

Wendy Brown, *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism's Stealth Revolution*, Zone Books, 2015, pp. 296, \$ 29.95, ISBN 9781935408536

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Wendy Brown is one of the most celebrated American political theorists, and with good reason. She is also a major voice defending the public demonstrations against the privatization of the University of California. In her works, she has critically analysed neoliberal rationality from multiple perspectives: as a feminist, an educator, a philosopher. In *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism's Stealth Revolution*, as a political theory work, Brown attempts to embrace all of these perspectives to highlight the ubiquity of neoliberal rationality today. Her work aims to produce a radical *critique*, while engaging with an eminent reference, among others: Michel Foucault and his critical analysis of governmentality in the 1978-1979 lectures at the Collège de France, published as *The Birth of Biopolitics*.

Brown's urgent claim is that neoliberalism is not just an extension of liberalism as a form of economic rationality. Instead, it is an order of normative reason, politically performative both in silently altering all major features of democracy (institutions, political practices, values) and in strongly conditioning individual conduct. Insofar as all the institutions, the concepts and the collective and individual actors belonging to the public democratic frame have already undergone a process of *economization*, Brown primarily aims to "challenge commonplace notions that democracy is the permanent achievement of the West and therefore cannot be lost" (p.10).

The book is divided into two parts. In the first, the author points out what neoliberalism is ("an order of normative reason that, when it becomes ascendant, takes shape as a governing rationality extending a specific formulation of economic values, practices, and metrics to every dimension of human life", p.30) and introduces her *political* critique against the dissemination of the model of the market. In the second, she explains how neoliberal reason is disseminated through an administrative and political form (namely, governance), the law, and education.

In chapter 1, Brown reclaims Plato's homology between city and soul to highlight how neoliberal reason has increasingly shaped

both persons and states on the model of contemporary firms, aiming to maximize their capital value. She explains this process, that she names *economization*, as related to the financial or investment capital instead of the productive one (monetization). Hence, she claims that neoliberalism strongly differs from classical economic liberalism, insofar as neoliberal reason has refashioned the basic liberal concept of self-entrepreneurialism as “financialized human capital” (p.33) concerned only with strengthening its competitive position. As a consequence, the subjects act as market actors only apparently responsible for themselves in a competitive world. Instead, within the firms in which they work and the states in which they live, they are involved in a bigger competition in which they have no guarantee of survival.

Brown’s narration about the ascendancy of neoliberalism effectively begins in chapter 2, where she points to two different settings. The first is the “Global South”, where since the early 1970s economic, financial and national powers such as the IMF and the US have been promoting political occupation and the militarized discipline of populations. The second is the Euro-Atlantic world where “neoliberalism has taken deeper root in subjects and in language, in ordinary practices and in consciousness. [...] neither singular nor constant in its discursive formulations and material practices” (pp.47-48). The latter turns out to be the real location of Brown’s story in which the programs of most capitalist governments in the second half of the 20th century develop what she calls (following Foucault) a *governing political rationality*. Within this Foucauldian frame in which a competitive market rationality shaped both state and society, Brown explains the birth of the main (and only) character her story: *homo oeconomicus*. This figure, as Foucault tells us, is produced through several inversions of the principles of classical economic liberalism. For instance, economic growth has become the only aim of social policy and the state is supervised by the market; human capital has replaced labor; and sovereignty and law have become subordinate to competition. The effects of these inversions have grown worse with the rise of financial capital, the shocks of the latest economic crisis and the consequent turn to austerity politics.

In Brown’s opinion, Foucault’s account of neoliberalism fails to recognize the main consequence of the rise of *homo oeconomicus*: the disappearance of the *citizen* as a political

subject and of the *demos* as a collective entity claiming for sovereignty. Hence, she devotes chapter 3 to an explanation of how neoliberal rationality has been *ontologically* performative in transforming both the state and *homo politicus*. Brown recalls the ubiquity of a *homo politicus* throughout the history of political thought. In particular, Aristotle describes life in common within the *polis* and its governing rationality as a natural feature of human life, in opposition to the unnaturalness of money, profit and trade. Similarly, in the works of Rousseau, Hegel, Marx, Bentham, Mill, and Freud, the representation of the subject does not lose its political identity and features (“these include deliberation, belonging, aspirational sovereignty, concern with the common and with one’s relation to justice in the common”, p.94). *Homo oeconomicus* concretely appears only with the emancipation of the subject from any social commitment and with the loss of any interest in a collective identity. The social sciences now use economic models and methods, inasmuch as the human beings become capital to be invested in. Lastly, Brown highlights that *homo oeconomicus* is even more gendered than *homo politicus*. Privatization has increasingly deprived society of the infrastructures it needs to support families, children, and retirees, and women pay the penalty for this fact more than men, inasmuch as they “are the invisible infrastructure sustaining a world of putatively self-investing human capitals” (pp.106-107).

