

Book Review

Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism's Stealth Revolution. By Wendy Brown. New York: Zone Books, 2015. 292 pages. ISBN: 978-1-935408-54-3.

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Wendy Brown's *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism's Stealth Revolution* is an insightful study that seeks to interrogate the political ideology known as neoliberalism as a particular form of reason that transforms all domains of life, including democracy's constituent elements in contemporary times. I posit that this book is valuable and illuminating for scholars and practitioners invested in critical and social justice-oriented social work; it offers a theoretically rich entry point into examining the features of neoliberalism and its pervasiveness. This book provides a critical analysis of the effects of neoliberal mentality and how its various manifestations infiltrate and shape how we practice social work, as well as what counts as social work knowledge. Practitioners are increasingly trained to assess and locate risk and moral deficit, and to problematize the populations that they work with in the name of helping (Rossiter, 2001). As neoliberal rationality has infiltrated social work and guided its values such as the heightened importance given to professionalization, accountability, and self-responsibilization, it becomes ever more crucial to study how the profession has been eroded and altered to pursue an economic priority. Brown's extended analysis goes beyond addressing the economic disparities between the haves and have nots, articulating how the constitution of the neoliberal subject as a purely economic subject came to be. Brown's critique of neoliberalism is valuable for critical social workers and scholars to become familiar with if we wish to destabilize and unsettle the "soft power" (p.35) that neoliberal knowledge production governs through, allowing us to interrogate its extensions within social work practice, research, and advocacy.

Brown constructs her arguments of neoliberalism as political rationality by drawing theoretical connections to Michel Foucault's concept of governmentality. In chapter one, Brown engages in a careful reading of Foucault's idea of economic rationality while asserting that it is not her aim to examine the destructive forces of the free market or to focus on elites and the rich. Rather, Brown is interested in looking at neoliberalism's political reasoning. Brown traces how neoliberalism's rapid growth in the contemporary political landscape has produced the state in a distinctively economic sense – the economy as a model, object, and project for the state. Drawing on Foucault's ideas on neoliberalism from his 1978-1979 lectures at the Collège de France, neoliberalism is situated as "a distinctive mode of reason, of the production of subjects, a 'conduct of conduct', and a scheme of valuation" (p.21). Brown speaks to concerns that neoliberalism, when understood as a particular mode of reasoning, has been extended into all

spheres of living as we know it – the workplace, educational institutions, the legal system, and culture. These areas of neoliberal infiltration emphasize the seemingly boundless and flexible nature in which neoliberal rationality can govern its subjects as this mode of reasoning continues to intensify.

Brown offers a structured reading of Foucault's lectures on neoliberalism in chapters two and three, and lays out the limitations of his conceptualization of neoliberalism. Foucault did not foresee the metamorphosis of neoliberalism at the time he was writing, as well as his dismissal of *homo politicus* (the demotic human) as an important analytical anchor within examining neoliberal reason. Brown contends that the *homo politicus*, a key feature within democracy understood as “the people ruling”, has been replaced by *homo oeconomicus*, depoliticized and reduced only to caring about their capital ranking instead of the pursuit of the common good by collective rule. Embedded within the *homo oeconomicus* is the concept of “responsibilization” where each neoliberal subject is responsible for the enhancement of their own human capital while surviving in a precarious neoliberal state – a state without protection or security for subjects themselves, and with the incessant message that one needs to be responsible for their own successes and failures. Here, Brown offers us the tools to examine how the neoliberalization of social work has effectively produced social workers as *homo oeconomicus*, both in their subjectivities and in their practice. Under the neoliberal turn, social work practice is focusing on enhancing human capital of both practitioners and the populations we work with, obscuring widening social and economic inequities and weakening critical social work's commitment to critique and transformation of unjust power relations on a structural level. Social work practice and activism has the potential to challenge the pressures of adapting to a neoliberal mentality through a conscientious dialogue with Brown's exploration of how subjectivities are being remade as exclusive market actors through neoliberal rationality.

The second half of the book takes readers through the different facets in which neoliberalism as a mode of reasoning has been disseminated in various areas of the public arena. Brown outlines in chapter four where neoliberal rationality was deployed in the case of Iraq, not allowing local farmers to re-use their own seeds, instead incentivizing them to use genetically modified seeds produced by the U.S. Through this case study, Brown traces how the U.S.-led project saw both government and corporate forces collaborating to remodel Iraq's agricultural system. Chapter five illuminates how neoliberal rationality has been institutionalized through legal decision-making, such as in a 2010 *Citizens United* decision to permit corporate campaign contributions for political elections to count as the free speech of persons. Brown argues that this effectively eliminates democracy's political imaginary through legal channels that work to reframe free speech itself, constituting it as another form of economic activity. The juridical system once seen as a potentially effective legal tool able to challenge corporate giants has been significantly neutralized, leading to the further erosion of democratic agency and its political possibilities – where the state is seen as the enemy against free markets and economic progress.

