

Critical Dialogue

In the Ruins of Neoliberalism: The Rise of Antidemocratic Politics in the West. By Wendy Brown. New York: Columbia University Press, 2019. 264p. \$75.00 cloth, \$25.00 paper. doi:10.1017/S1537592720000651

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In her new book, Wendy Brown brings her immense intellectual powers to bear on what is arguably the most important but also the most difficult question: Where are we? Brown has an outstanding track record not only as a theorist but also as a perceptive diagnostician of “what our present is,” to borrow a phrase from Michel Foucault. In *In the Ruins of Neoliberalism* she continues this diagnostic work, addressing the seemingly contradictory mélange of neoliberal and (ultra-)conservative, populist, or outright authoritarian ingredients.

The approach Brown pursues in her book rests on two key assumptions. First, she highlights the importance of a view of neoliberalism that is not confined to the strictly economic realm but also takes into account that “nothing is untouched by a neoliberal mode of reason and valuation,” implying that its critical analysis also “requires appreciating neoliberal political culture and subject “production” (p. 8). This means, among other things, that neoliberalism is not understood as an exclusively economizing project but rather as a political one that promotes the duo of markets and *morals*. It is through this novel conceptualization, which builds on the pioneering work of Melinda Cooper on the mediations between neoliberalism and social conservatism, that Brown gains a diagnostic handle on the more reactionary aspects of the contemporary conjuncture; for example, treating appeals to traditional morality not so much as antithetical to but as part and parcel of neoliberalism.

However, this does not lead her to the conclusion that ours is simply a neoliberal world properly understood in its more encompassing meaning, which brings us to the second key assumption. To be sure, neoliberalism did prepare the ground for the mess that today’s world appears to be. However, Brown maintains that neoliberals and neoliberalism are not its *cause* in the strict sense of the term. After all, the result of a decade-long pursuit of the neoliberal project is not a world straight out of the neoliberal textbook but rather a political-economic land-

scape that would be abhorrent to its intellectual founding fathers, Brown argues: far from a straightforward neoliberal dream come true, the present is ripe with aspects and elements that represent genuine nightmares to the neoliberal imagination. In other words, we live in a world that is marked by the unintended consequences of the neoliberal project, which have even turned it into its opposite in some respects. It is a world that had to endure a frontal attack in the name of markets and morals, which still only succeeded halfway and consequently created a monstrous hybrid of what might be called authoritarian neoliberalism: in this sense, we truly live in the ruins of neoliberalism.

The focus of the opening chapter, “Society Must be Dismantled” (which is a play on the title of Foucault’s lectures, *Society Must be Defended*), is the realm of the social and an account of neoliberalism’s tactics and the rationale behind its attack on society, including the concomitant notion of social justice. Not surprisingly, the main reference point here is the work of Friedrich Hayek who (in-)famously lashed out against the notion of social justice as deeply inimical to notions of individual freedom. As Brown shows, Hayek’s concern is that politically mandated justice will destroy the twin spontaneous orders of market and morality. His strategy consists in a negation of the realm of the social, including structural powers of domination, and instead focusing on a narrowly conceived notion of coercion as the sole threat to individual liberty. The result of this erasing of the social, which is also the locus of democracy and the concrete experience of the nonfamilial other, is individual freedom disembedded and thus turned into unlimited license.

In the second chapter, “Politics Must Be Dethroned” (which is a reference to Hayek’s demand to the same effect), neoliberal reservations regarding democracy are subjected to critical scrutiny. Brown’s starting point is to identify the political as the actual cause of concern for neoliberals, who sought to constrict and de-democratize it. Three varieties of neoliberal thought—Milton Friedman, Friedrich Hayek, and the German Ordoliberals—are examined in order to identify their respective critiques and remedies. Although these differ notably—for example, Hayek’s critique of sovereignty as the root problem of democracy against the ordoliberal espousal of strong, unified, and thus sovereign statehood as the very solution

to that problem—the bottom line is the thrust toward a polity in which markets (and morality) are made safe from the intrusions of democracy. However, as in Frankenstein's experiment, things go wrong. Brown shows that neoliberalism may have succeeded in demolishing democratic life across the board, but its failure to thoroughly theorize the political comes back to haunt it in the form of contemporary authoritarian forces that seize on the destabilization of liberal democracy to bring about that alter-neoliberal world we live in today.

