

BOOK REVIEW

In the Ruins of Neoliberalism: The Rise of Antidemocratic Politics in the West, by Wendy Brown. New York: Columbia University Press, 2019. \$25.00 U.S., paper. ISBN: 978-0-231-19385-6. Pages 1-248.

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“Taking even themselves by surprise, hard-right forces have surged to power in liberal democracies across the globe. Every election brings new shock: neo-Nazis in the German parliament, neofascists in the Italian one, Brexit ushered in by tabloid-fueled xenophobia, the rise of white nationalism in Scandinavia, and of course, Trumpism” (1). With these two opening sentences, Wendy Brown’s most recent book, *In the Ruins of Neoliberalism: The Rise of Antidemocratic Politics in the West*, establishes clear and urgent stakes about the rise of authoritarianism within actually existing neoliberalism. The text raises the point that actually existing neoliberalism deforms its theoretical legacy, and revises Brown’s 2015 hit book by shifting from a macro-economic lens to a refined criticism of Hayekian neoliberalism. In so doing, *In the Ruins* contributes a greater understanding about the relationship between rising authoritarianism and neoliberalism’s theoretical architecture.

Brown asserts throughout *In the Ruins* that the current march toward de-democratization is a “Frankensteinian creation” of neoliberalism’s theoretical architecture (9-10). That is, that actually existing neoliberalism is not the same thing as the theory developed by Friedrich Hayek and his contemporaries. This is best exemplified at the end of chapter two. Brown suggests that as democracy has been throttled and demeaned, “the effect has been the opposite of neoliberal aims” (84). Some opposite effects include big capital seizing legislative processes rather than the state becoming insulated from economic interest, citizenries becoming steered by demagogic nationalists rather than politically pacified, and traditional morality morphing into a hollow battle screech rather than ordering and disciplining populations (84).

This notion that disparity exists between actually existing neoliberalism and its theoretical architecture is certainly interesting, particularly as a comparison to failed Marxist revolutions of the previous century (83). However, this theme is ultimately at odds with *In the Ruins*’ revisions to Brown’s popular 2015 text, *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism’s Stealth Revolution*.

“More than a project of enlarging the sphere of market competition and valuation,” Brown writes in the introduction, referencing the thesis of her hit book, “Hayekian neoliberalism is a moral-political project that aims to protect traditional hierarchies by negating the very idea of the social and radically restricting the reach of democratic political power in nation-states” (12-13). She argues that Hayekian neoliberalism destroys the social as a concept and reduces democratic political power, and that it replaces these two processes with a conflation of traditional morality and market freedoms.

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Thus, where *Undoing the Demos* undertakes a more macro approach with its stress on neoliberalism's economization of everything, *In the Ruins* instead homes in specifically on Hayekian neoliberalism's de-democratizing values. This revised methodology enables the text to link the theoretical architecture of neoliberalism to rising authoritarianism.

For instance, chapter one juxtaposes Hayek's deconstruction of the social—encapsulated by Margaret Thatcher's infamous claim that “there is no such thing as society”—with the ethos that equality is democracy's foundation: when equality is absent, political power is exercised by and for only a part of the demos rather than the whole, and thus the systemization of group violence or destitution puts an end to democracy (23-25). By juxtaposing democracy's need for social equality with neoliberal rationality's dismantling of society as a concept, the text stresses that the foundation of Hayek's theory is intrinsically anti-democratic.

Furthermore, *In the Ruins* highlights how Hayek's denouncement of the social plays out today, seen in the ridicule and scorn heaped onto those who challenge exclusionary norms as “social justice warriors.” These attacks “serve to buttress nativist, supremacist, and nationalist claims about ‘who built the West’ and to whom it belongs” (40). She goes on to suggest that when Thatcher's infamous “society does not exist” becomes common sense, it “renders invisible the social norms and inequalities generated by legacies of slavery, colonialism, and patriarchy” (43). In essence, if democracy necessitates social equality—a demos for all rather than some—then a theoretical architecture that revels in deconstructing social equality inherently paves the way for de-democratization and authoritarianism.

As a result, when *In the Ruins* argues that actually existing neoliberalism is not the same thing that its (Hayekian) theoretical architecture prescribes, readers may find themselves asking, “so what?” If neoliberalism's theoretical legacy intrinsically dismisses inequalities generated by racism, sexism, ableism, etc., then is the current march toward de-democratization *really* a “Frankensteinian” creation?

This curious clash of themes comes to a head in chapter three. Here, the text suggests that Hayek replaces the social and political with traditional morality, which he accomplishes by extending the “private protective sphere” beyond the confines of church and family. Brown argues that when the nation is privatized and familialized, “it becomes legitimately illiberal toward aversive insiders and invading outsiders; thus does neoliberalism plant seeds of a nationalism that it formally abjures” (117). Furthermore, she outright states that Hayek's formula for transitioning from social democracy to a neoliberal order “featured political authoritarianism” (119). Hayek and his contemporaries may not have formally advocated for authoritarianism, but as Brown points out, the theory nonetheless wields authoritarian logic at its core.

Yet, simultaneously, *In the Ruins* claims that actually existing neoliberalism “twist(s) away from Hayekian governmentality” and that “Hayek's thought was intrinsically vulnerable” to (de)formation (119). The theme that authoritarianism we see in actually existing neoliberalism strays from neoliberalism's theoretical architecture rings hollow after the text convincingly argues that authoritarianism is planted at the core of the theory. Furthermore, the language used—that the theory has been twisted and deformed—somewhat absolves the theory of its internal authoritarianism, almost letting Hayek off the hook for the many crises we see rise as a result of his denouncement of the social and other theoretical legacies.

A more rigorously sourced final chapter would have helped this theme. The first four chapters signpost chapter five's analysis of the nihilistic condition as the crux to fully understanding how Hayek's theoretical legacy has led to the rise of authoritarianism in actually existing neoliberalism across the globe. The chapter relies heavily on passages from Hans Sluga and Herbert Marcuse to establish a framework of nihilism. Though Brown tries to connect the active quality of nihilism's negation to white nationalism (171-179), by failing to engage with much critical race or gender theory, the connection remains underdeveloped. The introduction establishes that *In the Ruins* draws primarily on both the neo-Marxist and Foucauldian responses to neoliberalism (20). These foundational approaches are certainly a strength when Brown critiques Hayek; however, as the text frequently argues that his theoretical architecture ignores racist and sexist pasts and presents, the lack of intersectional engagement is noticeable throughout.

Wendy Brown's *In the Ruins of Neoliberalism* is a timely follow-up to her influential 2015 book. It is at its strongest when it analyzes closely the theory set out by Friedrich Hayek. Although the text would have benefitted from sourcing intersectional critical analysis, it nevertheless provides readers an accessible deconstruction of how neoliberalism's intrinsically anti-democratic architecture links to the authoritarianism we see rising in actually existing neoliberalism across the globe.