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A revealing example of how social work situates itself within a neoliberal rationality is the creation of competency standards as a technology that sustains neoliberal governance. Social work has seen the creation of apolitical metrics as a means to capture productivity; concepts such as benchmarks, guidelines, and best practices are understood as the extension of neoliberalism's soft power in Brown's analysis, effectively ensuring governance through the production of a competence logic that not only remakes institutional practices and policy designs, but also remakes the social work profession itself – as an enterprise promising a positive “return on investment” (p.178). These technologies are indicative of the neoliberalization of social work, where practitioners are increasingly subjugated to the regulation of politically neutral and value-free standards that are exportable and devoid of historical context. Under neoliberalism, social work becomes consolidated into what Brown suggests is “a market episteme” (p.141) that rules out social justice as a worthwhile project.

Perhaps the most intimate and emotionally appealing portion of this book is Brown's plea that neoliberal rationality is detrimental to the development of citizens' capacities, from which they can understand, interpret, and come to the know the world in which they live. As her focus shifts to higher education in chapter six, Brown laments the current state of liberal arts – seen as antithesis to the development of human capital and return on investment – as being hollowed out from the inside and marketed to students as not worthy of their time and dedication. Brown argues that this transformation in education aligns with neoliberal's governing goals, which is to eliminate the engaged and politically-active citizen through the increasing trend of corporatizing education and its emphasis on job-training and the accumulation of certificates. Brown categorizes this as “mere life” (p.189), opposite of the democratic “good life” defined by freedom, individual thinking, and morality which depicts humanity.

Brown makes meaningful contributions to critical social work and the state of social work as a whole under neoliberal managerialism. Brown's goal to communicate to her readers that neoliberalism goes beyond a binary and oppositional interpretation has been successful. Key contributions from her book include the in-depth re-reading of Foucault's concept of governmentality, and her nuanced analysis of neoliberalism's ability to be productive through its constitution of neoliberal subjects, reminding us that no domain, including social work, is free from the saturation of neoliberalism's governing rationality. What makes neoliberalism so potent and pervasive lies precisely within its flexibility and extension of political rationality, producing multiple discourses that are sometimes competing, but nonetheless establish the conditions of possibility for subjects to live within the neoliberal state. Brown describes the features of neoliberalism according to “its unevenness, its lack of self-identity, its spatial and temporal variability, and above all, its availability to reconfiguration” (p. 21), pointing to the complexity of its permeability. This highlights why even within progressive social work education, well-intended teachings on resisting neoliberalism can lack in both analytical rigor and political imagination to comprehend neoliberal reasoning. Brown's book offers critical social work a rich formulation of the internal logics of neoliberalism, shedding light on its seductive rationality and the subjectivities it produces which sustains its potency. Social work can learn the ways that this

profession has been colluding with neoliberal market mentality, and the unjust power relations that continue to reproduce if this neoliberal mentality is left unsettled (Macias, 2013).

Paradoxically, one of Brown's theoretical limitations is revealed when she appeals to an essentialized myth of what it means to be democratic in order to strengthen her critique of neoliberalism. Behind this naturalization of democracy, we also see the metanarrative of what is considered humanist liberalism anchoring her analysis. There is a common thread in the book concerning the construction of what is human, a self-evident positioning of humanism as something stable, consistent, ahistorical, and in need of saving. This kind of naturalization is worthy of critical interrogation and deconstruction since social work has played a role in histories where in the spirit of humanism it sustained and reproduced colonial domination and racial exploitation (Wynter, 2003).

Throughout the book, Brown makes comparisons between the *homo oeconomicus* and what she refers to as “classically humanist values” (p. 24). Classical human values from Brown's perspective are humans that are intelligent, thoughtful, and capable of reproducing culture – morally autonomous creatures of interest, creativity, and unbounded reflection. Similarly, democracy is ascribed with values such as equality, freedom, and individual sovereignty, that seem to tie in with what Brown identifies as the human. At the other end, the neoliberal subject is seen as a threat not only to the democratic process, but to humanism itself, as she remarks that “neoliberalism is the rationality through which capitalism finally swallows humanity” (p.44), and that the *homo oeconomicus* “today may no longer have interest at its heart, indeed, may no longer have a heart at all” (p.84). These are powerful and poignant statements to make; however, Brown situates this argument on essentializing the notion of a shared “humanism”, and that it is worthy of saving due to its innocence, which neoliberal reasoning has only temporarily tainted. What Brown fails to take into consideration is the co-constructed nature of the two, and the complicated ways in which capitalist neoliberal subjectivities instill a sense of joy and pleasure within the “heart”, or what Foucault refers to as the soul, since the heart/soul is conceived as an effect of these governing techniques (Rose, 1999).

Brown's conceptualization of this untroubled humanism unwittingly falls within its own internal logic and regime of truth, where it reveals a Western fixation to preserve the modern human and with it, the liberal project. Historically and continuously it has been shown that the social work profession has been implicated in colonial violence rationalized as humanist, and liberal helping efforts and care work have been deployed as technologies to sustain a liberal project which believes its innocence can be maintained (Macias, 2013). As long as social work remains invested in the realm of humanist liberal aspirations, we cannot take up a radical episteme to critically interrogate the ongoing injustices that social work is situated in. Despite the troubled desire to preserve the liberal project by attempts to disentangle it from its neoliberal attachments, Brown offers social work a theoretically rich lens to deconstruct neoliberal reasoning, working to destabilize and make visible the technologies of neoliberal governance in constituting subjectivity as well as shaping practices that inform our work.

References

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