Chapters 3 and 4 are devoted to the way “the personal, protected sphere must be extended” (p. 89), with the latter chapter focusing on the judicial dimensions of this undertaking through a critical reading of two recent Supreme Court decisions. The starting point of the argument is Hayek and his lauding of tradition, morality, and even—if only for strategic reasons—religion as noncoercive, spontaneously evolved orders that must be protected against the intrusions of state and democracy. Hayek thus serves as the prime example of the neoliberal entanglement of markets and morality/tradition and also offers some of the crucial strategies: restricting democratic calls for social justice through the requirement of general rules, and so on, and, conversely, expanding the private sphere that is shielded against state intrusion. However, the result is an actually existing neoliberalism that is twisted in any number of ways, where traditional values are politicized and commercialized and thus turned into the opposite of what Hayek thought they would provide. Freedom is no longer restrained by such traditions as he conceived of it; rather, it is a raw will to power that emerges from uninhibited freedom.

In the concluding chapter on fatalism, *ressentiment*, and nihilism, Brown draws on Nietzsche and Marcuse to discuss how the neoliberal-driven trivialization of values (from democracy to truth and morality) breeds nihilism that results in something close to what Marcuse called “repressive desublimation.” The latter loosens the reins of individual conscience and also releases the expectations of social conscience. As “nihilism intersects neoliberalism” (p. 171), vengeance becomes the battle cry born of the wounded sense of entitlement held by what used to be a diffuse ruling class of white men that now lives out its apocalyptic fatalism: if they cannot rule anymore, they will try to take everybody else down with them.

In the Ruins of Neoliberalism is a powerful book replete with acute observations, nuanced insight, and bold theorizing. It is also written with an eloquence and style that are evident down to the very rhythm that sentences and entire passages exude. Still, there are four broad issues I would like to highlight where Brown's text prompts further questions.

First, despite some references to the European context, *In the Ruins* is a book that speaks to the transformations of neoliberalism in the context of the United States; however,

it is not clear to what extent the respective arguments are generalizable and whether Brown would suggest that this is the *general* shape and form of neoliberalism today—which is a claim not easily defended. Similarly, despite the attempt to ground her claims in a neoliberal tradition that is understood to include a certain *range* of positions (as in her discussion of neoliberal critiques of democracy), there are parts of the book that rely heavily—and at times solely—on Hayek. This is most obvious and consequential in the case of the neoliberal appreciation of tradition and morality. The argument fits really well with Hayek, and it would probably fit as well with Ordoliberalism. Still, it might be more difficult to square with someone like Milton Friedman, his known appreciation of the family notwithstanding. Although I find the interpretation of neoliberalism as a project of markets *and* morals to be *prima facie* highly plausible, it would still have to be demonstrated with respect to a broader range of thinkers.

This brings me to the second point, which is partly a matter of warring interpretations of Hayek and his take on morality, as well as on reform and history, more generally speaking. Brown emphasizes the conservative Hayek of tradition and rejects his own distancing from conservatism. But there is more ambiguity to this than Brown acknowledges. After all, the spontaneous order of traditional morality may be evolving slowly, but an evolutionary account such as Hayek's will always emphasize the room for mutation and experimentation inherent in such an order. Traditions, therefore, are hardly locked in, and Hayek insists that his account is different from a conservative reflex to pull the brakes on any (moral) innovation. Ultimately, this points to a well-known ambiguity in Hayek's overall framework where the quasi-conservative espousal of tradition and opposition to large-scale transformation sits uneasily next to his own calls for radical and abrupt reforms in the neoliberal spirit. If this is an accurate interpretation, what would this imply for neoliberalism understood as markets plus morals, given that Hayek is the key witness supporting this interpretation?

The third point is also related to the frame of reference of Brown's book, which is mostly neoliberalism, US style. What emerges from her narrative is an unbridled freedom largely understood as a de-sublimated will to power that simply does not care about its own conscience, society, or the future of the planet, acting out its instinctual impulses in an almost hedonistic manner. Still, how does this sit with accounts of actually existing neoliberalism that stress its disciplinary aspects, ranging from the installment of workfare regimes across the OECD world to generalized austerity, in the very name of futurity—that our children's children should not be forced to pay off our debts? In a nutshell, where Brown sees license and de-sublimation, I (also) see the harsh discipline of a punitive neoliberalism, to borrow a term from William Davies, which is all about a (financial) future orientation or at least pretends to be.

