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Wendy Brown, *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism's Stealth Revolution*, Zone Books, 2015, 292 pp., \$29.95 (hbk), ISBN 9781935408536.

This book provides a comprehensive analysis of the meaning of neoliberal rationality as a *distinct* mode of governance. Its *distinctiveness* within the long intellectual lineage of a capitalist knowledge culture is revealed through an extensive survey of European thought dating back to the Enlightenment—often juxtaposed with the ancient philosophy of Plato and Aristotle. This is an effective strategy which the author uses to critically and creatively engage the reader with a body of literature that insists on neoliberalism's continuity with capitalist modernity since eighteenth century liberal theory.¹ Wendy Brown's work challenges this insistence. In my opinion, the greatest value of *Undoing the Demos* can be found in its call to think and act *differently* in relation to the neoliberalism of today. Rather than applying the explanatory frameworks and political strategies available since the advent of European capitalism, Brown reminds us that there is a need to acknowledge the theoretical and historical uniqueness of the knowledge culture created by today's neoliberalism.

Thus, the book departs from conventional Marxist and non-Marxist theories whose frame of reference is Enlightenment-based modernity—which Ulrich Beck has defined as the “first modernity.”² Brown declares that under neoliberalism this “form” of modernity is over. Beck has already argued for the end of the first modernity through a critique of the *container theory of society*—expressed in a politically defined and controlled space by the state. Based on this critique, Beck presents an argument for what he calls the “second modernity,” which replaces the first. For him, the second modernity is the consequence of neoliberal, “economic globalization” which breaks up the national categorization of politics and society. *Globality* denotes the second modernity. This signals a long-term transformation in the social and political categories that have identified “the Western model”—which historically integrated the market economy, the welfare state, and democracy into a project of modernity.³ According to Beck, given that the first modernity appears destined to break down, a foundation has developed for the ideology of rule by neoliberalism, reducing the multidimensionality of human existence to a single economic dimension conceived in a linear fashion and centered on freedom of the individual. This process eliminates the basic

¹ See, for instance, C.J. Alexander, “‘Globalization’ as Collective Representation: The New Dream of a Cosmopolitan Civil Sphere,” in *Frontiers of Globalization Research*, I. Rossi, ed. (New York: Springer, 2007).

² U. Beck, *What Is Globalization?* (Oxford: Polity Press, 2000).

³ *Ibid.*, 8.

distinction in the first modernity between politics and economics. With the liquidation of politics, the state, society, and culture are re-made in the image of a firm and operated like a firm.⁴

For Beck, it is only by grasping the *processes of the new globality* that “the perspective and the space for political action [can] be opened up... Because only then can the depoliticizing spell of globalism be broken.”⁵ In contrast, Brown makes no attempt to interpret ongoing changes so as to provide an analysis of *whether or not* a new form of “modernity” could be emerging, and *how* we might think and act differently in relation to such a possibility. Beck clarifies the historical specificity of the new modernity, whereby the content, meaning, and scope of the concepts and categories of the first modernity are inapplicable. Hence the need to reinvent politics in relation to the peculiarity of current processes, which give rise to emergent new opportunities and social spaces for action, living, and thinking about a rule-changing politics. Beck calls this “*a politics of politics*.”⁶ In the absence of such a discussion in Brown’s book, we are left only with the prospect of “despair” (220-222). There seems little possibility for nuanced ways of rethinking politics and/or emergent forms of political-civic engagement with global diversities. Such a rethinking may be the prerequisite for re-imagining politics and finding hope for change in the growing contradictions and ambiguities rooted in current processes of *globality* as embodied in their relationship with the first modernity.

Undoing the Demos is focused almost entirely on the expansion and deepening of “economization” as the constitutive feature of neoliberal rationality. For Brown, it penetrates all spheres and practices of social and natural life, re-making humans, citizens, and subjects into *homo oeconomicus*, and refashioning all non-economic realms into *economic* entities. This is a process that dissolves the social, and eliminates *homo politicus* as an active, deliberating agent of association-making and transformation. Further, such a process undermines political imaginaries and aspirations for self-rule and rule with others—including democracy. In short, social existence is transformed into nothing but the entrepreneurial and self-investing bid of capital.

However, numerous questions remain unanswered in Brown’s assessment: How has this situation come about? What has sustained the hegemonic ascendancy of neoliberalism in determining our existence? What is the relevance of the different meanings attributed to neoliberalism in its seemingly unchallengeable domination of our thinking, imagining, and acting? Moreover, what are the contradictions, ambiguities, and inconsistencies arising from “seeing the world like a firm”? And what are the paradoxes and conflicts within what Rosenberg calls the “empire of civil society,”⁷ referring to the spaces and flows that characterize neoliberalism as an ontological project and as a measure of actual power?

David Harvey describes neoliberalism as a “political project” closely associated with restoration of the class power of economic elites and the revitalization of global capital accumulation.⁸ For Callinicos, it is “an economic policy regime whose objective is to secure monetary and fiscal stability, and is legitimized by an ideology which holds that markets are best treated as self-regulating” entities.⁹ Callinicos’s description includes the

⁴ Ibid., 8-9.

