



**Wendy Brown.** *In the Ruins of Neoliberalism: The Rise of Antidemocratic Politics in the West.* New York: Columbia University Press, 2019. viii + 248 pp. \$25.00, paper, ISBN 978-0-231-19385-6.

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"Neoliberalism" resists easy definition. For Philipp Ther, it is a protean, fragmented thing: a "moving target" that lacks a coherent core ideology but produces new strains, activated by compromise and pragmatism. Neoliberalism is a "slippery fish": a term that even its original proponents came to distance themselves from. Contemporary economists and politicians very rarely want to own the label.[1] For Ther, "neoliberalism," like fascism, suffers from definitional inflation and overuse. Today, it is a "catchall" for a strident, uncompromising right-wing economic policy. It is a concept, he argues, that is opposed to but nevertheless confused with neoconservatism and reactionary moralism: "the postwar Anglo-Saxon Protestant idea of traditional family values and small-town life—a worldview that would have been quite alien to European neoliberals such as Friedrich von Hayek." [2]

In this well-argued book, Wendy Brown confronts the idea of qualitative difference between elements of neoliberalism and today's global advance of the Right. She collapses the distinction between neoconservatism and neoliberalism, demonstrating that "traditional" morality, the Christian Right, racial populism, nationalism, and anti-elitism are not the opposites of neoliberal

ideas of "freedom" and globalization, as they might seem, but the results of a sustained neoliberal attack on the social state and the idea of the "political" as the democratic expression of the commonweal. Brown's aim is to trace the causal links between neoliberalism and radically antidemocratic forces. She argues that narratives linking neoliberalism to "the fascism of old" are incomplete, since they do not take into account how neoliberalism has driven the contemporary challenge to democracy. For Brown, neoliberal arguments for "freedom" and "morality" power the growing assault on racial, gender, and sexual equality, on secularism and the nonviolent civic space. Neoliberalism's attack on democracy surfaces in legal decisions that undermine constitutional democracy, and aggressive claims for relativism that challenge political objectivity.

The author contributes to a small literature that recognizes neoliberalism as transcending the purely economic to propagate a system of "values." In particular, Brown draws on Michel Foucault's recognition of the paradox that "free" markets must actually be set up, facilitated, and—as we saw in 2008 and witness again in the time of coronavirus—occasionally propped up. For Foucault, neoliberalism leads not to unfettered capi-

talism but to a radical change in the values of liberal democracies.[3] Recently, Melinda Cooper examined how neoliberal politicians have transferred responsibility for social aspects of this propping up to the "traditional" family, reinforcing its patriarchal leadership. Cooper highlighted the neoliberal emphasis on "responsibilizing" men for dealing with welfare issues such as teenage pregnancies, alongside the onus on parents, rather than the state, to meet the cost of higher education.[4]

Brown's most original contribution lies in her reexamination of neoliberal thought, and especially that of Hayek, to investigate how neoliberalism galvanizes forces hostile to democracy, and how traditional morality and the Christian Right have become so inextricably linked to the neoliberal revolution. Brown is a brave writer who is not afraid of contradicting her own previous findings. In this book, she recognizes that neoliberalism is not so much about "economizing everything," as she argued in her 2015 book, *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism's Stealth Revolution*, but is actually a "moral" project that aims at protecting traditional hierarchies through obliterating the concept of society.[5]

Brown emphasizes that the antidemocratic forces released by neoliberalism were neither intended nor foreseen by early neoliberal thinkers. These forces, she suggests, diverge from neoliberal ideas just as surely as authoritarian Soviet communism departed from Marx. Indeed, the founders of neoliberalism aimed at protecting free markets against fascism and totalitarianism (and separating politics in general from the markets). Original neoliberals, Brown claims, would be horrified by today's crony capitalism and international oligarchical power; they would, presumably, detest the 'oligarchic-neoliberal system' of Russia under Putin.[6] This, for Brown, makes antidemocratic forces "not neoliberalism's intended spawn but its Frankensteinian creation" (pp. 9-10).

However, Brown complicates this original argument by going on to make a convincing case for neoliberalism's inherently antidemocratic tendencies. She suggests that democracy fundamentally rests on political equality: since no democracy has ever been complete by the measure of fully attained equality, the pursuit of democracy demands that states work to reduce the type of inequalities inevitably created by neoliberal economics. Of the founding neoliberal thinkers, Brown tells us that only Milton Friedman emphasized affinity between neoliberalism and "democracy." However—crucially—Friedman considered that true political freedom had only appeared with the rise of capitalism. For him, both the flourishing of capitalism and freedom itself are dependent on states being reduced and rendered incapable of regulatory interference. Moreover, Brown reminds us that Friedman, like Hayek, legitimized authoritarian regimes, such as Augusto Pinochet's in Chile, when they considered these to be necessary facilitators of the transition to liberalized markets. Brown points out the irony that antidemocracy is inherent in neoliberals' dislike of social movements, activism, and direct political participation since all of these remind them of fascism and mob rule. Brown is alive to the contradictions within neoliberalism and never portrays the phenomenon as a homogeneous one. For example, she shows that while Friedman and Hayek saw the political as invasive and a constant threat to (their notion of) freedom, no neoliberal thinker sought a weak state; in particular, "ordoliberals" draw on Carl Schmitt in their recognition of the need to build a strong state as a guarantor of the order and stability needed to let markets run freely.

