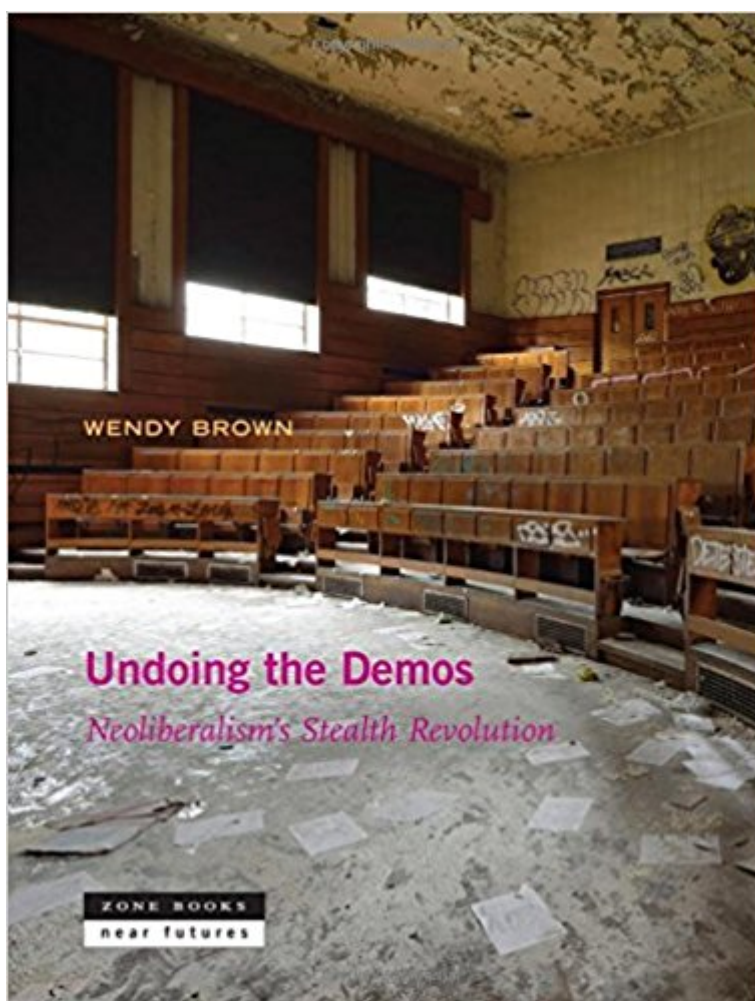


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# Undoing The Demos: Neoliberalism's Stealth Revolution (Zone / Near Futures)



## Synopsis

Neoliberal rationality -- ubiquitous today in statecraft and the workplace, in jurisprudence, education, and culture -- remakes everything and everyone in the image of homo oeconomicus. What happens when this rationality transposes the constituent elements of democracy into an economic register? In *Undoing the Demos*, Wendy Brown explains how democracy itself is imperiled. The demos disintegrates into bits of human capital; concerns with justice bow to the mandates of growth rates, credit ratings, and investment climates; liberty submits to the imperative of human capital appreciation; equality dissolves into market competition; and popular sovereignty grows incoherent. Liberal democratic practices may not survive these transformations. Radical democratic dreams may not either. In an original and compelling argument, Brown explains how and why neoliberal reason undoes the political form and political imaginary it falsely promises to secure and reinvigorate. Through meticulous analyses of neoliberalized law, political practices, governance, and education, she charts the new common sense. *Undoing the Demos* makes clear that for democracy to have a future, it must become an object of struggle and rethinking.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Wendy Brown's new book, *Undoing the Demos*, is a clarion call to democratic action. In close conversation with Michel Foucault's 1979 lectures on *The Birth of Biopolitics*, Brown brilliantly explores how the rationality of neoliberalism is hollowing out the modern subject and, with it, our

