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

Undoing the Demos is a brilliant analysis and polemic, providing a lens on life as it is lived in the contemporary West that throws daily experience into stark and disturbing relief. As befits the best kind of social science, reading *Undoing* makes the familiar strange and freights ordinary decisions with often uncomfortable new forms of self-consciousness. The book's central argument explores the relationship of neoliberalism to the possibility of "democratic self-rule" [11]. Here I will reflect most centrally on Brown's discussion of the first term in her argument, the analysis of neoliberalism itself.

Following on Foucault, the book argues that the evolution of "neoliberal reason" has remade both selves and society, turning workers into human capital and a democratic polity into a managed universe, its criteria for good governance reduced to economic calculation. This has a set of important consequences on both sides of the equation. For individuals, understood now as neither selves with interiority, laborers nor citizens, the modal relationship to self is one of investment: incurious, future oriented, individualized and, most fundamentally, calculating. On the other side, the "social" as we have known it has been disassembled. There is no community, but instead a set of self-interested individuals, purposely left to fend for themselves on the grounds of market efficiency and utility, organized by definition through competition rather than cooperation, the notion of "common good" now an oxymoron. This market structure is neither natural nor automatic. To the contrary, part of the job of the neoliberal state is to maintain sufficient inequality to support permanent competition; hence rather being than a *laissez-faire* state, the neoliberal state is deeply involved in the market. All this undermines the logic of "solidarity" and so makes opposition more and more difficult and unlikely.

One of the consequences of this overriding logic, Brown argues, is that it flattens substantive distinctions, creating a language that moves seamlessly across social sectors, subjecting all to the same language of "benchmarking" and "optimization" and "stakeholders." Terminology is never innocent. As the language of the economy becomes hegemonic, moving from business to university, studio and

social movement, the discourse of calculation takes root everywhere, shaping decisions before they can be thought otherwise, flattening true diversity and making distinctive desires and intentions harder and harder to articulate.

These processes can be seen with great clarity in the contemporary “public” university (Brown teaches at UC Berkeley, as do I), and that sobering experience provides the basis for a deeply insightful, if unsettling, chapter in the book. As elsewhere, neoliberal rationality in the university operates on both individuals and on the institution as a whole. Individually, it shapes how students and faculty enter the institution and how they live it while there. The intense competition to be accepted, the grade focused course selection and struggles over grades once in class, the question of whether a given major will lead to the right kind of future career—all these are part of an attitude to education that construes it as a pragmatic investment in future earning capacity. These trends shape the experiences of anxious graduate students and faculty as well, necessary careerists assessing the best use of time to obtain a job or a promotion or a raise, “pursuit of knowledge” too often pushed to the side by “practical” assessments of what is publishable or whether a given journal has a high enough “impact factor.”

These individual attitudes are made rational and produced in tandem with a set of structural and institutional shifts at the level of both state and educational field. In California (and elsewhere), a prized higher education system once understood as an important public good, provided by the people for the people, has come to be understood instead as a private benefit, sold to individuals who find it a worthwhile private investment. This is not by any means to romanticize the race, gender, and class stratified public education of a previous period but, with Brown, to recognize the difference in intention signaled by the political language of the two periods. These discursive shifts have material consequences, and students and faculty who alike are or were debt-financing their educations understand those costs and attendant obligations differently as they face a lifetime of individual repayments. All this produces and reinforces the individual calculations which produce the paradigmatic neoliberal subject.

The tactics typical of neoliberal governance also structure university life. Decision-making power is increasingly concentrated at the top of a system, with permission for leaves and approval of curricula climbing through ever-more distant and complex approval processes. At the same time, responsibility for economic capacity

devolves to the level of departments and programs. Individual departments with insufficient funding to run their programs choose which adjuncts to cut and which to keep, engage in private fundraising, teaching summer courses to pay for copying costs. This neoliberal logic is similarly evident in administrative verbiage that blankets the campus in an inescapable language of calculation. A missive from spring 2016, for instance, intones “Academic realignment is one of the strategic initiatives the campus is pursuing in order to position Berkeley for continued academic excellence in the face of our new budget realities” (<http://chancellor.berkeley.edu/academic-realignment-initiative>). Understanding these processes—a new texture of academic life—through the lens Brown develops here is devastatingly clarifying.

In a sense the power of this analysis lies in its heuristically schematic framework. Yet emerging as it does from one context, it is not always clear how it relates to other social spaces and features. Brown argues that neoliberal rationality is orthogonal to capitalism. More explicitly exploring its exercise within contemporary transnational capitalism, scrutinizing its relationship to class, race and global inequalities, would clarify both how it works and possibly how it might be resisted. Similarly, while *Undoing's* insightful discussion of gender suggests that neoliberal rationality relies on preexisting gendered inequalities to function, taking that analysis further suggests some of the limits of neoliberalism posed by reproduction itself. That is, expanding the discussion of the relationship between neoliberal rationality and other structures of power might help us not only to better understand neoliberalism's hegemonic reach, but also to grasp its limits.

