

Beyond Neoliberalism

Matthew Clair

Public Books

September 1, 2015

Published Version URL:

<http://www.publicbooks.org/nonfiction/beyond-neoliberalism>

Most of the people I know are constantly seeking self-improvement. Not spiritual enlightenment or knowledge for knowledge's sake, but the kind of self-improvement that promises career advancement, celebrity, or money. They view their life as a project that must be carefully managed. They worry about how many people follow them on Twitter, if their love of baking can be converted into a book deal, or if graduate school will really be worth the investment.

Of course, most of the people I know are college-educated, in their late twenties, and seeking more than just economized self-improvement. While crafting their tweets and working on their book deals, they are also seeking love, friendship, and political change. Yet the growing criticism of this self-improvement ethos argues that constant striving for a return-on-investment in one's personal life is not only crowding out these other things, but also subverting them to the logics of investment and accumulation. And, according to the critics, not just among the twentysomethings or the upper-middle class.

In her recent book *Undoing the Demos*, the political theorist Wendy Brown traces how we arrived at this moment of constant personal management. Concerned with assessing the contemporary nature of neoliberalism and its implications for democracy, Brown considers how neoliberalism has reimagined both the nation-state and individual subjectivity in the model of the market. For Brown, neoliberalism is defined as a governing rationality that "disseminates market values and metrics to every sphere of life and construes the human itself exclusively as *homo oeconomicus*." Unlike classical liberalism, which views economic man as an interest-driven cost-benefit maximizer bounded to properly economic spheres of social life, *neoliberalism* reimagines individuals as bits of human capital unbounded. Where Foucault understood neoliberalism as reconstituting the individual as entrepreneurialized human capital, Brown argues that contemporary neoliberalism reconstitutes the individual further as *financialized* human capital. All facets of life have come to be seen as an opportunity for self-investment, competitive positioning, and the appreciation of value.

This self-investment is not just about money. In Brown's rendering, neoliberalism has not so much "marketized" all spheres of social life as much as it has "economized" them. It has transposed the model of the market to formerly non-economic spheres. Thus, in seemingly non-economic activities such as dating, fitness, or family life, individuals nonetheless seek competitive advantage and value appreciation. They strive to maximize the investment of their time and energy in these activities, focusing on the possible (monetary or not) returns they may accrue as opposed to, say, the simple use value (though Brown does not use this term) of going on a date, cycling through the neighborhood, or spending time around the dinner table. Even when more monetary value is not the ultimate aim, more of *some* value becomes essential—for ourselves and, importantly, for the macroeconomic system which requires us to be responsabilized citizens who only contribute to (rather than take from) the larger economy. Human capital appreciation above all else is one of the defining features of neoliberal rationality.

*

Many critics define neoliberalism as an economic policy—an arrangement of 1970s and 1980s policy prescriptions imposed as an alternative to Keynesian economic theory. Thus, many assessments of neoliberalism center on its implications for wealth inequality, the instability of financial markets, and the roll-back of the welfare state. Brown's critique, however, centers on neoliberalism's evisceration of democracy. Drawing on Foucault's 1978-79 Collège de France lectures, Brown argues that Foucault's key insight was that neoliberalism is more than an economic policy propagated by elites—it is a subtle, diffuse, and deep restructuring of the state, discourses, and material practices. Revising Foucault, Brown argues that neoliberal rationality also restructures citizens—political (as opposed to individual) subjects whose normative model is that of *homo politicus*.

Brown defines *homo politicus* as a model that portrays humans as creatures of deliberation, moral reflection, collective association, and self-rule. Walking the reader through a brief history of Western political thought, Brown details how thinkers from Aristotle and John Locke to (even) Adam Smith and Jeremy Bentham carved out space for the existence and importance of *homo politicus* in social and political life. For these thinkers, political man—no matter how "anemic" or marginalized—existed outside of economic rationality, making possible spheres of human existence that valued the common good, deliberation, collective rights, and individual and group equality, often above economic

gain or individual self-investment. Neoliberalism, however, jettisons *homo politicus* by insisting that individuals are always and only maximizing their human capital in every sphere of social life. For Brown, the eclipse of *homo politicus* dooms democracy. As she defines it, bare democracy is simply some form of rule by the people, which she presupposes as a morally good form of government (despite its potential to produce bad outcomes, e.g. the rule of the majority constraining the rights of a minority). To exist, democracy requires, at the minimum, an educated citizenry able to conceptualize and advocate for their own interests, as well as some level of equality in wealth, as extreme inequality “undermine[s] the work of legislating in common.” These minimum requirements are what *homo politicus* enables, and what the encroaching omnipresence of *homo economicus* would destroy.