contemporary liberal democracies. Delving deep into the logic of neoliberalism and widely across the spectrum of neoliberal practices, from benchmarking to higher education policy, Brown offers a compelling new dimension to the critical work on neoliberalism. It is necessary reading today -- powerful and haunting. (Bernard E. Harcourt, Isidor and Seville Sulzbacher Professor of Law, Columbia University and Directeur d'Études, École des hautes Études en sciences sociales) With this passionately incisive critique of neoliberal (ir)rationality, Wendy Brown delineates the political stakes of the present. Tracing its antipolitical and antidemocratic impulses, she challenges us to defend and extend the possibilities of a popular politics that makes the promises of democracy come true. (John Clarke, Professor Emeritus of Social Policy, The Open University) This is a book for the age of resistance, for the occupiers of the squares, for the generation of Occupy Wall Street. The premier radical political philosopher of our time offers a devastating critique of the way neoliberalism has hollowed out democracy. But the victory of homo oeconomicus over homo politicus is not irreversible. Wendy Brown has little time for 'left melancholy.' Hers is a call to arms for the defense of the enlightenment principles of freedom, equality, and solidarity and for reimagining and deepening democracy. After reading Brown, only bad faith can justify the toleration of neoliberalism. (Costas Douzinas, Director of the Birkbeck institute for the Humanities and author of *Philosophy and Resistance in the Crisis*) Wendy Brown vividly lays bare neoliberalism's perverse rationality, the 'economization of everything,' documenting its corrosive consequences for public institutions, for solidaristic values, and for democracy itself. Essential but unsettling reading, *Undoing the Demos* is analytically acute and deeply disturbing. (Jamie Peck, author of *Constructions of Neoliberal Reason*) Brown deepens the conceptual analysis and criticism of neoliberal ideology, now on the point of becoming the dominant way people think about themselves, their lives and their social world. In illuminating detail, she also discusses the real and horrifying social changes taking place partly as a result of the way in which this ideology is being implemented. A major contribution, presenting its arguments with power and clarity, this book helps us understand the world we have increasingly been forced to live in, and to begin the process of thinking about what might be done to revitalize our political imagination and practices. (Raymond Geuss, Professor Emeritus of Philosophy, University of Cambridge) A trenchant critique of the piecemeal neoliberal destruction of democratic politics by one of the most powerful political theorists of our time. *Undoing the Demos* is a much-needed, passionate defense of political autonomy. (Rainer Forst, Frankfurt University, author of *Justification and Critique*) Political theorist Wendy Brown opens her brilliant and incisive new book, *Undoing the Demos*, with a clarion call: Western democracy is imperiled. According to Brown, democracy has grown gaunt as a consequence of an

ascendant political rationality that, like an ideological autoimmune disorder, has assaulted its very fiber and future. Democracy is the crux of the issue and by focusing on how it's been diminished Brown has written a book that deserves to be widely read. (Astra Taylor Bookforum)

A prize-winning examination of why nation-states wall themselves off despite widespread proclamations of global connectedness.

The basic idea of this book isn't necessarily new, but it's worth repeating: that neoliberalism isn't just bringing economics into a more prominent role in public policy, it's destroying the very institutions of democracy and changing how we talk about politics. What might be novel about it is that the author's (WB's) argument is targeted to a very particular audience: Americans who are steeped in critical theory. Even though I'm outside the target audience and had encountered the basic idea elsewhere on a number of occasions (and agree with it), my copy now has a few stars in the margins, too. What I especially liked was WB's emphasis in several places on language: how the neoliberal vocabulary of governance -- based ostensibly on compromise and optimization -- is replacing that of politics, which is based on conflict; and that by doing so, neoliberalism is robbing us of ways to think about politics. In this regard, WB makes the striking observation that through "the vanquishing of homo politicus" and its replacement with "homo oeconomicus," neoliberalism eliminates the "open question of how to craft the self or what paths to travel in life" (@41). WB's concepts of the political draw heavily from Aristotle's *Politics* and Machiavelli's *Discourses*, two of my own favorite source-texts. There's also a very heartfelt and jargon-free chapter near the end of the book (Chap. VI) about the impact of neoliberal policies on public education, which I found all the more interesting since I myself recently started teaching undergraduates. That said, if you're an outsider like me you may find some aspects of the argument frustrating. WB's concept of neoliberalism is framed in response to Michel Foucault's 1978-79 Collège de France lectures on "neoliberal reason." Foucault's view, with WB's updates, is presented as authoritative about what neoliberalism is: aside from a couple of quotes from Margaret Thatcher and Milton Friedman, the actual writings of neoliberal thinkers themselves are pretty much ignored. I'd have appreciated a more primary source-based approach. Some arguments might have been stronger with better-chosen examples. For example, WB illustrates neoliberalism's spread through benchmarking and "best practices." The example she chooses to illustrate the latter, though is "Bremer Order 81" issued during the occupation of Iraq, pertaining to intellectual property and especially to plant varieties. Most pertinently, the order forbids Iraqi farmers from re-using seed from