Unlike Marxist theorists such as David Harvey, Brown understands neoliberalism as coexisting with contemporary capitalism, rather than as its intensification or product. That is not to say that she thinks capitalism is less important than or irrelevant to neoliberalism, but rather that she sees these as two distinct processes which, intertwined, each support the most oppressive features of the other. Following Foucault, she argues that neoliberalism is a political rationality that in remaking liberal governance, creates a form of economic valuation so pervasive that it becomes impossible to see beyond capitalism: “Neoliberalism is the rationality through which capitalism finally swallows humanity” [44]. In practical terms, neoliberalism constitutes self-investing, entrepreneurial selves for whom “collective organizing” does not and cannot make sense. Thus, a truly

democratic polity that might challenge or at least ameliorate capitalist dominance becomes unthinkable.

Thinking about capitalism however, invites us to think about class, materiality and inequality—about whether we are all indeed equally subject to neoliberal rationality. Are all people in the “Euro-Atlantic” similarly self-investing and entrepreneurial? To take the US case I know best, it is certainly the case that one sees traces of calculating selfhood and obsessive self-monitoring at all class levels. One might look for instance at what passes for welfare programs in the current period, insisting on evidence of “training” and routinized proof of job seeking, or notice the commercial success of “Fitbit” devices and other such self-monitoring equipment, to recognize the power of such subjectification. Nonetheless, I am not convinced that the obsessive self-improvement and calculating self-investment typical of elites and the professional classes are as pervasive among the poor and/or working class. This distinction seems if anything more pronounced as material inequality grows across the population, with the experiences of “citizens” becoming less and less similar across class differences. One need only consider the growing inequalities among high schools—poor students of color face increasingly militarized settings where metal detectors and often violent security personnel displace textbooks and teachers, while elite students frantically compete to enter costly, resume-enhancing “service” projects helping poor people on the other side of the world—to begin to comprehend the size of that gap. Perhaps one might more accurately think of subjection to neoliberal governance as itself a perverse form of privilege. Only subjects with a certain amount of “autonomy” and level of material security have the wherewithal to engage in the compulsive forms of self-improvement so typical of, for instance, the denizens of US universities in the current historical moment.

Similarly, thinking about the relationship between capitalism and neoliberalism invites us to explore this form of governance’s location in transnational space. Brown uses the term “Euro-Atlantic,” but (this may be a disciplinary difference between political science and sociology) one might as well use the more relational term global north. This second term invites us to ask, not how does neoliberalism work in a specific geographical and political space, but how its predominance in one area, the global north, as related to its more uneven presence in another, the global south. Might the privilege of neoliberal subjection in the global north be based on the more old-fashioned lack of such “freedom” elsewhere? Are the directly exploited assembly workers in

China, the enslaved shrimp fisherman in Thailand and the dispossessed trash scavengers in India the figures who enable the pervasiveness of neoliberal rationality in the global north? Theorizing these relationships would provide a wider view of the processes Brown discusses and, more significantly, might help us to delineate not only neoliberalism's hegemony in certain contexts, but its limits and its relationship to other social and geographical spaces in which these rationalities do not dominate. That is, investigating the relations between neoliberal reason, as it is lived in the global north, and accumulation by dispossession (to use Harvey's term), as it emerges in the global south, would help us to better understand neoliberalism's triumph in the "Euro-Atlantic," and to take stock of its limits as well as its powers.

Finally, taking Brown's insightful discussion of the relationship between gender and neoliberalism a step further might similarly help to cut the image of an invincible neoliberal hegemony down to size. Brown notes the slippage between individual and family in neoliberalism, most famously embedded in Thatcher's statement, "There is no such thing as society. There are only individual men and women [...] and their families" [100]. Similarly, she points out Becker's curious claim that, whereas most rational subjects invest in themselves, mothers reap "psychic income" by investing in their children [102]. She argues that not only does neoliberalism in fact depend on women's historic responsibility for reproductive labor, but that in taking as axiomatic that everyone is responsible only for themselves, it makes this task all the more difficult by its refusal to recognize the reality of women's persistent maternal obligations. However, in addition to making women's lives more challenging, this inconsistency in neoliberal ideology reveals a more profound problem with its logic. Reproductive labor, not only care of children but also of the old and the ill, does seem to require a distinct form of being. Even as reproductive labor is increasingly, and unequally, commodified under contemporary capitalism, there is something intractable about care work—a form of profound attention, desire and empathy for the other, whoever carries it out, that stubbornly persists even within the contemporary neoliberal context. That is, neoliberal logic cannot contain reproductive labor; whether done by all women, by poor women of color, or by all people, care work cannot be fully encompassed within a calculating frame. That overflow thus illuminates not only the rationality's power and unfairness, but also its limits, suggesting that there continue to be forms of life that are not, and cannot, be fully contained within its bounds. This knowledge matters, as it can help us to see the cracks in

the apparently impermeable edifice, and to imagine forms of thought beyond.

This at last brings me back to Brown as an author, and to the very existence of *Undoing the Demos* as a text. Brown opens by saying that the work itself is grounded in “convictions animated by attachment, scholarly contemplation of history and the present, and argument, nothing more” [11]. Felicitously, this statement places the book itself outside of a neoliberal logic, outside the frame of “market veridiction” in which knowledge is assessed by its practical value for and in the market. Instead, the essay itself becomes a refusal of that frame, and so an enlivening sign of the limits of the very form of reason it delineates. Brown herself describes the book as a “classic [...] critique” [28], intending to illuminate the present, not to identify solutions. However insofar as it does that work, it too is part of showing the limits of this purportedly totalizing form of reason, and thus of pointing toward other possibilities imminent in the current dark. In this, the book is a great accomplishment, a gift to all of us working to see around the edges of a form of reason that too often appears to have no outside.

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