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American Nightmare: the Depravity of Neoliberalism

By Michael Welton
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Deciphering the meaning of Neo-liberalism as a historical force and societal form requires the energies and know-how of a sagacious sleuth like Hercule Poirot. Wendy Brown, a philosophy professor at UCLA (Berkeley) and author of *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism's Stealth Revolution*, has a Poirot intellectual sensibility and acuity that sees what most of us cannot.

Those of us who have written on neo-conservative politics and neo-liberalism as an economic form have illuminated many dimensions of “something new” that has emerged out of the collapse of welfare state liberal democracy in the West over the last five decades.

But putting all the pieces of this intricate puzzle together and detecting not only particular patterns but also the logic underlying neo-liberalism is a complex task.

What is the connection between the US Empire's contempt for law and truth-telling and neo-liberalism?

And how is it that citizens can be so passive in the face of evident government prevarication, endless spinning of false narratives, the evisceration of democratic morality and countless corporate and government scandals?

Most of us know that neo-liberalism as an economic form repudiates Keynesian welfare state economics and was propounded by ideologues like Milton Friedman at the University of Chicago and in an earlier day, by the dubious intellectual propagandist Friedrich von Hayek.

In popular usage, neo-liberalism conjures up a cluster of ideas adumbrated by Brown: a radically free market, maximized competition and free trade achieved through economic de-regulation, elimination of tariffs, a range of monetary and social policies favourable to business and indifferent toward poverty, social deracination, cultural decimation and long-term resource depletion and environmental destruction.

Something new and darker is at stake

But something new and darker seems to be at stake. The crux of Brown's sophisticated argument is that the left fails to see the "*political rationality* that both organizes these policies and reaches beyond the market" ("*Neo-liberalism and the end of liberal democracy*" [2003]). The left analyses do not capture the "neo" of neo-liberalism because they "obscure the specifically political register of neo-liberalism in the First World, that is, its powerful erosion of liberal democratic institutions and practices in places like the US."

In other words, neo-liberalism agents systematically aim to radically de-democratize their societies. The supreme triumph of corporate power in the world requires that liberal democracy be undermined. This means that political autonomy is jettisoned. Formal rights, private property and voting are retained, but civil liberties are re-cast as useful only for the enjoyment of private autonomy.

Social problems are de-politicized and converted into therapeutic, individualistic solutions (mostly through consuming a special commodity). The political rationality of neo-liberalism interpellates the governed self of the citizenry. Separated from the collectivity, this self is then absorbed into a world of choice and need-satisfaction through consumption that is mistaken for freedom.

Aware that the mere restoration of some ragtag social welfare state spiced with a pinch of climate change rhetoric is a dangerous delusion, Brown slices through the bramble bush of esoteric terminology to enable us to see that "neo-liberalism carries a social analysis which, when deployed as a form of governmentality, reaches from the soul of the citizen-subject to education policy to practices of empire." Neo-liberal rationality "involves extending and disseminating *market values to all institutions and social actors*, even as the market itself remains a distinctive player."

Neo-liberalism ruthlessly sets out to subvert democracy

Neo-liberalism is a project requiring ruthless construction: plotting, planning and execution of the animating vision—in every domain of life. Donald Gutstein’s detailed study of *Harperism: How Stephen Harper and his think tank colleagues have transformed Canada* (2014) hit me between the teeth.

Good god! This guy moved stealthily and incrementally according to a “master plan”: to dismantle Canadian democracy and free the society for total corporate domination without citizen recourse. It was systematic! It was devilish! He did it behind closed doors and in the twilight under our noses! Voter ignorance permits these bastards to blast the world back into the medieval era of serfdom and anti-enlightenment beliefs and degrading practices.

This intention to subvert liberal democracy has not been fully grasped by those on the left. That’s Brown’s wake-up call. And it is a salient one. It may provide us clues to understanding puzzling elements of the contemporary world such as lying without consequences, total absence of moral principle underpinning actions, abject inconsistency, utter hard-heartedness towards the vulnerable and contempt for democratic deliberation and international diplomacy.

Specific characteristics of the neo-liberal political rationality

To help us sort these things out, Brown identifies the specific characteristics of this rationality. Plunging in, Brown first points out that neo-liberal rationality configures human beings as *homo oeconomicus*. All dimensions of human life are cast in terms of a market rationality. Actions and policies are reduced to the bare question of profitability and the social production of “rational entrepreneurial action.” Our schools are re-figured to pump out little brown-shirted entrepreneurs who know only calculation and competition.

