

NEOLIBERAL POPULISM
AS A CONTRADICTIONARY ARTICULATION

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

Most scholars focus on the macro outcomes and characteristics of neoliberalism, such as privatization, financialization, welfare gutting, and decentralization. A scholarly tradition that draws on Foucault's biopolitics lectures has emphasized an arguably more thorough transformation that neoliberalism brings about: the re-making of the individual and all of her qualities in the image of an entrepreneur. Wendy Brown has been one of the leading voices in this scholarship on (what has been called) "neoliberal subjectivity."

In line with this literature, *Undoing the Demos* shows that liberalism has a history of its own (as an art of government), which cannot be reduced to capitalism. The original contribution of this book, however, is to further demonstrate how neoliberal subjectivity leads to what the Frankfurt School theorist Herbert Marcuse called "the closing of the political universe": "the erasure of intelligible, legitimate alternatives to economic rationality" [68].

Moreover, Brown's analysis heavily draws on Foucault's writings on biopolitics, but seeks to integrate the development of capitalism and the undoing of the people into Foucaultian analysis, as well as re-interpreting his study of rationality as "sliding between" Weber and the Frankfurt school.

Economization as the dismantling of the demos

Undoing the Demos wants us to focus on the *economization of all spheres of life*. The book also clarifies the "neo" in neoliberalism. Classical liberals did not attempt to collapse all spheres of life into the economic. Even Adam Smith had a complicated understanding of non-economic conduct [92-98]. Moreover, neoliberalism is specifically "financial" in its understanding of what constitutes the economic itself. Whereas Smith's theorization of the economy was based on "exchange" between ("naturally") *equal* producers, neoliberalism *normatively* postulates "competition" between *unequals*. These two core differences from classical liberalism culminate in neoliberalism's

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Cihan TUGAL, University of California, Berkeley [ctugal@berkeley.edu]
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constitution of a new creature: today's individuals are expected to increase their market value in all spheres of action.

These are significant contributions to the study of neoliberalism. However, some scholars have questioned Brown's approach and asked: how flattening is *actually existing neoliberalism*? Isn't the neoliberalization of subjectivities (or "economization" of politics) frequently hybridized with other logics? What do we gain and lose by emphasizing the flattening push at the expense of what scholars (such as Nikolas Rose and Aihwa Ong) have studied as "assemblages"? Even though Rose and Ong also base their theorization on Foucault's biopolitics lectures, they argue that neoliberal subjectivity always coexists with non-liberal logics of action such as communitarianism, which are not always expected to be economized.

Based on Brown's and others' work, we could claim that assemblage studies under-emphasize the global, somewhat unifying success of neoliberalism. But we could similarly point out that Brown's version of Foucaultianism underestimates the *popular appeal* of actual processes of neoliberalization. The core of my *first* contention today is that *some* articulations of neoliberalism re-constitute the demos, while simultaneously demolishing older constructions of the popular.

Neoliberal hegemony

The spread of neoliberal populisms (in geographies as diverse as Latin America, South Asia, and the Middle East) presents a fundamental challenge to Brown's arguments. Even though *Undoing the Demos* insists that the demos becomes impossible under neoliberalism, several passages in the book (where the concepts popular, populist, etc. go hand-in-hand with neoliberalization) suggest that new constructions of the demos are quite possible under neoliberalism (e.g. p. 38). Brown is certainly aware of hybridizations with non-neoliberal logics, but is less interested in them, since the neoliberal project has, in her words, a distinct "order of reason" [48-50].

Certainly, much hinges on what constitutes the political. It could be argued that we see neoliberal populisms all around us, but they are not *truly* political. We could have a long debate about what *qualifies* as political (and in that regard too my definition would be slightly different from that presented in *Undoing the Demos*). But to simplify our task, I will adhere to the definition developed in this book in order to gauge whether varieties of neoliberal populism could be characterized as political.

Undoing the Demos defines the political as involving “deliberation, belonging, aspirational sovereignty, concern with the common and with one’s relation to justice in the common” [94]. By these standards, many (if not all) aspects of neoliberal populism are political. The Turkish Justice and Development Party, the Indian BJP, and the Menem and Fujimori regimes in Latin America, involve(d) belonging, claims to sovereignty, and concern with the common, as well as justice (but not deliberation). So, a corollary question for me is: would the revised (“Deleuzian”) Foucault of Rose and Ong provide better lenses to study such regimes?

