

Wendy Brown, *In the Ruins of Neoliberalism. The rise of antidemocratic Politics in the West*, Columbia University Press, New York 2019, pp. 249, € 21.45, ISBN 9781935408543

Helmer Stoel, Università degli Studi di Padova – GoetheUniversität Frankfurt

The victory of Donald Trump in the US-presidential elections in 2016 is often taken as paradigm for the steady global rise of a new and aggressive form of right-wing politics. This rise still leaves many observers –from all over the political spectrum – in a state of shock. It comes as no surprise, then, that it has spawned a small industry of theories, all aimed at explaining “how this could have happened”. Typically, the explanation offered by the Left links it to the decades of neoliberalism, the managerialisation of the political class, and the fear of mass immigration. What makes Wendy Brown's new book, *In the Ruins of Neoliberalism. The rise of antidemocratic Politics in the West* so fascinating, is that it departs from a diagnosis that goes beyond this “common sense” (p.6) of the Left. This common sense, Brown argues, fails to account for the nature of the unholy alliance between neoliberalism and the new far-Right. How can it be that the new form of right-wing politics successfully pairs neoliberal concerns to a – at the surface contradictory – moralistic and nationalist agenda?

In her previous book, *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism's Stealth Revolution* (2015), Brown had already written about neoliberalism (a term that always needs to be specified, if it is to be more than a catchword). She follows Foucault in understanding it not so much as a viewpoint on economics, or a political theory, but rather as a specific political rationality, one that “economises” the state as well as the individual. It views the state essentially as a function of the market, thereby separating it from all ideas of public life and the common good, while the individual is approached as an “enterprise” that must learn to view all of its activities in terms of “investments”. Departing from this premise, Brown constructs her central argument: neoliberalism, understood as a political rationality in the Foucauldian sense, undermines and ultimately destroys liberal democracy. *Undoing the Demos* calls for a defence of liberal democracy in the face of neoliberalism, although Brown's insistence on democracy beyond the state clearly reveals her own adherence to a more radical

democratic perspective. Without a minimum of democratic culture, she argues, liberal democracy cannot survive, let alone all Leftist aspirations to extend democratic rule.

In the Ruins of Neoliberalism further explores the crisis of democracy. But against her initial analysis, Brown now stresses that understanding neoliberalism in terms of economisation is not sufficient. Rather, we must see it as a more heterogeneous phenomenon. Already the turn towards neoliberalism in the Thatcher-Reagan era, as she writes in the introduction, “aimed at releasing markets and morals to govern and discipline individuals while maximising freedom, and it did so by demonising the social and democratic version of political life.” (p.11). Brown claims that there is a reactionary moralism at work “*within* neoliberal reason” (p.96). This claim thus goes beyond the more familiar one that traditional structures, such as the family, the church, and the 'community' serve as the hidden presuppositions of neoliberalism, since they must privately compensate for the ravages of unrestrained capitalism. It is precisely on this point, Brown argues, that the Foucauldian and the (neo-)Marxist perspective fall short (which is why she deems theories of “the commons” (p.52) unhelpful). It is important to mention that the analysis of neoliberalism presented here distinguishes between neoliberalism as an ideal, as it was conceived in the circle of the Mont Pelerin Society (and by Hayek in particular), and “really existing” neoliberalism. Unsurprisingly, implementing the neoliberal ideal ultimately failed, since it proved itself in many respects to be too utopian. To describe the relation between the neoliberal vision and 'really existing' neoliberalism, Brown uses the metaphor of Frankenstein (supposedly more the figure of popular culture than the “creation” from Mary Shelly's novel): an idealistic creation that turns out to be a raging monster. It is with such a monstrous destruction of democracy in mind that Brown warns us that “populist rage” might well be “the least of the dangers on the horizon” (p.87).

