

A Year in *The Ruins* An Interview with Wendy Brown

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ABSTRACT In 2019, Wendy Brown's *In the Ruins of Neoliberalism* was published. In it, she analyses the way in which right-wing and demagogic forces in the US and elsewhere have performed a 'multi-pronged assault on democratic values'. Brown argues that such anti-democratic practices were present from the inception of neoliberalism: always flirting with 'authoritarian liberalism' and repelling 'social justice claims through appeals to market freedom and morality'. Here Brown reflects upon the coalescence of neoliberal and neoconservative politics in the US over the past 40 years, the nihilism that persists within that context today and the importance of fighting for democracy within social movements. Finally, Brown describes the movement for Black Lives as one of the most formidable in recent decades and warns that strategic change is as urgent as ever.

Harrison Lechley: In *In the Ruins of Neoliberalism* you describe the way in which the present political climate in the US continues to jettison democracy. Are there forms of democracy and political equality that you would want to defend?

Wendy Brown: To be worthy of the name, democracy, a polity must secure and protect arrangements that generate and reproduce substantive political equality. Why? Because democracy promises that the people will rule themselves, which means they will not be ruled by a part, by a power other than themselves (markets, churches, algorithms) or by a foreign power. It specifies nothing more, which is why there are so many possible forms of democracy. However, ruling ourselves requires political equality—no one having more power, or more access to political power than another. Such political equality is hard to achieve. Of course, it entails universal suffrage and the easy ability to exercise one's voting right, something still on the distant horizon in many places that call themselves

democracies. But it also entails unbought elections, unbought legislation and unbought media. It requires that the people equally determine political outcomes but also that we have access to the information and knowledge that allows to make intelligent determinations, that we are unmanipulated, and that other interests, like those of corporations or technocratic elites, have no power in this process. We could not be further from such arrangements, especially in the United States.

HL: Is neoliberalism inherently anti-democratic or can forms of neoliberalism produce democratic moments?

WB: Neoliberals, especially the classical ones, openly hated the kind of democratic force I just described. They opposed popular sovereignty because it interferes with markets and their distributions, which they insisted ought to be untouched by political power. Hayek and the Ordoliberals also believed that rule by the people would almost inevitably lead to social democracy or worse, because majorities would demand state interventions and provisions to mitigate inequality and poverty. So, neoliberalism aims to make political power serve markets –supporting and constructing them—and, as Foucault pointed out, it aims to make markets function as a limit on liberal governmentality. James Buchanan, of the Virginia or Public Choice school of neoliberalism, went further by seeking to openly subvert, not just limit, even the most basic practices of electoral democracy. He could be seen as the father of specifically neoliberal voter suppression and gerrymandering. And Milton Friedman, who pretended at the compatibility of democracy with neoliberalism by reducing democracy to libertarianism, openly sponsored the violent overthrow of the democratically elected Allende regime in Chile and its replacement by the repressive Pinochet government.

Neoliberalism is undemocratic in many other ways as well. There is, for example, its inadvertent generation of financialization which, especially in economically weaker countries, makes a bad joke of popular sovereignty—these countries are yanked by their creditors. There is also its ubiquitous economization, which both naturalizes inequality in every domain and normalizes the ‘bought’ character of democratic processes and institutions that I discussed above. There is its force in converting everything into market terms, which eliminates the value of something like education for building citizenship capacities as opposed to building human capital. This is a major assault on democracy at a time when some knowledge of the complex forces in the world—ecological, financial, technological, social, religious, political and more—is essential for self-rule. When education is reduced to job training and technical knowledge, it no longer builds democratic citizens.

Does neoliberalism also produce some democratic moments? Yes, in spite of itself. I believe we will talk about these later.

Ian Sinclair: How much emphasis should political struggles against neoliberalism emphasise ‘democracy’ given the way in which neoliberalism has so thoroughly corrupted the term, and can forms of direct-action assault neoliberalism without recourse to ‘democratic’ political institutions?

WB: “This is what democracy looks like!” This was a frequent chant at the WTO protests, at Occupy, and now in the movement for Black Lives, Extinction Rebellion and others. Such reclaiming of democracy, as people power and the fight for justice against financial power, neoliberal privatization, white supremacist policing and incarceration, and destruction of the planet by corporations and their political enablers—that is potent stuff. It recovers the term from its denigration and co-optation by neoliberalism and before that from its terrible thinning by liberalism. And, as you imply, such democracy expressed in such direct action and protest allows the term to provisionally shed association with distant institutions, instead casting democracy as popular struggle for the public good. Democracy is hardly all we need to fight for the future of the planet and species thriving, but we can’t do without it.

Corruption of the term, as you put it, is not new. Democracy has long been hijacked for nefarious ends—colonialism, imperialism, and Cold War external aggressions and internal suppressions. The same is true of socialism and communism: the ideals were mobilized to justify gulags, the barbarism of the Cultural Revolution, corruption and some of the nastiest forms of crony capitalism. Fighting for the meaning of the term is part of fighting for democracy. Politics is always in part a struggle over signification.

HL: You argue that the sphere of the political is a contested one and you use this tool to help us understand the ways in which neoliberalism denigrates political spaces and how this has authorised the erosion of political equality and participation. Does restriction to the political not risk limiting the terms of what political resistance can be?

WB: I have never argued for restricting resistance to a certain domain or configuration of the political. Resistance in the arts, in labor struggles, in gender and sexual practices and more—these all have potential for making a better world. However, unless we work to wrest the meanings of the political and the social from neoliberal configurations (and denigrations) of both, we are likely caught in neoliberalism’s grip – its lexicon and its forms of valuation. That is what worries me about everything from left affirmations of the “postpolitical” or “postdemocracy” to anarchist rejections of sovereignty and rule. All of these are emanations of neoliberalism, effects of its normative and discursive hegemony. That hegemony must be challenged if we are to have a chance in hell of generating responsible and collective practices of freedom and of co-habitation with each other and the non-human.