Second, Brown states that neo-liberalism pedagogics intends to develop, disseminate, and institutionalize such a rationality. “Far from flourishing when left alone,” Brown asserts, “the economy must be directed, buttressed, and protected by law and policy as well as by the dissemination of social norms designed to facilitate competition, free trade, and rational economic action on the part of every member and institution of society.”

Neo-liberals only want to get the state out of providing for the security and well-being of its citizens. They use the state apparatus to enable corporations to serve only their profit-making without fear of legal regulation or moral demands. This means, then, that the market organizes and regulates the state and society. Therefore:

(a) By openly responding to the needs of the market (through immigration policy or monetary and fiscal policy), the state is released from the burden of a legitimation crisis (European critical theorists like Claus Offe and Jurgen Habermas had raised this concern in the 1970s). The new form of legitimation is simply economic success (it is also, I might add, the new, post-liberal democratic morality). The old norms of crime and morality are expunged from the cultural ethos of neo-liberalism.

(b) Under neo-liberal conditions, the state itself must think and behave like a market actor. The languages of cost-benefit analysis and calculation sweep in and consume public service and governmental practices. Under the Harper dictatorship's thumb, gags were stuffed in the public service mouth.

(c) The health and growth of the economy is the "basis of state legitimacy both because the state is forthrightly responsible for the health of the economy and because of the economic rationality to which state practices have been submitted." The watchword of neo-liberalism is: "It's the economy, stupid."

The third characteristic, then, of this depraved neo-liberal rationality (which wrenches itself free of the constraints of the old liberal democratic paradigm) has to do with the "extension of economic rationality to formerly non-economic domains and institutions extends to individual conduct, or more precisely, prescribes citizen-subject conduct in a neo-liberal order." Famously, Habermas termed this the "colonization of the lifeworld."

There is something disturbingly monstrous now before us. The classical liberal thinker Adam Smith set out the necessity of tension between individual moral and economic actions. This crucial distinction collapses, Brown maintains, because neo-liberalism has figured us as rational, calculating machines. Thus, to be "morally autonomous" means that we take care of our own needs and fund our own self-projects.

Pedagogics (in schools and everyday life) orients its students to consider the costs, benefits, and consequences of individual action. But this "responsibility for the self" gets carried to new heights as support for the vulnerable and needy is withdrawn. They are on their own. Didn't Thatcher say: "There is no such thing as society. There are individual men and women, and there are families"?

Grim news for the last defenders of deliberative democracy

For diehard defenders of active citizenship and liberal democracy, Brown's analysis is grim news. Political citizenship is radically reduced within the neo-liberal frame to an "unprecedented degree of passivity and political complacency."

In "American nightmare: neo-liberalism, neo-conservatism, and de-democratization," *Political Theory*, 34 (6), December 2006," Brown bemoans the "hollowing out of a democratic political culture and the production of the undemocratic citizen. This is the citizen who loves and wants neither freedom nor equality, even if of a liberal sort; the citizen who expects neither truth nor accountability in governance and state action; the citizen who is not distressed by exorbitant concentrations of political and economic power, routine abrogation of the rule of law, or distinctly undemocratic formulations of national purpose at home and abroad." Bravo Ms. Brown!

Brown's most innovative analysis is the way she links neo-conservative religious thought and neo-liberal economic and political rationality. She addresses the evident contradiction. "How does a project that empties the world of meaning, that cheapens and deracinates life and openly

exploits desire, intersect with one centred on fixing and enforcing meanings, conserving certain ways of life, and repressing and regulating desire?”

Neo-liberal political rationality and neo-conservative fundamentalist Christianity may diverge on the level of ideas. But American Christianity (in its fundamentalist form) and neo-liberal rationality, Brown contends, converge in the domain of political subjectivity. American fundamentalism contours the spiritual sensibility of its adherents to submit to Divine Authority and a declarative form of truth.

She states: “The combination of submissiveness toward a declared truth, legitimate inequality, and fealty that seeps from religious and political rationality transforms the conditions of legitimacy for political power; it produces subjects whose submission toward authority and loyalty are constitutive of the theological configuration of state power sketched in Schmitt’s juristic thought.”