To some extent, the tension between the inherent and unintended antidemocratic consequences of neoliberalism is not fully worked out in this book. The query here emanates from some uncertainty about what Brown means by the "ruins" of neoliberalism. For example, she highlights the many ways in which "actually existing neoliberalism" departs from original neoliberal thought. Ne-

oliberalism in action produces states dominated by big business and special interests, implying levels of control and unfair competition not envisaged by neoliberal thinkers (including Hayek). The resulting inequalities and marginalization of working-class people produce "a populace seething with rancour, rage and resentment, not to mention material needs" (p. 85). Alienated, displaced citizens become susceptible to xenophobic and nationalistic discourses, fueling perceptions that their states have lost sovereignty at the expense of ever-expanding globalization and international oligarchical power. Does this resentful, hate-filled populism build on "ruined" neoliberalism or rather on a triumphant, albeit in some ways unintended, realization of neoliberalism?

The seeming contradictions between ultranationalist fascism and neoliberals' preference for depoliticized states and supranational institutions take some squaring—but Brown does a convincing job here. While stressing that the contemporary challenge to democracy comes from multiple directions and cannot simply be seen as resurgent fascism, Brown argues that neoliberal antipathy to statism fosters unexpected alliances, some components of which are indeed fascist. The forces opposing the state's perceived challenge to their "freedom" include ultra-Right nationalists, but also economic libertarians, plutocrats, pro-lifers, and (not incongruously because of their shared rationale) homeschoolers. Moreover, when the social state retreats and traditional values promote familization, the trend is towards xenophobic fear of the outsider: "thus does neoliberalism plant seeds of a nationalism it formally abjures" (p. 117). Brown is also good on the convergence of neoliberalism and neoconservatism, against Ther's standpoint. Capitalism may well disregard political borders, while nationalists cling to them. However, neoliberalism and neoconservatism converge in fostering an antidemocratic citizenry; both agree that the family rather than the state should shoulder the burden of providing education, health, and

childcare. Both reinsert religion into political discourse and promote patriotism.

Brown especially delineates the link between neoliberalism and the Christian Right through reference to Hayek, whose formulation she characterizes as "freedom restrained by tradition" (p. 122). The link between evangelical Christianity and neoliberalism might seem a fragile one when we reflect, as Brown does, on the dissonance between divine intentionality and "design" on the one hand, and the "chance" implied by risking capital in amoral, unregulated markets. However, Brown shows that the dual strengthening of markets and "morality," in place of society and democracy, is the Hayekian dream (p. 108). The author again acknowledges the disparate forms neoliberalism adopts when in positions of power, noting that Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan neglected to make connections between economic policy and a moral project. However, when neoliberals made an active appeal to evangelicals during the American presidential elections of 2016, common cause was readily made. To some extent, Brown suggests, affinity between neoliberalism and the Christian Right is quite natural because evangelical Christians "were often entrepreneurs in their own right" (pp. 93-94). Of much more importance, however, is that the Christian Right sees in Donald Trump's power confirmation of the position of traditional morality and the diminution of government regulation encroaching on the exercise of this morality, despite any immorality that might surface in Trump's personal behavior. This is an issue Brown deals with in depth, through a case study of the Supreme Court's decision on *Masterpiece Cakeshop v. the Colorado Civil Rights Commission* (2017-18), which overruled the commission's decision that the cakeshop proprietor was guilty of discrimination in refusing to provide a wedding cake to a gay couple. Instead, the Court ruled, the commission had violated the proprietor's right to free exercise of religion. Brown also provides a detailed case study of the legal decision allowing Christian-run pregnancy centers to prac-

tice without having to disclaim that they are not medical centers or being required to signpost external abortion services.