⁵ Ibid., 11.

⁶ Ibid., 65.

⁷ J. Rosenberg, *The Empire of Civil Society* (London & New York: Verso, 1994).

⁸ D. Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 19.

⁹ A. Callinicos, “Commentary: Contradictions of Austerity,” *Cambridge Journal of Economics*, 36.1 (2012), 67.

“financialization” process that represents a significant change in the structure and dynamics of capitalism. McMichael¹⁰ and Gill¹¹ regard neoliberalism as an intellectual, normative project which justifies the ideational dominance of a calculative episteme and a drive to bring an economic calculus to cultural and social relationships. It is this normative reorientation that intensifies market-driven, growth-oriented development projects across the globe. The dominant theme in all these descriptions is that economic-crisis management through austerity measures has been a signifier of neoliberal restructuring since the 1970s. Brown does not reject the analytical relevance of these complexities for explaining the various processes and mechanisms that bolster neoliberalism’s encompassing of the world. Nevertheless, she opts for an interpretation which ignores the fact that context-specificity always matters in any meaningful analysis of change which includes a shift in our normative orientation.¹² This, I believe, results from her adoption of a Foucauldian approach to neoliberalism as an ontological compass of governmentality that dissolves the social and political, and in particular questions of political agency and engagement. Brown *does* acknowledge a number of problems associated with Foucault’s contention that “neoliberalism was born not from crises of capitalist accumulation...but of liberal governmentality” (59), as well as his “relative indifference to democracy and to capital” (77). Nonetheless, she continues along a Foucauldian path that sees neoliberalism as a mode of governance that socially and politically disintegrates the social and political, and levels out difference as a global condition of existence. This approach continues to blur exactly where this global neoliberal ontology stands in relation to the globality of capitalism and its context-specific contradictions.

Brown’s description of “economization” is not a historical comparative analysis of neoliberal capitalism understood in terms of commodification and accumulation. Instead, her concern is with “neoliberal rationality,” which by her description appears as a mode of *total* governance that envelops existence. Yet, we are not presented with any details as to *how* a normative conformity with economization actually occurs. Her book offers no analysis of geo-historical differences, or cultural specificities in relation to broader trends, discourses, processes and crises related to neoliberal capitalism.

As argued in the work of Atasoy,¹³ Ferguson,¹⁴ Peck and Theodore,¹⁵ and Pieterse,¹⁶ among others, even practices, discourses, and policies which appear to be the “same” are frequently modified and refashioned in their interactions with locally and culturally diverse normative contexts. It is by focusing on politicized spatial and temporal processes that we can trace the twists and turns of an increasingly world-wide diffusion of neoliberalism generating localized material and discursive outcomes. These processes underscore the interactions among capital, citizens, and political power, as well as the responses to new

¹⁰ P. McMichael, *Development and Social Change: A Global Perspective* (Los Angeles: Pine Forge Press, 2012).

¹¹ S. Gill, ed., *Global Crises and the Crisis of Global Leadership* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

¹² See Y. Atasoy, *Global Economic Crisis and the Politics of Diversity* (London & New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014).

¹³ See Y. Atasoy, *Islam’s Marriage with Neoliberalism* (London & New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009) and *Commodification of Global Agrifood Systems and Agro-Ecology: Convergence, Divergence and Beyond in Turkey* (London & New York: Routledge, 2017).

¹⁴ See J. Ferguson, “The Uses of Neoliberalism,” *Antipode*, 41 (Supplement S1), 2010: 166-184.

¹⁵ J. Peck and N. Theodore, “Mobilizing Policy: Models, Methods, and Mutations,” *Geoforum*, 41.2 (2010): 169-174.

¹⁶ See N.J. Pieterse, ed., *Global Futures: Shaping Globalization* (London and New York: Zed Books, 2000).

dynamics of inequality involved in the global extension and deepening of neoliberalism. An analysis of these interactions also reveals *how* neoliberal rationality deepens and expands.

Brown interprets “economization” in terms of a fundamental break from the self-interest driven logic and utilitarian ethics of capital accumulation, also expressed historically, in a Weberian-style instrumental rationality that shapes capitalist behavior. For her, neoliberal rationality as economization represents a fundamentally different mode of governance that appears *as if* it has an agency of its own and *as if* it is an autonomous force. As a distinct mode of governance *it* produces “subjects,” generates “conduct of conduct,” remakes cultures, practices, and normative orientations, and converts all other dimensions of the noneconomic into the economic spheres. *It* breaks away from a capitalist modernity that has unfolded from the time of the European Enlightenment, with roots in earlier intellectual, philosophical currents. *It* constructs rationality for *total* governance in the remaking of citizens and subjects as human capital which act and think on the model of the firm, and adhere to the practices and principles of entrepreneurialism and self-investment.

