

**Neoliberalism as Frankenstein and an Unfinished Monster**

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## Neoliberalism as Frankenstein and an Unfinished Monster

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Wendy Brown ranks as one of the foremost theorists of neoliberalism. In her excellent book *Undoing the Demos* (2015), she demonstrated the erosive effect neoliberalism has on our democratic institutions, and in the earlier paper, “American Nightmare” (2006), she analysed neoliberalism and neoconservatism as two distinct rationalities entangled in a symbiotic relationship. Her new book, *In the Ruins of Neoliberalism: The Rise of Antidemocratic Politics in the West* (2019), revises these arguments and goes beyond them. Neoliberalism isn’t merely the infringement of economic rationality within the domains of politics and subjectivity, hollowing out democratic institutions in the process; nor is it an amoral rationality that only pragmatically aligns with the neoconservative focus on traditional morality. Rather, Brown argues, neoliberalism was, from its inception, not merely focused on the constitution of markets, but also on the preservation and extension of traditional morality. In pursuit of these aims, neoliberal rationality subverted democratic institutions and deconstructed programmes and policies designed to combat social and economic inequalities. In doing so, according to Brown, neoliberalism paved the way for contemporary antidemocratic politics. Drawing on elements from both neo-Marxist and Foucauldian approaches, Brown teases out neoliberalism’s effects on political and economic institutions as well as its reshaping of governmental rationalities. Unbridled neoliberalism, she argues, has created a monster its inventors would despise.

Brown’s argument, then, goes considerably further than most analyses of neoliberalism and seems to give credence to the idea of neoliberalism as the root cause of all of the world’s troubles; a notion one often comes across in political op-eds, but one that is less common in more serious academic work. However, she stops short of arguing that our current social and political landscape is the logical outgrowth of neoliberal theory, or even of its practice. Not everything can be reduced to neoliberalism, according to Brown. Indeed, if that were the case it would be very difficult to explain the policy differences of the last six US presidencies. The point is rather “that nothing is untouched by a neoliberal mode of reason and valuation” (Brown 2019, 8). This can be true for programmes like DACA—which provides protections against deportation for children of undocumented immigrants—as well as the Trump

administration's efforts to repeal the very same programme. In this sense, it isn't necessarily policy that is or isn't neoliberal, but rather that neoliberalism provides a measure with which to test policy. Simply put, if a policy can be cast in a neoliberal logic it is deemed legitimate.

Although Brown does not argue so explicitly, it can be said that for a policy to pass the test of neoliberal logic it has to meet one of three criteria: first, does the policy serve to deconstruct society? Brown equates society with the social domain. In her view, this domain deals with equality between citizens in the broadest sense of the term. It is a space of commonality and communality "where we are more than private individuals or families, more than economic producers, consumers, or investors, and more than mere members of the nation" (27-8). In this sense, the first criterion of neoliberal logic might be reformulated to ask: does the policy serve to undermine policies, programmes and institutions that address social and economic inequalities? Because social and economic inequalities threaten political equality, this idea of society or the social is foundational for democratic politics, according to Brown. In neoliberal theory and practice, on the other hand, dealing with inequalities is problematic since it would require an infringement in the private domain—whether through a disruption of tradition, for example in the case of gender equality, or economically, through taxation.

Second, does the policy serve to disarm the political? That is, does it serve to subvert democratic political power? Brown describes the political as "a theater of deliberations, powers, actions, and values where common existence is thought, shaped, and governed" (56). In this sense, the political provides the space in which political power is generated and through which it is exercised. But the political domain is not strictly autonomous; rather, it is a complex domain that is connected and suffused with other powers and domains (e.g. social, economic, religious). As such, the political is shaped by different rationalities in specific temporal and spatial contexts. Thus, we might say that the political domain denotes the conditions and limits of the possible exercises of political power. Crucial for Brown, in this respect, is that democracy cannot function without the political. Democracy gains its legitimacy from "political vocabularies and ordinances" (57). Without a space in which these political vocabularies and ordinances can acquire meaning, democracy would be powerless. For neoliberalism, on the other hand, the political is problematic for two reasons. First, state power has the capacity to influence the free market, which would undermine its efficiency; second, democratic power is

viewed as akin to majority rule and therefore a threat to the private sphere. For these reasons, according to Brown, neoliberalism seeks to depoliticize and limit the state.

