofascism today is not a direct outcome of neoliberalism but rather a "deformed plant [that] grew from soil fertilized by" neoliberalism (9).

Whether political scientists are pondering the question of neoliberalism's responsibility for neofascism is unclear to me; I am not aware that it is a pressing question outside political science. For those who were not pondering that question, the value of Brown's latest book lies more in its details than its overall argument. The first chapter, for example, demonstrates persuasively that Friedrich Hayek and other neoliberal theorists directly attacked the very concepts of the social and society, thus providing the theoretical basis for contemporary political assaults on government programs of social welfare, justice, and reform. The second chapter reviews the different theoretical foundations of neoliberalism and concludes that all fundamentally oppose democratic governance and endorse minimal government, aiming to replace unpredictable, messy politics with consistent economic laws and business rationality. Neoliberalism's goal is economic stability, growth, and uniformity—and secondarily a pacified populace—but advocates did not anticipate its effects: magnified inequality, plutocracy, and an enraged populace willing to elect neofascist leaders. This chapter is particularly informative and compelling. The third chapter explores the weird alliance between the religious Right and neoliberalism in the United States. Neoliberalism's dismantling of government programs, Brown suggests, throws the responsibility for solving social problems onto families, with the effect of sanctioning traditional Christian and family values—not at all what the neoliberal theorists had in mind. Meanwhile, Trump, who advances neoliberalism's goal of dismantling government, has made political alliances with the Christian Right, who are comfortable with authoritarianism as long as it enforces traditional morality—again, very different from the goals of neoliberals. The fourth chapter analyzes the US Supreme Court decisions that blend neoliberal free market ideals with traditional morality, fostering a "(re)Christianization of the public sphere" (125). The final chapter explores the entanglement of neoliberalism with white male resentment. Trump and his supporters, Brown suggests, seek to restore white male entitlement, and they regard democracy (understood as the increasing equality of women and minorities) as the cause of their waning privilege.

Much of the material in the book is informative and enlightening, and Brown's basic diagnosis of conditions in the US is compelling. For those with an interest in US politics and the history of neoliberalism, Brown's book will be engaging.

What troubles me about Brown's work, however, is its assumptions about the ordinary citizen and the appropriate method for combating recent challenges to democracy. In *Ruins of Neoliberalism*, Brown reviews Herbert Marcuse's argument that the modern individual's intellectual capacity is diminishing because of increasing pleasure stimulation in a commodity culture. The result is a subject "[f]ree, stupid, manipulable, absorbed by if not addicted to trivial stimuli and gratifications, . . . released from . . . general expectations of social conscience and social comprehension" (167). This subjectivity is "amplified by the neoliberal assault on the social and attack on intellectual knowledge" (167). In a previous essay titled "'We Are All Democrats Now . . .'" Brown laments that "the majority of Westerners have come to prefer . . . consuming, conforming, luxuriating, . . . simply being told what to be, think, and do over the task of authoring their own lives" (55). She proposes that "humans do not want the responsibility of freedom" and that they either do not desire democracy or, when given the opportunity, elect fascist governments (55). In *Undoing the Demos*, she argues that democratic self-rule is not a natural desire; it must be constantly cultivated and defended against threats. This involves the "need to educate the many for democracy" (11). *Undoing the Demos* implicitly proposes a strategy for that: we must defend the humanities as a bulwark against threats to democracy because the humanities cultivate democratic sensibilities and values of justice and equality.

I have doubts about the humanities as a pillar of democracy. Postcolonial scholars have noted that literary education in the colonies was a tool of cultural colonialism in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, while others have shown that the discipline of English developed in Britain in the late nineteenth century to disseminate middle-class values and cultivate a working-class populace deemed insufficiently civilized and inadequately prepared for the responsibilities of democratic citizenship. In other words, historically the humanities have arguably supported anti-democratic, elitist values in the name of uplifting the masses, and humanities scholars have often approached education with elitist assumptions about the inadequacies of ordinary citizens.

There are troubling resonances of these ideas in Brown's work. She, too, presumes that the masses need to be cultivated in democratic sensibilities and cannot be trusted to recognize principles of justice or equality. Her argument is notably different from Marxist-inspired critiques of democracy by scholars

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like Jacques Rancière who suggest that contemporary Western democracy itself may be responsible for anti-democratic sentiments: that is, representative democracy preserves a system of political rule by the elite, as, in fact, the founders of the US intended. As opposed to more robust forms of participatory or direct democracy, in other words, representative democracy fosters a passive, spectatorial populace forced to sit on the sidelines as elected officials make decisions for them.

It seems contradictory to champion democracy and simultaneously demean the demos. Moreover, disparaging the masses as unfit for democracy without proper training in the humanities risks reinforcing the very elitism that Trump and his supporters routinely decry. Brown's work reveals both the value of ongoing attention to democratic culture as well as the persistent need for intellectuals to remain vigilant about their own elitism.

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Notes

- 1 While she gestures toward global issues, her focus is resolutely on the US. She does not attempt to explain the rise of neofascism or far-right governments globally.

Works Cited

- Brown, Wendy. "We Are All Democrats Now . . ." *Democracy in What State?* By Giorgio Agamben et al., Columbia UP, 2011, pp. 44–57.
- Brown, Wendy. *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism's Stealth Revolution*. Zone, 2015.
- Rancière, Jacques. *Hatred of Democracy*. Translated by Steve Corcoran, Verso, 2006.