genetically modified crops, forcing them to buy new seeds every year. Problem is, the document itself doesn't explicitly rely on the rhetoric of "best practices" at all, and seems to be a very traditional government-sponsored boondoggle for corporate America, in this case Monsanto. WB acknowledges these points, but that's not enough to relieve the feeling of stretch in her argument, which invokes another scholar's characterisation of "best practices" in lieu of Bremer & al.'s own use of that term. Actually, the idea of disrupting traditional farming practices by preventing seed-reuse is a pervasive neoliberal theme in trade diplomacy, based not only on the 1991 treaty known by the French acronym UPOV and the TRIPS part of the WTO treaty but also much bilateral diplomacy -- and not just the US's. But this point about global neoliberalism is never mentioned. Similarly the book discusses the relationship between neoliberalism and law by focusing on the US Supreme Court decision in *Citizens United*, with a brief mention of the Court's enthusiasm for favoring private arbitration over court-based trials. Once again, the example centers on the US, and discusses law peculiar to it. Of course, *Citizens United* is relevant because it's directly related to American political discourse. Arbitration, though, undermines democracy on a more global scale, and could have borne more attention. It eliminates the role of courts (whose judges may be elected directly, or at least nominated and vetted by elected officials), and even that of legislatures. Another global neoliberal legal phenomenon is the spread of "Law and Economics," a doctrine that originated with corporate funding at the University of Chicago Law School (led at the time by Milton Friedman's brother-in-law). Today even politically liberal law profs in the US rely on it, and it's also spread to places like France and Japan. But it's absent from this book. Outside the legal context as well, the book is a little shaky on economics. It often lumps together neoclassical economics and neoliberalism, but they're very different. Neoclassical economics originated in the late 19th Century, long before neoliberalism was born, and was further developed by socialists like Philip Wicksteed and fans of the welfare state like Paul Samuelson. WB also repeatedly emphasizes neoliberalism's love for economic growth, but I suggest this is off-point in a couple of ways. First, economic growth has been a goal of state policy since the Keynesian 1950s, and its instrumentalizing rhetoric (i.e., the best argument for any policy is that it contributes in some way to growth) not only has a long pedigree but affects even some economists one might hesitate to call neoliberal, such as Thomas Piketty. Second and more important, the real economy of goods and services, which is what's purportedly measured by GDP, has been much smaller than the financial economy since the 1990s, if not earlier. The combined annual value of trades on the NYSE and NASDAQ alone has exceeded US GDP since the late 1990s, and the aggregate value of global equity trading has exceeded global nominal GDP for much of the past decade too, including the past three years; and that's not even