Her argument, then, is two-fold—it insists both that political man has existed throughout history in the philosophical accounts of well-known thinkers, and that political man currently does not exist because of the actual neoliberalization of everything. While Brown struggles to keep *homo politicus* alive and breathing in her review of some thinkers (in particular, Bentham), the latter aspect of her argument proves to be even less persuasive. Brown points to the neoliberals’ jettisoning of *homo politicus*, as in the works of Friedrich Hayek and Milton Friedman. Still, much of Brown’s argument appears to rest not just on neoliberalism as a theoretical model but also on neoliberalism as an actual political program and deeper reality. Her analyses of major legal cases like *Citizens United* and of the neoliberalization of higher education provide evidence of its real effects on democracy. She goes further, asserting neoliberal rationality’s real structuration of the subject:

Within neoliberal rationality, human capital is both our ‘is’ and our ‘ought’—what we are said to be, what we should be and what the rationality makes us into through its norms and construction of environments.

Thus, Brown suggests that neoliberal rationality has molded conditions that make alternative ways of existing nearly impossible, either for the state or for individuals. Accordingly, those who do not comport to neoliberal rationality risk “impoverishment and a loss of esteem and creditworthiness at the least, survival at the extreme.” For Brown, neoliberal rationality has driven out other forms of political and cultural discourse.

Brown is not alone in her interpretation of neoliberalism as omnipresent. In *Never Let a Serious Crisis Go to Waste*, Philip Mirowski develops the concept of “everyday neoliberalism,” arguing that an “accretion of neoliberal attitudes, imaginaries, and practices... have come to inform everyday life in the first few decades of the new millennium.” Through “[a] thousand and one little encounters spread over a lifetime,” we are disciplined into seeing self-investment as not only empirically possible but also as normatively good; individuals thus become risk takers, personal salesmen, and malleable personalities, ready to “sell a kidney” or “rent your body” in response to market demand.

But the argument that neoliberalism is everywhere ignores the reality of its absences, ultimately derailing critical theorists’ attempts to search for alternatives beyond neoliberalism. For both Brown and Mirowski there is no there beyond neoliberal subjectivity, either in prescription or in reality. Yet, even in spheres and behaviors characterized by these theorists and others as uniquely prone to a neoliberal construction of the subject, resistance to neoliberal rationality exists.

Take the example of social media. For Mirowski, social media sites like Facebook are the “neoliberal technology par excellence.” Through such online platforms, people are trained to embrace and invest in their entrepreneurial selves. And while Brown only vaguely mentions social media, she appears to view it as structured by, and enabling of, neoliberal rationality. Where else, she suggests, is the constant act of self-investment and the desire for value appreciation more rewarded than in the technological infrastructure that mediates “every activity and domain” through an amalgam of “‘followers,’ ‘likes,’ and ‘retweets.’” To be sure, the apparent technological determinism of their arguments can be attributed to both theorists’ intent to explain social media’s role in contributing to neoliberalism, as opposed to describing the complexities of social media on its own terms. And yet this inattention to spheres of social life as they actually exist constitutes the central difficulty of claiming that neoliberalism is everywhere, and debilitates attempts to identify working alternatives to neoliberal rationality.

On the contrary, social theorists who look closely at social media (as opposed to neoliberalism) come away with a more nuanced interpretation of the affinity between neoliberal political rationality and social media. José van Dijck’s *The Culture of Connectivity* and Emily Parker’s *Now I Know Who My Comrades Are* serve as two recent illustrations. For Parker, who considers individual and collective stories of Internet dissent, social media and other digital technologies enable political dissidents to build networks of trust and develop subversive communities that contest

authoritarian political rule to various extents in China, Cuba, and Russia. In *The Culture of Connectivity*, van Dijck offers a more critical interpretation of the historical and contemporary discourses and everyday practices surrounding social media. Her analysis, focusing on specific platforms such as Facebook, YouTube, and Wikipedia, reveals how online sociality emerges between users' interests and the interests of corporations who manage, manipulate, and profit from users' online behavior. With respect to everyday users, van Dijck reminds us that, despite the normative pressure to engage with connective media, users have alternatives—opting out (which comes with potential social costs) and resisting from within (which has resulted in more than a few victories against corporate control, manipulation, and hierarchical practices). Thus, for van Dijck, connective media engage both neoliberalism and resistance to it from everyday users, and provide a “diversity of platforms” that contest the logics of neoliberalism.