And one other thing, we need to be wary of conflating resistance with practices or movements that inaugurate significant change. Sometimes resistance is just resistance and not a lot more. It can satisfy certain moral and ethical desires but have little bearing on the world.

IS: You mention that neoliberalism has authorised a ‘marketplace of ideas’ in which any ideas become acceptable because there is nothing external to ‘the market’ that ought to negate them. Is this specific to neoliberalism or was there a broader change in social culture that neoliberalism was able to exploit to its own political ends? For example, could the impingements of supposed religious

freedoms (such as the Wedding Cake case and CPCs in your book) have gained ground without the political resonance of neoliberalism?

WB: Liberalism devalues ideas by distinguishing them sharply from actions and by making popular opinion the test of their worth. It disavows the powers that make ideas respectively credible or crazy by framing them as if they were in a neutral competition with one another. John Stuart Mill is the one to read here, of course, both because he advanced this framework and also knew better—*On Liberty* is one long tortured brief on its behalf. Mill did not use the language of a “marketplace” but imagined a competition among ideas that would permit the best and the true prevail. The presumption was that, absent censorship, falsehoods will be dispatched by reason.

Now neoliberalism takes this up a couple of notches. It frames the idea world as a true marketplace, where everything is a form of advertising and brand promotion, and it also dispenses with both reason and truth as the measure of ideas. Both have been an important part of neoliberal jurisprudence in the U.S.—hence the deregulation of advertising and of campaign finance. At the same time, as you say, it has buttressed religious liberty claims on the right as a weapon against gender and sexual equality provisions. Neoliberalism’s protection of traditional morality and hostility to state-secured social justice – all of which I detail in *In the Ruins* – are combined with a ferociously libertarian interpretation of the First Amendment to empower the Christian Right.

IS: Is there a need to distinguish neoliberalism from neoconservatism with the rise of Trump? And if so, how might this be done?

WB: Neoliberalism and neoconservatism are names attached to two seemingly distinct political agendas of the 1980s, one focused on economic policy, the other on moral, social and political policy. But they were never radically distinct, not only because many neoCons were also neoliberals, but also because restoring the place and power of traditional morality—pushing back against challenges to it by a social state--was an important part of the classical neoliberal program. (That’s why I devote so much time with Hayek and the Ordoliberals in *In the Ruins*.) Thatcherism, of course, was an expression of this. That said, though, there are those who got on the neoliberal train and tried to leave its moral baggage behind—we identify this with the Clintons. But Melinda Cooper, in *Family Values*, has done a superb job of revealing just how family-centric and religiously conservative so-called “progressive neoliberalism” is. It’s silly to measure right and left neoliberalism by official positions on gay rights or single mothers. You need to look at welfare, education and pension policies, at the stripping out of the social state and use of the family to replace its provisions.

Trumpism emerges from this potted history but adds new chapters. He shredded the neoliberal emphasis on globalized free trade and depoliticized markets, and he abandoned the neoconservative preoccupation with imperial statism and moral rectitude. So, it is probably unhelpful to use these terms to capture the present.

IS: If neoliberalism opens up a ‘marketplace of ideas’, is there any virtue in a politics opposed to neoliberalism reclaiming some sense of ‘truth’, or does ‘the Left’ need to play the neoliberal game but just play it better in ‘selling’ its ideas?

WB: Well, it depends on what truth you're talking about. We need truth about factual phenomena - famines, wars, viruses, climate change, electoral outcomes and more. But matters of justice, equality and freedom are not about truth and never will be. They are always partisan positions within certain hegemonic forms of reason. Weber is one of our most important teachers here—politics is ultimately about values and these are about attachments and beliefs—what he called Godheads, not truth. Thus, a Left vision needs to be compelling—not righteous but persuasive in a given context, offering an image of the future that addresses people's fears, anxieties and existing beliefs. This is the hard work of politics.

IS: Given recent protests, can the cultural climate (in the US at least) still be cast as nihilistic? When the alt-right protest their demand for a haircut during a global health pandemic have they lost all conscience in not reflecting on their actions at all, or is it that neoliberalism warps how our conscience reflects upon social issues?

WB: There's an enormous amount of nihilism coursing through US politics, especially but not only on the Right. Remember, nihilism rightly understood isn't about the loss of values but their devaluation: it's about values becoming thin, instrumentalizable, trivial, usable for other ends. When liberty is reduced to being able to get your nails done during a deadly pandemic, when a Bible never opened by a president is deployed for a political photo op, when truth has literally ceased to matter for millions, when everything is partisan and politicized—from believing in climate change or masking during the pandemic to the food you eat—that's nihilism.

HL: Neoliberalism marks the political and the social as totalitarian. Does the political turmoil in the US this year, including the Federal response to the COVID-19 pandemic and the protests resulting from the death of George Floyd and systemic racism more widely, mark the possibility of reclaiming the social and the political?

WB: The movement for Black Lives is one of the most powerful and profound social movements to erupt in the United States for decades. The effects have already been tremendous, from mass consciousness raising to municipal police reform. And it has re-affirmed the immense power and importance of social movements. But the social movements on the right, including the alt-Right, should not be under-estimated. Meanwhile, our political system is now so deeply corrupted and compromised that redeeming its value and cleaning it up is an enormous challenge. And the fascists around Trump combined with the ticking time bomb of the climate crisis don't provide much room or time in which to achieve this. There's nothing to do but think as strategically as possible and put our shoulders to the wheel.