The book begins with a reflection on the inherently antidemocratic elements of neoliberalism. Brown demonstrates that neoliberals do not just want to end social regulation and wealth redistribution, seeing these as interference in the markets, but also strive to undermine democracy's links to political equality. It is the neoliberal attack on the social that galvanizes an antidemocratic culture "from below" alongside the erosion of democratic principles at the highest political levels (p. 28). Brown especially reconnects contemporary events to Hayek's repudiation of society and his insistence that personal interdependence arises not from organized common pursuit—the social—but from rules of conduct that develop from markets and moral traditions. Thatcher's declaration that "there is no such thing as society [but only] individual men and women ... and families" seems therefore like the purest manifestation of the Hayekian brand of neoliberalism. It is true that Brown has centered on the most systematic, and arguably most extreme, neoliberal critic of social democracy. This is, however, understandable in its logic, since Brown deals above all with "Hayek today": the manifestation of aspects of this particular neoliberal brand in contemporary America, signaling both an attack on society and the insistence on family in its place. Brown does not suggest that Hayek's vision is completely triumphant. Indeed, she points out that states dominated by finance and big business, seeking legislation to protect their positions, depart significantly from how Hayek imagined the interplay of markets and morals. Traditional values are not truly or purely ascendant but are instead exploited and manipulated politically and commercially. In themselves, traditional values are victimized, as well as eulogized, by antidemocratic forces (p. 118).

In chapter 2, Brown turns to the neoliberal assault on "the political," seen by neoliberals not as

composed of immutable fundamental values but instead infused with the kind of damaging social and democratic tendencies that can hamper markets. Neoliberals, Brown shows, determine to separate politics from sovereignty and democratic principles. They insert management and technocracy in place of democratic discourse. She provides a brilliant example of this in the preceding chapter when she describes the inauguration of Trump's Office of American Innovation, led by the president's son-in-law, Jared Kushner. The office aims at "fixing government with business ideas"; the United States should be run "like a great American company" (p. 29). This chapter describes Friedman's concept of the synergy of capitalism and true freedom and, in more detail, Hayek's views that creativity and enterprise always emerge from below: political power from above is both inauthentic and mistakenly viewed as creative. Brown also analyzes ordoliberalism in this chapter. In describing ordoliberals' rejection of state sovereignty and the replacement of this with technical expertise and commitment to liberalized economies, Brown might have engaged more with left-wing perceptions of the European Union as ordoliberal. This book is overwhelmingly US-centric—but this is a minor criticism because the rationale for this is explicit and again understandable in light of the author's concerns with the realization of some aspects of Hayekian ideas in America.

Next, Brown deals with the theorizing of moral traditionalism within neoliberalism. It is here that she narrows the spaces between neoliberalism and neoconservatism. Again, Brown interrogates Hayekian thought, highlighting his belief that traditions not only evolve internally but compete externally: only those centered on family and property will survive this competition. Bringing neoconservatism and neoliberalism closer together, Brown reminds us that for Hayek, markets themselves are a form of tradition: according to him, Brown explains, "we are disciplined and oriented by market rules"(p. 100). Family and the markets align on one side, opposing the social and political.

In chapter 4, Brown deals with the neoliberal strengthening of the Christian Right, focusing on pregnancy centers and the Masterpiece Cakeshop case. Despite having established the connections between neoliberalism and American evangelical Christianity in the preceding chapters, this section might have benefited from some more explicit linking back to neoliberal thought to help readers understand how this thinking came to guide Supreme Court decision-making. A good example of where this retrospective linkage does take place occurs in the context of pregnancy centers. Brown highlights Justice Clarence Thomas's invocation of a "free market of ideas" for religious conviction, so that "a neoliberal principle considered appropriate to the realm of marketing or politics is ... transposed onto the realm of faith" (p. 153).

The core chapters conclude with a special focus on alienated, angry white men. Here Brown argues that neoliberalism has strengthened nihilism through its pervasive entrepreneurialization and monetization. Brown draws on Herbert Marcuse's sense that the market has replaced both the reality principle and moral truth, displacing guilt and conscience. This nihilism, Brown suggests, surfaces in the vitriol and aggression of right-wing cable and internet news, blogs, and tweets. These hate-filled media connect to the "ressentiment, rancour, rage [and] reaction to humiliation" exploited by

right-wing populism and targeted at exploiting America's white, working-class men (p. 175).

*In the Ruins of Neoliberalism: The Rise of Antidemocratic Politics in the West* is an important and very timely book. Brown's vital contribution lies in demonstrating that neoliberalism utterly transcends economic theory to damage the heart of our society and democracy. Brown does this through making careful, well-explained links from Trump's America back to founding neoliberal thought. The book will add to the fields of modern political science, the historiography of developing neoliberal thought, and studies of fascism and extreme-Right ideologies.

#### Notes

[1]. Philipp Ther, *Europe since 1989* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2014), 18.

[2]. Ther, *Europe since 1989*, 19.

[3]. Michel Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the College de France, 1978-79*, ed. Michel Sennelart and trans. Graham Burchell (New York: Picador, 2004).

[4]. Melinda Cooper, *Family Values: Between Neoliberalism and the New Social Conservatism* (New York: Zone Books, 2017).

[5]. Wendy Brown, *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism's Stealth Revolution* (New York: Zone Books, 2015).

[6]. Ther, *Europe Since 1989*, 28.

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