Can neoliberal success backfire?

While studies of assemblages depart from Brown’s version of neoliberalism studies, the two scholarly traditions overlap in some of their assumptions and *practical* implications. Most importantly, they create the impression of an all pervasive neoliberalism. Whether hybridized with other logics or not, neoliberalism appears to be inescapable in today’s world.

By no means do I want to downplay neoliberalism’s strengths. However, I argue that communitarian, democratic, and other logics do not always fall prey to neoliberalism. Currently, we are witnessing reverse processes, where populist regimes and communitarian organizations hijack aspects of neoliberalism to serve projects that are far from liberal or neoliberal. For instance, the current Turkish regime manipulates neoliberal techniques to re-build the Turkish people as more sectarian and more patriarchal. These sectarian and patriarchal logics do not simply co-exist with neoliberalism, as in the assemblage literature, but gradually erode it. My *second major point*, therefore, is that neoliberal populism is an internally contradictory, potentially explosive articulation.

Such contradictions and explosiveness are *not* unique to the global South. Tellingly, in the last few pages of the book, Brown focuses on one logic that uneasily coexists with the neoliberal order of reason. The logic of sacrifice requires, she argues, “belonging to an order larger than oneself,” which neoliberalism rejects on paper [215-216]. The logic of sacrifice therefore works as a “supplement” to neoliberal reason, since the world of capital cannot self-regulate: “the status of sacrifice as a supplement to neoliberal reason means that

it carries the potential for breaking open or betraying the limitations of that logic" [216].

Occupy Wall Street, Brown points out, was a *realization* of the neoliberal call to sacrifice and its *exposition* [217]: Just as in religious sacrifice, the post-2008 rage against the banks was *diverted* into a call for shared sacrifice by the victims, and this is what Occupy refused in 2011. This powerful passage of the book, however, does not acknowledge that such a refusal could not have happened if it were not for the vibrancy of the demos and of non-neoliberal morality despite decades of neoliberalization. If neoliberalism banishes all nonmarket ethics, as the book argues [140-141], how was this possible?

In other words, the question is: did Occupy simply build on an inherent contradiction in neoliberalism's "supplementation" with sacrifice, or did it build on *many other contradictions within American neoliberalization*, contradictions which have been neglected throughout the book?

In other words, does not the rest of the book overestimate the pervasiveness of neoliberal logic, as it holds that "[t]he success of neoliberal rationality [...] is indexed by the lack of a scandalized response to the state's new role in prioritizing, serving, and propping a supposedly free market economy" [40]? This sentence would make much more sense before 2011, as now even (2016 presidential candidates) Trump and Clinton pay lip service to the criticism of the state's new role. Even though Brown contends that the unease with neoliberalism focuses on issues of inequality, commercialization, and dismantling of public goods and there is "far less worry expressed about neoliberalism's threat to democracy" [208], this, arguably, was the focus of the Sanders campaign in the Democratic Party primaries of 2016, and even occasionally the Clinton campaign.

Therefore, what is lacking is *not* a "scandalized response" to neoliberalism, I would argue, but the *political organization* which would prevent the hijacking of the emergent, anti-neoliberal structure of feelings by populist and establishment demagogues (such as Trump and Clinton, respectively).

I am on the same page with Brown when she points out (again at the end of the book) that the real problem is the lack of hope and a clear sense of alternatives. However, I would further add that despair did not come out of nowhere: As the last pages of the book note, the lack of hope was only *reinforced* by neoliberal reason, but not *created* by it. And as these pages do not really spell out, despair resulted from an active (at times bloody, at times civil) battle against the alternatives.

Liberalism won that fight. So is not one of today's main tasks to develop the political means with which to win the war? Hopefully, that can be done (unlike in the first round of the struggle), in a way that will not undermine the alternative-ness of the alternatives themselves.

In concluding, I would agree with the author that neoliberalism and democracy are indeed incompatible in the long run.¹ Nevertheless, this might be because liberalization (not only neoliberalization) results in constructions of the popular that are fundamentally at odds with liberal democracy—and not because “popular sovereignty is nowhere to be found,” as Brown asserts [42]. In sum, rather than drowning in an all-encompassing neoliberal world, we might be walking into a decade of populist turmoil.

CIHAN TUGAL

¹ I elaborate this point in Tugal, 2016, *The Fall of the Turkish Model: How the Arab Uprisings Brought down Islamic Liberalism*, Verso.