This brings up the final issue. Brown answers the question as to where we are in the most admirable fashion; still, she remains conspicuously silent on the follow-up: Where do/should we go from here? Although I think it is perfectly legitimate to focus on the diagnostic side without offering too much on the constructive side, some gestures as to how definitive and also possibly irreversible she deems the current transformations to be would have been welcome, especially given the ominously dark coloring of the last chapter.

Response to Thomas Biebricher's Review of *In the Ruins of Neoliberalism: The Rise of Antidemocratic Politics in the West*

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— Wendy Brown

I am grateful to Thomas Biebricher for his thoughtful consideration of *In the Ruins*. Certainly he is right that many of the immediate referents and touchstones of the book are American, even as the work also aims to limn characteristics of contemporary politics elsewhere. To some degree, this accidental provincialism besets every work of contemporary political theory: we risk universalizing the tendencies we tacitly or explicitly draw from our immediate milieu. But it also indexes a problem peculiar to theorizing both neoliberalism and contemporary right-wing authoritarianism. On the one hand, these are transnational developments—the late twentieth-century neoliberal revolution was global, and the eruption of ethnonationalist and authoritarian responses to some of its effects extends across South Asia and South America, the EU and the near East, and the United States. Yet the specific instantiation of neoliberalism; the cultural and political traditions it intersects, displaces, or builds on; and even the crises to which it responds and foments are specific to each national and even subnational setting. There is no universal architecture of actually existing neoliberalism or actually existing right-wing authoritarianism, even as both are global phenomena. Efforts to politically theorize our conjuncture must navigate this paradox and will inevitably fail.

This brings me to the centrality of Hayek to my account of the antidemocratic force of neoliberalism. There are two reasons for this. Hayek, on my reading, offers the most systematic and far-reaching *theory* of a neoliberal order, replete with an epistemology, ontology, cosmology, and political theory. This theory displaces the “capitalism on steroids” stereotype of neoliberal economic policy to feature the novel account of the social, the political, the moral, and the economic at the heart of the program. If, as Biebricher's book makes vivid, the other founding neoliberals do not agree with Hayek on everything, they largely share his critique of robust democracy,

popular sovereignty, and social justice; his formulation of liberty as the absence of political coercion; and his concern with supplementing economic competition with a strong family-based moral order. Moreover, Hayek identifies the importance of getting the state out of the social-provision *and* social-justice business, tarring both with the label of error and totalitarianism. In this respect, he gives us the fullest and most profound account of neoliberalism's transmogrification of liberal democracy *tout court*, which has in turn transformed everything from the social imaginary to the soul of the neoliberal subject.

As for Hayek's account of morality, although it is true that he distanced himself from Burkean-style conservatism in affirming the evolutionary dynamic of tradition, he did not regard all traditions as equal; nor did he think they had an equal chance of winning an evolutionary competition for survival among them. Rather, he insisted, only those religions and traditions survive that center family, property and individual liberty. Moreover, he believed that all traditions embody spontaneously developed and evolved orders of hierarchy and authority to which we voluntarily conform, while state social programs represent the opposite: rationalistic and coercive principles of egalitarianism; in short, social engineering that violates the spirit and ordering principles of human tradition. It is this opposition (and its legitimized antagonism to social justice and state mandates of provision or protection) that has been unleashed in neoliberalized societies from Bolsonaro's Brazil to Trump's United States. Tradition, freedom, patriarchy, religion, and authority are bundled and hoisted to demonize and defeat state-secured social justice, equality, “gender ideology,” secularism, and democracy. Just ask William Barr.

Finally I want to turn to the nihilism, both facilitating and intensified by neoliberalism, that unleashes a de-sublimated will to power and a spurning of obligation to society and futurity in contemporary subjects. Here, Biebricher simply misunderstands me. This phenomenon, especially evident in the alt-right, was no more a part of the neoliberal blueprint than are the plutocracies, irresponsible political demagogues, or resentful ethnonationalists and Brexiteers populating contemporary Western politics. Rather my argument is that a *condition* of nihilism more than a century in the making (cf. Nietzsche) both has blended with key features of neoliberalism, including its libertarian version of freedom and assault on the social, and responds to key neoliberal effects—including deindustrialization, union busting, and mass migration—to produce political formations of no one's aim or design. This kind of analysis, which Stuart Hall identifies as conjunctural and Foucault would call genealogical, aims to identify some of the political energies, especially those of a reactionary white working class, roaring about in the ruins of neoliberalism. Discerning how to transform these energies is surely an important

part of answering Biebricher's final query to me: What is to be done?