Brown’s main focus shifts in chapter 4 to the concept of *governance*, namely the governing rationality produced by neoliberal normative reason, but not exclusive to neoliberalism. Referring to Foucault’s account of governance, Brown points out that it posits “ontological qualities and relations of citizens, laws, rights, economy, society, and states” (p.116). Governance and its practices totally differ from sovereignty. For instance, it marks a shift from a hierarchic model of governing to a networked one. Private-sector management methods are transferred to public services. Therefore, “governance becomes a substitution for government, [...] public life is reduced to problem solving and program implementation” (p.127). Moreover, in this chapter the author explains some strategies and practices characterizing neoliberal governance: the devolution of authority; the responsabilization of individuals, provided with agency but also intimidated by the risk of failure; the best practices. An important example of the latter is the

transformation of Iraqi agricultural practices in 2003 by large seed corporations such as Monsanto. An American law (Bremer Order 81) played a fundamental role in promulgating this set of best practices in Iraq.

Chapter 5 is focused precisely on neoliberal juridical reason, which Brown considers as complementary to practices of governance in weakening democratic associations, social relationships and political rights. The core of this chapter is the analysis of the legal case *Citizens United v. Federal Election Commission*. This 2010 U.S. Supreme Court decision overturned regulations related to corporate spending in elections, “arguing these are unconstitutional limits on free-speech rights” (p.154). In this way, as Brown points out, corporations are entitled as citizens of the right of free speech, secured by the First Amendment. Hence, the neoliberal legal rationality produces both a procedure of economization, in impeding the government from conditioning the free market, and, ideologically, equalizes speech to capital. Public speech becomes a private good to invest: it freely *flows*, and it depends on the competitive rules of market. There is no fairness in equalizing voters with financial contributors and corporations on a market platform.

Education, in addition to governmental practices and law is another fundamental field permeated by neoliberal reason. Brown’s analysis, in chapter 6, mainly concerns public higher education and the cultivation of the liberal arts curriculum. She points out that it does not count anymore to teach the democratic values related to citizenships. The students, as human capital, become a matter of investment and self-investment, who require an education in *technical* skills. As a consequence, the opportunities for the many to access a high-level quality of life are considerably reduced. In addition, public universities are increasingly ameliorating their recruitment strategies in order to compete with the private ones, while compressing time to degree, discouraging any research without inherently marketable purposes, and so on. Brown significantly claims that “democracy can defund, degrade, or abandon the education it requires, undermining its resources for sustaining or renewing itself” (p.200).

In the *Epilogue*, the author focuses on the bare concept of democracy, which features only the idea of popular sovereignty. Brown points out that “democracy is an empty form that can be filled with a variety of bad content and instrumentalized”

(p.209): this bare concept does not provide any guarantee of a “good life” (in Aristotelian terms) for women, racial and religious minorities, migrants, the LGBTQ community, or poor workers. While capitalist dominant powers aiming to secure their privileges already ruled European liberal democracy, the rise of neoliberalism has made the situation worse. Indeed, democracy has been gradually *identified* with a capitalist social structure: what is at stake in this recent transformation is the loss of the bare “idea of the people ruling themselves together in a polity” (p.209).

Ultimately, Brown’s book provides a detailed and useful analysis of the fields and the ways in which neoliberal reason and practices of governance have become increasingly pervasive. Nevertheless, even though it mourns the loss of *homo politicus*, it does not refer to any possible way to either think politics as a *constituent* force or to develop new kinds of social relationships no longer depending on the model of human capital and on its performances. Brown might have taken into consideration, for instance, the new leftist parties born after the 2008 economic crisis with the fundamental aim to counter austerity (such as *Syriza* in Greece, or *Podemos* in Spain), and the social movements, besides *Occupy Wall Street*, created by those subjects who have been discriminated against by the representative dynamics of politics, while struggling the most against the capitalist social structure on the same side with workers. Consider the feminist and the LGBTQ movements, *Black Lives Matter*, and all the organizations demonstrating against climate change and related issues. The European migrant crisis seems not being at stake either. Instead, Brown’s account of democracy (particularly her account of *homo politicus*) seems still dependent on the traditional modern notion of sovereign power and on the political representation scheme.

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