The “endless” ability of neoliberal rationality to convert all domains of existence into the economic realm is an exhaustingly repeated theme in the book. This is precisely because there is no historical-comparative analysis of the actually existing relations and processes that shape this epistemic drive towards, and normative activation of, economization. Neoliberal rationality, it appears, pervades every sphere of life as a single dominant mode of thinking and acting. However, such an argument carries with it a burden of proof. Is it capable of shedding light on the meaning as well as the consequences of neoliberal economization across global diversities? Brown provides a few select examples from North America to support her argument rather than conduct a comparative analysis. Without research that is sensitive to geo-historical difference and place-specific complexity, we remain in the dark on the question of *how* neoliberal rationality and the neoliberal capitalist economy are actually connected within the constitution of a knowledge culture—one that is capable of integrating behavior and policy in spatially and temporally distinct ways. It is important that we pursue research on neoliberalism’s many entanglements with global diversity. This can be a starting point for building a new general theory that would be capable of grasping global complexities and escaping the eurocentrism of conventional descriptive categories associated with “Western modernity.” If this modernity is truly over, there is now an opportunity to formulate an emergent theory that is sensitive to historical diversity, rather than continue to emphasize old European categories of liberal democracy, as in the work of Brown. Brown maintains that liberal democratic principles and expectations can form a “platform of critique” which may be mobilized to counter the civilizational despair arising from the exhaustion of modernity (202-208, 221). This means that she does not address the gap between the historical distinctiveness of current neoliberal processes and the continuity with Euro-American centrism in theory, including liberal democracy. Frantz Fanon has called for a “model, schemas and examples” that would enable us to move away from a mode of knowledge that describes the particularities of European achievement in universal terms.¹⁷

...the European game is finally over, we must look for something else...
When I look for a man in European lifestyles and technology I see a constant denial of man, an avalanche of murders. Man’s condition, his projects and collaboration with others on tasks that strengthen man’s totality, are new

¹⁷ F. Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (New York: Grove Press, 2004 [1963]), 236.

issues which require genuine inspiration...let us tense our muscles and our brains in a new direction. Let us endeavor to invent a man in full.¹⁸

As explained in my book *Commodification of Global Agrifood Systems and Agro-Ecology*, Brown's assumption of neoliberal rationality remains an empirical question, given the globally valid conditions of geo-historical diversity and context specificity. It is important to ask if "economization" as a totalizing, umbrella concept is the most useful one for an analysis of the structural transformation underway in global political economy. Moreover, economization demands further investigation because its normative power does not pre-exist the place-specific and historically-bound power dynamics, political struggles, and conflicts that reshape the political and cultural conditions of accumulation and commodification.¹⁹ We need to explore *how* shared and divergent perceptions frame tensions and ambiguities in economic, political, and cultural relationships, and *how* they may complicate economization as the dominant mode of neoliberal reasoning. As a neoliberal value system, economization is sometimes embraced and sometimes pushed aside, leading various possibilities to emerge. Both old and new ways of thinking co-exist in framing the knowledge culture of neoliberalism, *without certainties* in outcome.

Brown's book does not engage with "economization" *through* the situated social relations of place, beyond a discursive exposition of a generalized, single-pointed normative commitment to economic growth and the responsabilization of humans who contribute to it. Brown formulates neoliberalism as a conceptual aggregate, resulting in a unified understanding of governance that elevates economization into an organizing principle of existence. Economization's interactions with locally and culturally diverse normative contexts and/or emerging mutations disappear from the analysis.

Brown points to the emergence of neoliberal governance from the "exhaustion and despair in Western civilization" (221). Given the "loss of conviction about [the] human capacity to craft and steer its existence" (221), neoliberalism completely encases everything and anything with no way out. Thus, economization "entails an existential disappearance of freedom from the world, precisely the kind of individual and collaborative freedom associated with *homo politicus* for self-rule and rule with others" (110). In my view, this argument is reminiscent of Fukuyama's "End of History" thesis. Humans transformed into entrepreneurial, self-investing capital bids seem able to exercise their freedom *only* at the level of their responsabilization for economic growth.

Max Weber has already argued for the disappearance of existential freedoms under capitalism (and within European modernity). According to Weber, freedom can be in inner accord with rationality only as expressed through an "ethics of responsibility" contained within the "iron cage" of instrumental rationality. For Weber, this is an inner-worldly freedom based on the rationalization of the world that will continue to govern the lives of all individuals.²⁰ "Perhaps it will so determine them until the last ton of fossilized coal is burnt... But fate decreed that the cloak should become an iron cage."²¹ Contrary to Brown's

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ See: Y. Atasoy, *Islam's Marriage with Neoliberalism* and Y. Atasoy, "Repossession, Re-informalization and Dispossession: The 'Muddy Terrain' of Land Commodification in Turkey," *Journal of Agrarian Change* (2016), <doi: 10.1111/joac.12182>.

²⁰ K. Lowith, *Max Weber and Karl Marx* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1960), 52-60.

²¹ M. Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1984 [1930]), 181.

claim for the *distinctiveness* of neoliberal governance, then, it is unclear in what ways neoliberalism presents a distinct rationality from the one associated with capitalism itself.

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