The Political Theory of Neoliberalism. By Thomas Biebricher. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2018. 272p. \$85.00 cloth, \$25.00 paper.
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Is it possible to extract a *political* theory from the constellation of postwar ideas that self-identified as neoliberal? What would be the elements and arc of such a theory, its immanent norms and ideals, its tensions or aporias? Did the theory inform and shape actual regimes in recent decades, and if so, how? And how might certain current political predicaments be refracted through appreciation of this theory?

These important questions animate Thomas Biebricher's superbly researched, artfully constructed, and impressively even-handed contribution to the growing literatures on neoliberal intellectual history and "actually existing neoliberalism." He moves from the 1938 Colloque Walter Lippmann to the contemporary European Union technocracy and across neoliberal thought in Germany, Austria, Chicago, and Virginia to map the explicitly political architecture of neoliberal theory and practice. He underlines the significance of fascism, communism, and totalitarianism, and not only Keynesianism, in fomenting neoliberalism's response to simmering crises of liberalism that came to a head in World War II. And he works expertly with the major and minor works of the classical neoliberal thinkers themselves, rendering the book both a trustworthy introduction to and skillful analysis of its subject.

Deriving a political theory from classical neoliberal thought has three distinct challenges, each of which Biebricher faces directly. First, "neoliberal" is a shorthand for the *non-unified* ensemble of postwar thinkers hailing from Germany, the United Kingdom, Austria, Switzerland, and the United States who gathered under the rubric of the Mont Pelerin Society but pursued most of their work separately from one another. Formed by what Biebricher terms different "fields of adversity" (collectivism, the Keynesian welfare state, paleoliberalism, fascism, republicanism) and trained in different disciplines (economics, philosophy, sociology, politics), these thinkers also differently appraised the limits of classical liberalism (pp. 18–21). If they all demonized socialism, an overreaching state, and democratic excess, they differed on how best to secure "the political and social conditions for functioning markets" (p. 26). Establishing these conditions constitutes what Biebricher terms "the neoliberal problematic"; what distinguishes neoliberalism from its

classical ancestor, laissez-faire political economy, is the extent to which markets require careful political construction and support. This in turn is what makes a political theory indispensable.

Second, any claim that a political theory derived from the classical neoliberal texts bears on the present requires dealing with the interval between the postwar intellectuals and the later rollout of neoliberal regimes. This means reckoning with features such as financialization and postnational political entities that were not on the landscape of the founding thinkers, as well as the significant variation across neoliberal political regimes in Latin America, East Asia, and Eastern Europe, and even within Europe and the United States.

Third, any effort to relate intellectual history to concrete historical developments raises the question of how this influence occurred. Against approaches in which intellectuals are portrayed as direct advisers to power (though this was crucial in Chile and, as Nancy MacLean has established, characterizes the role of certain US think tanks as well) or in which politicians use neoliberal texts as playbooks (though Thatcher certainly did), Biebricher draws on the neoliberals' own understanding of how ideas become reality principles. On the one hand, there is the importance of *crisis* in developing what they understood as an "ideational" opportunity – as Milton Friedman famously put it, in a crisis, "the actions that are taken depend on the ideas that are lying around." On the other hand, Biebricher argues that neoliberalism's influence develops gradually and takes hold over time by "impregnating" action and institutions; this approximates what the Ordoliberals explicitly identified with a new form of reason or what Foucault, in his 1979 *Collège* lectures, identified as neoliberal political rationality.

Biebricher treats these three challenges—the disunity of neoliberal thought, the interval between the founding ideals and actually existing neoliberalism, and the challenge of linking the ideas to policy—as more than technical riddles to be solved. Instead, they undergird the complexity of his analysis: the importance of featuring heterogeneity and tensions, coherence and contradictions at the site of the common neoliberal project; the importance of grasping the form of reasoning that structures institutions, not just the decisions that emanate from them; and the importance of tracking how a regime designed for one purpose—building a competitive market economy—ends up becoming a managerial apparatus for another: technocratic crisis management in a financialized EU.