The third criterion asks whether the policy strengthens the private domain. That is, are individual property rights and traditional moral standards upheld and extended? It should be clear that the first two criteria are dedicated to the third. Neoliberalism's central claim is that society will prosper if and only if individuals are left to their own devices. However, Brown points out that neoliberalism is not merely concerned with individuals and the private, but also with the family and the domestic. This, then, is one of Brown's most original insights: the neoliberal focus on the family is programmatic from its inception. According to Brown, this is especially clear in the work of Friedrich Hayek, and most important in this regard is his notion that markets and morals are both constituted by, and constitutive of, freedom. This is nothing new to be sure. For instance, Hayek's *Road to Serfdom* ([1944] 2007) argues that anything but a free-market economy will inevitably lead to totalitarianism, and his *Constitution of Liberty* ([1960] 2006) is steeped in moral language. What is so original about Brown's analysis, however, is that she points out his reverence for tradition.

Hayek is of course first and foremost a liberal. But his idea of liberty as freedom from coercion, according to Brown, goes hand-in-hand with tradition and evolved out of a Darwinian process. Following Burke, Hayek argues that tradition is so for a reason; conventions and customs have either withstood challenges of new practices, or were supplanted by them. Hayek views this as an evolutionary process whereby the most well-adjusted traditions survive, and, as such, he regards it as a process of optimization that should play out organically. By introducing or encouraging new practices the social or the political will overreach and force something new, thereby interrupting the Darwinian process and undermining optimization. Moreover, the new practice would necessarily be born out of a utopian blueprint for society, according to Hayek, and hence would be a step on the road to totalitarianism.

Markets and traditional morals are examples of tried and tested practices, according to Hayek, therefore interfering with them is an inherently bad idea. But there is something more at play, argues Brown. It is not only the case that they have withstood the test of time; markets and morals also reinforce personal liberty. That is, markets provide individuals the means with which to act on their individual preferences, and traditional morality provides the non-coercive

means for order, as well as “protection against interference with our actions” (Hayek 2006, 123). This, in turn, enables the Darwinian process to take its course, thus weeding out bad practices. In this sense, freedom, ensured by markets and morals, strengthens tradition in a self-reinforcing cycle. It is worth noting that this notion of a self-reinforcing cycle is very similar to that held by large contingents of the Left. The only difference is a realization that tradition has fundamentally oppressive features, and that ‘freedom’, in this sense, only means freedom for wealthy white men. Hayek, on the other hand, takes no offense at the state of the world; his trust in social evolution allows him to argue that as long as there is no arbitrary coercion between people, they are free to do as they please - and social inequalities be damned.

Hence Brown’s focus on Hayek; his views provide a justification for the neoliberal criteria. Society must be dismantled because it deals with inequalities and injustices that are grown out of tradition, thereby interfering in the Darwinian process. If the inequalities and injustices will disappear in time, good; if not, they are part of the most optimal state of the world. But we should not try to alleviate the suffering of the poor, or enact other forms of social justice; politics must be dethroned because it has the power to interfere. Democratic politics is especially dangerous, according to Hayek; not in the least, because it tends to strengthen the social, but also because democracy equates with ochlocracy or mob rule. The individual, then, for Hayek, is made insignificant and subordinate to the will of the mob. Finally, the personal, protected sphere must be extended, because individuals have to be free in order to continue the cycle. Moreover, protected individual freedoms are a safeguard against totalitarian control. As Brown notes, Hayek sees totalitarianism as liberalism’s opposite, whereas it is not contrary to democracy.

But this is not to say that a liberal authoritarianism cannot be legitimate, in the neoliberal view. Milton Friedman’s support of the Pinochet regime, for example, is well documented—albeit often exaggerated. It is at least certain that he admired the regime’s free market reform, and this should come as no surprise if one takes these reforms to mean an extension of personal freedom, as Friedman does. The other imperatives are by no means at odds with an authoritarian regime; indeed, they seem to work quite well together. In this sense, as long as a free market is secured or enforced there is no contradiction between authoritarianism and neoliberalism.