considering the value of currency, derivatives and other securities markets. The gains on such markets aren't included in the computation of GDP, and don't have any necessary connection to economic growth (a point that seems to have been misunderstood, e.g. @70). WB correctly points out that GDP figures have an impact on interest rates on sovereign debt, but that relationship is more psychological than algebraic. There's a lot more money to be made on the financial markets than in the real economy, and the wealth accumulated in that way is very narrowly distributed. Modern neoliberals realized that a long time ago -- just as they understand that the \*rhetoric\* of economic growth is useful to conceal their purpose, because people still think of the time before the 1980s when growth in developed countries really did coincide with improved incomes for many classes of society. A clearer parsing of this point would have strengthened WB's argument. The style of the book is engaged, even passionate, very serious and a little tough to read. Thanks probably to its Foucauldian foundations, there's a certain viscosity to the prose: one finds not 'ideas' or 'concepts' but "imaginaries," not 'issues or 'problems' but "problematics," and neither 'forms' nor 'versions' of things but "iterations" of them. (There's also a Foucauldian spin on "homo legalis" and "homo juridicus" that neither my law dictionary nor my well-worn Lewis & Short could totally de-mystify for me.) Unfortunately, the book's apparatus is poor. There are close to 60 pages of endnotes, without any separate list of references. The notes don't have any page guides, so when you open up to that part of the book you don't have any clue to where you are. Moreover, the notes lack any cross-references to the first citation of a work, making it a tough slog to locate the full bibliographic details of a cite. The index is very idiosyncratic: some entries are semi-meticulously (and circularly) cross-referenced, e.g. "Chile, 20, 151. See also Allende, Salvadore; Pinochet, Augusto," "Pinochet, Augusto, 20, 151. See also Chile," and simply "Allende, Salvadore, 20, 151" -- but major topics such as Aristotle and economic growth are entirely absent. I expected better quality from Zone and from its distributor, MIT Press. If you're allergic to critical theory, you might try the volume edited by Philip Mirowski and Dieter Plehwe, "The Road from Mont PÃ¢lerin" (Harvard UP 2009), and especially Mirowski's concluding essay, "Postface: Defining Neoliberalism," as well as the rather feisty book by Alain Deneault, *Gouvernance : Le management totalitaire* (Lux (MontrÃ©al) 2013), and the more sober but concise and terrific *La Gouvernance* by Philippe Moreau Defarges (PUF Que sais-je 4th ed. 2011). There are also narrower case studies that illustrate WB's main point, such as the volume "Contradictions of Neoliberal Planning" edited by T. Tasan-Kok and G. Baeten (Springer 2012) and A. Ogawa's excellent "The Failure of Civil Society?" (SUNY Press 2009). None of these are referenced in this book. But if, figuratively speaking, you're among the Ephesians, Corinthians or others to whom this

work is addressed, you may find it very persuasive; and no doubt some readers who don't hail from those parts may find it enlightening too.

The latest contribution from this remarkable critical theorist is short on conceptual specificity and historical depth. Taking the Foucauldian critique of neoliberalism as its starting-point (though departing in important ways from the governmentality discourse) Brown develops an almost entirely anecdotal critique of today's neoliberal society. Unfortunately, as her account would have it, neoliberalism dropped in from nowhere as a form of instrumental reason (sometime during the Reagan era) and as a result of the failure to conceptually articulate the relation of neoliberalism to its predecessor, Brown reverts to a rather Manichean dualism of traditional liberalism against its neoliberal regression. But in failing to address the history of liberalism and the ways in which classical liberalism was already premised on the defense of the state the text tends to obscure what is truly novel and insidious in the neoliberal present.

This incisive critique of Neoliberalization, while formally grounded in the traditions of Political Science, is sharpened against a close reading of Foucault's; Birth of Biopolitics lectures, both interrogated by a method deriving from Brown's erudite and commanding grasp of Critical Theory. One of the book's pleasures is the author's thunderous, yet carefully reasoned and historically informed defense of democratic citizenship, institutions and ideals. Undoing the Demos is an intellectual tour de force that manages to capture the high drama of modern civilization on the brink of disintegration, under assault from what Brown exposes as a ruthless and nihilistic counter-enlightenment, now displacing democracy's citizen with the entrepreneur embodying human capital, under the rule of what Sheldon S Wolin has described as a system of inverted totalitarianism. As Brown puts it. "The replacement of citizenship defined as concern with the public good by citizenship reduced to the citizen as homo oeconomicus...eliminates the very idea of a people, a demos asserting its collective political sovereignty" she goes on to specify, "...the way neoliberalism differs from classic economic liberalism, is that all domains are markets and we are everywhere presumed to be market actors."

Great book!

excellent book

Thanks!

A persuasive analysis of the corporatization of every phase of life, to the exclusion of humane values, and its dire effects on the democratic ideal of government for and by the people. The slow erosion of a life of meaning serves to obscure reality and leads us to believe falsely that the limited political, social, educational, cultural options---that are solely valued by their "productivity/profitability"---are as it was always intended and constitute all the options that we have. This important understanding may free some from the "trance" of corporatization and free others to live more exuberant lives untied to the expectations rigged by the our institutions.

Absolutely loving this exploration of the hegemony of neoliberalisation/neoliberalism. An intelligent, important and timely read

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