In part I, Biebricher dedicates chapters to the neoliberals' varied approaches to the state, democracy, economic science, and politics. In the chapter on the state, Biebricher builds his account from the paradoxical problematic of how to simultaneously empower, narrowly focus, and limit the state. Exploring differences between

the overtly strong statism of thinkers like Eucken and Roepke and the more covert statism of the Americans, he also probes their different concerns, from resetting general principles of federalism, the balance of power, and law's purpose to the specifics of achieving balanced budgets or countering the moral effects of capitalist proletarianization. The chapter on democracy traces neoliberal challenges to popular sovereignty, majority rule, and pluralism, each of which threatens a liberal market order. All the neoliberals sought to delegitimize and deinstitutionalize mass democratic demands and interest group pluralism, but their strategies for insulating the state from these phenomena differed. They ranged from Hayek's aim to restrict legislatures to universal rule-making and legitimization of liberal authoritarianism to the ordoliberal investment in depoliticized technocracy and an "economic constitution." Similarly, the fascinating chapter on science traces the disparate degrees of confidence the neoliberals had in economic science, from those who essentially thought the state should be largely run by economists to those who were dubious about all claims to comprehensive knowledge, including those of economics.

The final chapter of part I, on politics, examines among other things the mobilization of politics for the transition to neoliberalism. Here, Biebricher reveals how, for the neoliberals, a political iron fist may operate within a liberal frame to throttle democratic will formation while protecting private liberties. Thus, across neoliberal thinking, "totalitarian democracy" (aka social democracy) may be legitimately replaced by "dictatorial liberalism," at least in the transitional period. Yet even this device does not settle how an order premised on constructivist and organicist elements, forthrightly eschewing planning, and reliant on the spontaneity of markets and on "re-rooting" *homo oeconomicus* in the pastoral family could be fashioned from the political-economic order it strives to vanquish. So how did ideas that lacked a plan for their own instantiation become the ruling ideas of our age?

Part II approaches this question not by the usual means of reflecting on the early decades of neoliberalism but by focusing on the post-2008 crisis of the European Union. Why did the EU and United States deal so differently with the 2008 financial crisis and its aftermath? Why did the EU undertake austerity that prolonged its recovery when the United States did not? Here, Biebricher develops his (and the neoliberals') argument that ideas matter, especially in crisis and when there is uncertainty. He argues that ordoliberal ideas, particularly those of Walter Eucken, shaped the European Union/European Monetary Union response to the crisis and that, since 2009, the growing ordoliberalization of the EU has entailed development and administration of *depoliticized and undemocratic* rules for intra- and international European competitiveness. The EU is thus realizing the ordoliberal technocratic ideal of a supervenient political

entity that prizes markets above all and is insulated from popular demands or popular sovereignty.

Biebricher offers multifold "proof" of the influence of ordoliberalism in recent EU developments. There is the importance of Eucken's text to EU policy makers and their setting of economic rules and thresholds enforced by sanctions. There is the economic theory that guided the handling of the financial crisis and its aftershocks in southern Europe: it incorporated a specific model of economic competition and punishing austerity measures. And there are the political principles guiding the management of the crisis. Here Biebricher identifies the authoritarian model of politics embodied in the Troika—"analogous to a liquidator in a private insolvency"—and in a European Commission invested with powers of "surveillance, monitoring, and, if need be, sanctioning of member states that strike at the heart of a core competence of national parliaments" (p. 216). Indeed, the Macroeconomic Imbalance Procedure (MIP) established in 2011, with its set indicators, scoreboard, and semiautomatic triggering of powerful sanctions, epitomizes ordoliberal scientism and technocracy. Thus, Biebricher concludes that the European Commission has become precisely that undemocratic economic rule setter, umpire, and enforcement power that ordoliberalism sought from the state.