All this does not *prima facie* appear to be in contrast to contemporary society; if one follows the news, it seems as though the social is still under assault, the political is more dethroned than ever, and the focus on individual and religious liberties have only gotten stronger during the lockdown. Doesn't this sound like a neoliberal paradise? Yet the book is called *In the Ruins of Neoliberalism*, implying the neoliberal era has come to an end, leaving behind a derelict structure. Moreover, Brown argues that the great neoliberal icons would have found the current state of the world abhorrent. She points to four reasons for this: first, although the attack on the social and political have intensified, the new right-wing populism relies heavily on mob-politics and has unleashed a previously depoliticized and enraged constituency. Second, the functioning of the financial sector has crushed any hope of a competitive order free from manipulation of prices and markets. Third, the neoliberal goals of markets and morals have become confused, so that "morality was marketized and markets were moralized" (Brown 2019, 16). Consequently, they have become political rallying cries, losing their spontaneous character. Finally, neoliberalism only served to amplify the nihilism and *ressentiment* already stirring in our society, hence Brown argues that neoliberalism has created a Frankensteinian monster its original inventors would detest.

The last two chapters aim to analyse these dynamics, but unfortunately they are both rather disappointing. The penultimate chapter looks at two United States Supreme Court cases and details how the neoliberal rationale is used to justify juridical decision-making. Although this chapter might serve to expose the eroding effects and limits of neoliberal reason, it is narrowly focused on the United States, making the reader question the use of Brown's analysis in other contexts.

The final chapter deals with nihilism, fatalism, and *ressentiment* experienced especially by white men faced with status loss. This chapter feels somewhat out of place, or perhaps unfinished in a way. It focusses chiefly on Nietzsche's concept of nihilism and Marcuse's "repressive desublimation" and the role of market rationality in intensifying nihilism. By itself it is an interesting text, but Brown does little to connect it to the earlier chapters. Moreover, there is a historical-conceptual tension here. Marcuse's analysis demonstrates how market rationality "has become both reality principle and moral truth" (168). The problem, however, is that although Marcuse focuses on late capitalism he writes well before the neoliberal revolution,

as Brown herself points out. The question then is what makes neoliberalism so special? Aren't the problems today an outcome of late capitalism rather than neoliberalism? If nihilism, which has been brewing at least since the sixties, and intensified by neoliberalism, is to account for the rise of anti-democratic politics in the West, what accounts for earlier explosions of anti-democratic politics? Brown does not go into these questions.

These last chapters also make clear that Brown's concern is with the United States. This would not be an issue if not for the fact that she regularly talks about "the West" in general. The subtitle is 'the rise of antidemocratic politics in the West', no less. And although neoliberalism has affected the whole world, the American experience is not comparable to the Dutch, for example. Moreover, the rise of antidemocratic politics is by no means a Western phenomenon; Narendra Modi, Tayyip Erdogan, Vladimir Putin, all antidemocratic leaders who rely on similar tactics, are none of them a part of the West in any meaningful sense.

Furthermore, the question of whether Brown thinks the age of neoliberalism has come to an end is left open. To be sure, she implies its end with the book's title, but it is far from clear that this is actually the case. Neoliberal reason still legitimizes policy, and attacks on social justice have only intensified: the monster lives on. This is especially relevant since the election of Trump was in many ways a rejection of the neoliberal status quo (see: West 2016; Fraser 2017; Gallagher 2019). Online movements, such as the alt-right and the increasingly relevant QAnon, despise anything to do with establishment politics, and they surely share the neoliberal rejection of the social and adherence to tradition. However, the foregrounding of the economy and economic rationality are completely absent in the non-libertarian corners of the online far-right, so can we still legitimately say that they are touched by neoliberal reason?

Similarly, although the Right has dominated US politics in the last few years, a new Left is emerging. Young people especially are more engaged than ever, and progressive policies like the Green New Deal are increasingly prevalent in the news-cycle. To be sure, the Left suffered electoral defeats recently, but its growing potential is evident, yet Brown mentions this only in passing and ends the book with the question about what kind of Left politics can reach and transform the fatalistic and nihilistic masses. But if the neoliberal experience is so ubiquitous, why would the growth of the anti-establishment Left be explained by different reasons? What accounts for the differences between these movements? Wouldn't neoliberalism's nightmare—

–its true monster—take the form of a socially and politically active Left? These questions are unfortunately left unasked.

This is not to say *In the Ruins* is not worth reading. Brown’s analysis of Hayek in particular is intensely fascinating for anybody interested in political theory. The book is, simply, excellent except for the last two chapters, and one almost gets a sense that it is unfinished in a way, as if it needs one more chapter to tie up loose ends - to see if the monster, as in Shelley’s novel, actually gets to destroy its creator.

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## Biography

**Casper Verstegen** obtained his rMA in philosophy in 2018 at the University of Amsterdam, where he is currently affiliated with the research group Philosophy and Public Affairs.