Of the book's five short chapters, the first two deal with neoliberalism's twofold attack on “the social” and “the political”. In the remaining three chapters Brown then turns to what can broadly be described as the apparent return of tradition under the guise of a defence of “the personal sphere”. Chapter four presents the reader with two juridical cases – one involving a wedding cake, the other a pregnancy centre – as an illustration of how the right of “free speech” is instrumentalised in this context. Here, as

throughout the whole work, Brown reminds us of the political importance of a sensibility to language: the struggle for democracy is also a struggle over the meaning of this term. She excels in showing how certain terms, particularly “the freedom of expression”, have been appropriated by the far-Right. It must be noted, however, that the book focuses almost exclusively on the American discourse (as the references to “SJWs” and “incels” exemplify), which makes the reference to “the West” in its subtitle disturbingly americentric. The last chapter, finally, looks at how the return to tradition advocated by the far-Right is only apparent: the protection of so-called traditional values, Brown argues, using Nietzsche and Marcuse, is only a sign of nihilism and resentment in disguise.

Neoliberalism's hostility towards the social seems beyond doubt. On this point both its defenders and critics seem to agree. From a critical perspective, the two directions of this attack have often been analysed: where on the one hand it appeals (often in bad faith) to a caricatural positivism (what should the term “society” refer to? – what does “class” even mean?), on the other hand it interprets all references to the existence of society, social relations, or social hierarchies as a potential danger to the “personal sphere” – one that could easily lead to totalitarianism. With the current situation in view, *In the Ruins of Liberalism* plausibly concludes that this attack has been successful. This can not only be observed in the economic reforms effected since the 90s, but also by the fact that mainstream cultures have *en bloc* become neoliberal. In order to bring this hostility towards “the grammar of the social” (p.53) at a theoretical level in view, Brown examines Hayek and Arendt. In the former, the demonisation of the social, the privatisation of freedom, and the parallelism between the market and morals (as both spontaneous and organically grown); in the latter, the well-known condemnation of the social as the a-, and even anti-political realm of needs and wants. The absence of both theoretical accounts and practical consciousness of the social leads to the inability to address, and more crucially to criticise, any form of social domination and exclusion: “If there is no such thing as society, but only individuals and families oriented by markets and morals, then there is no such thing as social power generating hierarchies, exclusion, and violence, let alone subjectivity at the sites of class, gender, or race” (p.40). Ultimately, as Brown points out, the neoliberal conception of freedom can only be an “illiberal” and

profoundly undemocratic one: “Freedom without society destroys the lexicon by which freedom is made democratic, paired with social consciousness, and nested in political equality” (p.44).

The second direction of neoliberalism's attack, according to Brown, is aimed at the political. Thinkers such as Hayek and Friedman not only hold that the state must occupy itself only with creating the conditions for the free market, they also insist on the necessity of limiting and containing political power. Classical concepts associated with democracy, such as popular sovereignty or majority rule, are framed as inherently dangerous and hence discredited. As a consequence political power depends less and less on procedures of legitimation. This ultimately leads to the “de-democratisation” of the state. The main consequence is simple: “Realpolitik rules [...]” And it is at the level of Realpolitik, so it seems, that the reactionary moralism – that Brown places within neoliberal rationality – reveals itself. Giving countless examples, Brown describes vividly how the appeal to traditional values of the new far-Right hides nihilism. This nihilism is understood – with Nietzsche, Weber, and Marcuse – as something endemic to modernity and late-capitalism itself. This would explain why nihilism and traditional morality are less contradictory than we would imagine: “Nihilism releases the will to power not only in subjects, but in traditional values themselves” (p.173). It would also explain why the blatant 'amorality' of figures such as Trump fails to shock.

Generally spoken, Brown's analysis of the attack on the social seems very convincing. Even though it does not contain a social theory in a stricter sense, the immanent criticism of both neoliberal theory and neoliberal language (as in the two juridical cases) powerfully suggests the effacement of the essential consciousness of the social, both in reality and in theory. The part of the argument that focuses on the political, however, seems a bit weaker. This might be due to the fact that Brown leaves what she calls “the political” a bit too unspecified, loosely referring to different thinkers who use this word (Wolin and Arendt in particular). Although she explicitly chooses not to examine “these differences” (p.56), such a lack of differentiation makes it harder to give the reader a sense of how the depoliticisation of politics under neoliberalism operates. But generally the critique of the ideological replacement of political concerns with moral ones could not be more relevant today. With *In the Ruins of Neoliberalism* Wendy Brown delivers a passionate exercise in

critical theory, powerfully reminding us that critical theory only has the right to exist so long as it engages with the struggles of the present.