*

One of the most promising and resonant contemporary examples of democratic subjectivity mediated through social media is the Black Lives Matter movement (BLM). More than an example of the possibility of democracy in neoliberal times, BLM illustrates the counterintuitive role neoliberal rationality can play in bolstering democracy.

Birthered in social media activism, BLM has leveraged social media for critique and deliberation. The movement has made visible—through hashtags, videos, and images—the degradation and killing of black men and women at the hands of law enforcement. Through the organization of protests and surveillance of those enforcing state power, BLM has attempted to keep the government, the media, and the public accountable for the persistent degradation of black lives. BLM has even held the left accountable. Against recurring leftist critiques of movements centered on identity, BLM has articulated how capitalism places a unique burden on blacks. The recent [BLM protest at Netroots](#) has evinced the potential of BLM to shift mainstream political discourse and alter policy proposals. Indeed, Martin O'Malley's recent articulation of a [comprehensive criminal justice reform plan \(unveiled in an interview with *Ebony*, mind you\)](#) is undoubtedly a function of pressure from BLM.

Both Brown and Mirowski are skeptical of movements like BLM. Occupy, which many have likened to BLM, has largely been construed as a failure for what [political theorist Brandon Terry describes](#) as its aversion to practical policy reforms and organizational infrastructure. Terry warns that BLM, which has

largely relied on dramatic provocation as opposed to the articulation of alternative policies, could suffer the same fate. For Mirowski, the problem with Occupy was activists' uncritical embrace of everyday neoliberalism. Mirowski argues that Occupy activists simply wanted "to express themselves, especially with cameras nearby, rather than to work patiently for a thought-out political project." Political protest for Occupiers was individualistic, privatized, and commercialized, and activists' aversion to working with labor unions and existing governmental institutions accounted for their failure to bring about lasting change. Brown strikes a similar tone, describing Occupy as a "public coalescing and uprising of solidarities dismantled and citizenries fragmented and dispersed by neoliberal rationality."

The criticisms of Occupy could apply to BLM as well. BLM activists on Twitter and other social media are certainly making a name for themselves individually. Self-expression and self-representation are BLM activists' main tools. And despite the avowed leaderless-ness of the movement, certain activists' voices are more influential than others, making the movement susceptible to the pitfalls of hierarchy, internal marginalization, and the many ostentations of a phenomenon one might term "protest-celebrity." And yet, these neoliberal characteristics of the movement (bolstered by the technological processes of retweeting and trending) have also allowed for the dissemination of black revolutionary thought, the reinvigoration of black counter-publics, and at least nominal state accountability. And when it comes to a movement so centered on identity, self-representation of individual black activists is intimately tied to the larger representation of black bodies as entities that live and breathe outside of capital.

In this sense, BLM constitutes a public sphere outside of the state but above the private sphere that, [as Nancy Fraser reminds us](#), is a "site for the production and circulation of discourses that can in principle be critical of the state" and is thus "indispensable to critical theory." While public spheres (especially those online) are susceptible to cooptation and [surveillance](#), BLM (unlike Occupy) is evidence that a social media culture of connectivity mired in neoliberal rationality can still produce the conditions that make democracy possible through the reinvigoration of a public sphere invested in policy reform and engaging the state.

These instances of democratic potential within (and, often, counter to) neoliberal rationality exist on the margins of dominant social life. Brown and Mirowski's accounts of neoliberalism have little to say about the margins—about the poor and racial/ethnic minorities. Although Brown briefly touches on the disproportionate implications of neoliberal rationality for women, her portrait of *homo economicus* appears replete with upper-middle

class finery—it is a portrait of too much networking, too much concern with the instrumental value of education, and too much unapologetic individualism. Mirowski anticipates this objection, explicitly arguing that everyday neoliberalism is not just an upper-middle class subjectivity. Anyone, even those without a college degree, can become “infused with a vision of the self that is besotted with the narcissism of a thoroughly unmoored personality.” This portrait, however, does not capture the excluded confines of American society, where poverty, racialized police violence, and secondary school retention rates are everyday concerns. Such precarity is undoubtedly one consequence of neoliberal economic policy, but the determination to see neoliberalism everywhere blinds us to models of resistance burgeoning at the margins.