In post 9/11 America panicked and fearful citizens easily fall prey—so it sadly seems—to sacralising the existing Neo-liberal regime. The founding myth of America as New Israel tips fundamentalists (and others, too) toward fusing the US’s malevolent actions in the world with America as instrument of God’s eternal purposes—“holy violence” to usher in the New Millennial Order.

Thus, apolitical preferences rule the day and citizens consume and idolize their families. Political participation is not necessary; and political scientists write articles about “voter ignorance” and weep. Critics of Habermas chide him for harbouring the illusion that voters know enough to deliberate with each other. But this submission to the Natural Order (now God’s order) of neo-liberal capitalism is to bow down before the Golden Calf.

We appear to have entered Weber’s “polar night of icy darkness” without morality, faith, heroism and meaning. But for Brown both Weber and Marx’s analyses are too teleological. Neither captures the “discursive and practical integration” of formerly differentiated moral, economic and political rationalities.

This perspective certainly is controversial and debateable stuff. But there is no denying that neo-liberalism erodes “oppositional political, moral or subjective claims located outside capitalist rationality but inside liberal democratic society, that is, the erosion of institutions, resources, and values organized by non-market rationalities in democracies.”

There is much at stake: the Left from Marx’s day to ours assumed that liberal democratic societies at least contained the formal principles of equality and freedom. This ethical gap between the norms and social reality could elicit oppositional action to close the division and permit a form of “immanent critique.” Now Brown suggests provocatively, “Liberal democracy cannot be submitted to neo-liberal political governmentality and survive.” Indeed, “liberal democracy is going under in the present moment, even as the flag of American ‘democracy’ is being placed everywhere it finds or creates soft ground.”

The Left humanist project for post-liberal democracy times

Thus, the Left Humanist movement world-wide confronts—if Brown’s argument holds—a neo-liberal rationality that in the post 9/11 period uses the idiom of liberal democracy while undermining it in practice. The infamous cry from Paul Bremer in Iraq that it was “open for business” clearly signalled that democratic institutions were secondary to “privatizing large portions of the economy and outsourcing the business of policing a society in rubble, chaos, and terror occasioned by the combination of organizing military skirmishes and armed local groups.”

The only way we might fathom the post 9/11 American world of governmental deceit and a raw market approach to political problem solving is to assume that moral principle has been banished because the only criteria for action is whether the ends of success and profitability have been achieved. That’s all. That’s it. And since morality is the foundation of legal systems, adhering to law is abandoned as well.

There is, then, plenty of evidence for the argument of the assault on democracy. Civil liberties have been undermined in the USA in the Homeland Security Act (and in Canada under the Harper regime), aggressive imperial wars ventured into, the welfare state dismantled and progressive tax schemes abolished and public education defunded.

Brown is reluctant to name this miserable concoction fascism (or neo-fascism). “Together these phenomena suggest a transformation of American liberal democracy into a political and societal form for which we do not yet have a name, a form organized by a combination of neo-liberal governmentality and imperial world politics, contoured by the short run by conditions of global economics and global security crisis.”

Nonetheless, regardless of how we name this new world, the conditions we find ourselves inhabiting at the moment must acknowledge that the “substance of many of the significant features of constitutional and representative democracy have been gutted, jettisoned, or end-run, even as they continue to be promulgated ideologically, serving as a foil and shield for their undoing and doing of death elsewhere.”

Bitterly, Brown admits that this unprecedented nature of our time is that “basic principles and institutions of democracy are becoming anything other than ideological shells for their opposite as well as the extent to which these principles and institutions are being abandoned even as values by large parts of the American people.”

Thus, in order to avoid descent into acute melancholia on the part of the Left, Brown urges us to reject the idea that we are in the “throes of a right-wing or conservative positioning with liberal democracy but rather at the threshold of a different political formation, one that conducts and legitimizes itself on different grounds from liberal democracy even as it does not immediately divest itself of the name.”

She maintains strongly that the Left must face the implications of losing democracy. We ought not to run around in a frenzy raging into the polar night. We will have to dig in for the long haul and offer an intelligent left counter-vision to the neo-liberal political and economic formation. This will be an integral project of the reconstitution of the global left in post-liberal democracy times.