Biebricher's argument of steady EU de-democratization by ordoliberalism is persuasive and disturbing. Still, one wishes that its implications for the present and future of European democracy, which are compressed into the last few pages of the book, were more fully drawn. (His final ominous claim, that "if Europe does not manage to redemocratize its will-formation and repoliticize some of its institutions, there is a distinct danger that its ordoliberalization will slowly stagger toward its eventual completion," is notably undeveloped and makes no mention of contemporary nationalist rebellions against this process [p. 224].) One also wishes that Biebricher's consideration, in part I, of the ordoliberal aim to fortify a pastoral patriarchal morality had not dropped away from part II, given its relevance to Thatcherism in an earlier decade and to broader contemporary developments on the Right, including in the United States and Latin America. One might wish, too, that after a relatively expansive and transcontinental treatment of the several strands of neoliberal thought and its applications, Biebricher had not narrowed the focus of the final discussion to an ordoliberalizing European Union.

More generally, Biebricher's interpretive and critical claims are sometimes frustratingly brief and underdeveloped. Perhaps this exchange will be an occasion for him to expand on them. That said, Biebricher fulfills his promise to identify a political theory in neoliberal ideas, to treat these ideas seriously and critically, and to reveal their relevance to building actually existing neoliberalism. The work is an important contribution to both the academic

literature on neoliberal thought and understanding contemporary crises of liberal democracy.

Response to Wendy Brown's Review of *The Political Theory of Neoliberalism*

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— Thomas Biebricher

In her generous and deeply perceptive review of my book, Wendy Brown points out some strengths but also what she considers to be the limitations of the study. And, as in many things, Brown is right—certainly with respect to some of the limitations. In particular, she draws attention to the quite abrupt and also ominous closing lines of the book that raise a lot of questions regarding the current state and future trajectory of an increasingly ordoliberal European Union that might be subject to escalating nationalist contestation from any number of “right-wing populist” movements and parties. More generally, Brown points to the often “underdeveloped” interpretive and critical claims in the study. Furthermore, she detects a narrowing of the scope that takes place over the course of the book; for example, when the ordoliberal praise of traditional morality, which is addressed early on, is never taken up again in the more diagnostic parts of the book or when the broad transatlantic framework of varieties of neoliberal thought gives way to an analysis of “actually existing neoliberalism” with an exclusive focus on contemporary Europe.

I think these are perfectly valid points, so let me try to address them, beginning with the last one. Although a broader transatlantic comparative scope of the analysis of actually existing neoliberalism would have been more desirable in principle, given the restrictions of space, I chose to focus on Europe for two reasons. First, the severity of the string of crises was much more pronounced there, and assuming that neoliberalism thrives on crises, this is the setting where “neoliberal innovation” is most likely to be expected. Second, the unique political form of the Eurozone/European Union turns it into a perfect laboratory for neoliberalism, especially with regard to statehood “after” the nation-state. For someone

who is interested in the *political theory* of neoliberalism and what is distinctive about the neoliberal *present*, Europe is thus one of the most interesting sites of actually existing neoliberalism to consider.

There is indeed a somewhat ominous ring to the final paragraphs regarding scenarios for the future development of the EU. Let me take this opportunity to clarify that I consider this future development to be, in principle, undetermined. There *are* alternatives to ordoliberalization. Some are represented by right-wing populist parties (although there is a considerable north–south divide here, Dutch or Swedish populists being staunch supporters of an “ordoliberal” Europe of austerity), while other political forces continue to fight for a more “social democratic” Europe. And although the structural decks are stacked against this latter project of a more social, more democratic European Union that does not revert back into a loose federation of nation-states, I would still consider this a position worth struggling for.

Finally, Brown correctly points to what I would describe as rather modest critical claims that aim not so much at a refutation but rather a problematization of the various tenets of neoliberal political theory. The systematic reason for this is my commitment to a mode of critique that is largely immanent and that I have employed for a combination of reasons. Given the relative dearth of studies that engage critically and in depth with the primary sources of neoliberal political theory, I think it is sufficient as a first step to identify tensions, lacunae, inconsistencies, and blind spots in that theory. I hope that others will take the small holes I tried to poke into this body of thought as a starting point and enlarge them. Moreover, the book was to be about neoliberal theory, first and foremost; I wanted the critique developed in it not to be inherently tied to (for example) Foucaultian or Gramscian assumptions, so the critical points could not be dismissed simply because one disagrees with these assumptions. In other words, I wanted to write a book whose critique would have to be taken seriously not only by those who are already part of neoliberalism’s choir of critics but even by those who tend to have faith in the neoliberal creed.