

# *In the Ruins of Neoliberalism: The Rise of Antidemocratic Politics in the West*, by Wendy Brown

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The power and influence of the radical right in the West has surged considerably in recent years. The growing support for anti-immigrant agendas, patriarchal ideologies, neo-Nazism and radical evangelicalism threaten the very foundation of democracy. What is the cause of this resurgence of support for antidemocratic practices? To Wendy Brown, neoliberalism has been directly responsible for the spread of radical right populism and the support for antidemocratic practices.

Avram Noam Chomsky recently referred to neoliberalism as the real plague that left the United States unprepared for the COVID-19 outbreak and contends that “decades of neoliberal policies shredded the social safety net and public institutions” (Goodman 2020). Neoliberalism is commonly associated with laissez-faire economics and free market competition, as also illustrated in Wendy Brown’s latest book on neoliberalism.

In her latest book, *In the Ruins of Neoliberalism*, Wendy Brown, a political theorist and Professor at the University of California, explores neoliberalism as a political project that threatens democracy. She interrogates its aim of radically limiting governmental interference in the affairs of individuals. Brown examines the roots and antidemocratic elements of neoliberalism from a neo-Marxist and Foucauldian approach. She also considers the failure of twentieth century neoliberal thinkers to predict its consequences. In her introduction, Brown revisits and criticises her previous work in *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism’s Stealth Revolution* (2015) and admits its failure in grasping the features of the Thatcher-Reagan neoliberal revolution that began in the 1970s. Brown argues that the neoliberal revolution was “aimed at releasing markets and morals to govern and discipline individuals while maximising freedom” (Brown 2019, 11). It brought about the support and implementation of neoliberal economic policies, such as

the deregulation of capital, privatisation of public goods and services and shrinking the social state.

According to Brown, support for the neoliberal revolution was achieved through the demonisation of social justice and political equality. In the first and second chapters, Brown contends that neoliberalism is aimed at dismantling society. She gravitates the reader to focus on neoliberal thinker, Friedrich Hayek's hostility towards the social and any regulation of the social sphere. The reason for this hostility is based on the fact that neoliberal thinkers seek to limit political control over markets and economic actors. Both Hayek and Milton Friedman, neoliberal intellectuals, consider political sovereignty as a tool to restrain the freedom of a society. Friedman considers any exercise of political power, even if democratically enacted, as a threat to economic and political life. Brown proceeds to criticise the views of political philosopher, Hannah Arendt, for her attack on the social sphere. Arendt is known for her criticism of the forced desegregation of a white school in Little Rock, Arkansas in 1957. According to Arendt, the social sphere is where the right to freedom of association exists, and schools are social institutions. To Arendt, enforcing desegregation was an infringement of the rights of parents to choose whom their children may associate with.

The third chapter begins with the following quotation from Hayek's address to the Mont Pelerin Society, which in my view, perfectly encapsulates the type of society neoliberals strive for: "... reason and morals, as equal partners, must govern our lives, where the truth of moral is simply one moral tradition, that of the Christian west"(Brown 2019, 89). From this, Brown contends that the Hayekian dream consists of replacing a democratic society with one ruled by markets and the far-right's conservative view of morality rooted in Christianity. According to Hayek, this should include a focus on property and family in the traditional or conservative sense – in other words, heterosexual marriages and patriarchal societies. This ideology poses a clear threat to democratic values. A society with no social and political regulation provides no protection to marginalised groups and does not protect those discriminated against on grounds of gender, sex, religion, culture, race and sexual orientation. Brown illustrates this in the fourth chapter with an analytical and critical discussion of two court cases namely, *Masterpiece Cakeshop v Colorado Civil Rights Commission*,<sup>1</sup> and *National Institute of Family Life Advocates, DBA NIFLA, et al. v Becerra, Attorney General of California*.<sup>2</sup>

The author argues that the First Amendment is wielded as a weapon to discriminate against minorities and is instrumentalised to enforce the views of conservative Christian groups to the detriment of others. The aim of the First Amendment has always been to protect vulnerable or minority groups. Instead, the First Amendment is used as a tool to enhance the conservative view of morality. An example of how this is achieved is

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1 *Masterpiece Cakeshop v Colorado Civil Rights Commission* 2018 584 U.S.

2 *National Institute of Family Life Advocates, DBA NIFLA, et al. v Becerra, Attorney General of California* 2018 585 U.S.

through the refusal of services to, and essentially discrimination against, members of the LGBTQI+ community based on the fact that members of this community do not fall under the conservative and Christian view of what family entails, as illustrated in the *Masterpiece Cakeshop* case. Another illustration of free speech used as a weapon against vulnerable groups, is the refusal of pregnancy centres to refer or advise on abortion care as an option to women for an unwanted pregnancy, based on the organisation's support for the anti-abortion movement. Their support is rooted in the unfounded opinion that aborting a fetus is equal to murdering a human being. In the fifth and last chapter, Brown departs from the previous four, as she shifts the focus to Nietzsche's and Marcuse's philosophies. Here she attempts to analyse nihilism, fatalism and resentment as consequences of neoliberalism that ultimately led to the intensification of the anger of the working class white men. Influenced and fuelled by hard-right forces, this group was aggrieved by its dethronement.

In this book, Brown indicates, in a series of arguments, the manner in which neoliberalism attacks social justice and political equality. This argument is applicable to the current politics of the United States of America (USA). Far-right forces criticise and attempt to limit state intervention, essentially deeming it inappropriate. Former President Donald Trump's constant efforts to repeal Obamacare, Ben Carson's refusal to enforce the Fair Housing Act, Trump's anti-immigrant agenda, the radical pro-life movement and the condemnation of the 'Black Lives Matter' movement are a few examples of how neoliberalism is used to attack social justice and threaten democratic legislation. Ultimately, neoliberalism threatens democracy and equality on economic, social and political fronts. Conservatives share Hayek's view that social regulation undermines freedom. Brown contends, rightfully so, that this is an extremely dangerous ideology and that dismantling the social and diminishing its existence has unjust consequences – politically, legally, ethically and culturally. It threatens minority groups who depend on the assistance of the state for welfare, health and education. It disregards historical inequality and injustices suffered by marginalised groups. The narrative used by hard-right forces that social regulation, in reality being implemented to empower the underprivileged, seeks to deprive individual freedoms, is only a method to appeal to white, conservative, Christian elites who cannot reasonably be considered marginalised. Neoliberal thinkers refuse to consider how vital social regulation is in achieving democracy and how instrumental it is in redressing historical injustices. Social intervention is imperative in addressing injustices committed against marginalised groups, including people of colour, the LGBTQI+ community, women and immigrants. Neoliberalism is therefore, used as a weapon to discriminate against any person who challenges Christian conservatism, for example the radical pro-life movements, those stereotyping people of colour, anti-LGBTQI+ movements, and those branding feminists as 'feminazis'. Brown argues that neoliberalism is to blame for the surge of power from the hard-right. Hard-right forces appease select groups only and, deceitfully, appeal to their factors of privilege (white, Christian conservatism or maleness) by arguing that social intervention would be to the detriment of individuals.

Throughout *In the Ruins of Neoliberalism*, the author draws a causal link between neoliberalism, conservatism and antidemocratic forces. Brown contends that neoliberalism brought about the surge to power of hard-right forces, the latter supporting extreme nationalism, neo-Nazism and authoritarianism. The publication was timely. Following the election of Donald Trump as President of the United States, many questioned how a candidate without political experience and who attempts to run a country like a business, with its citizens treated as customers, could possibly win the election. I agree with Brown's contention that the support for Trump is due to the fact that he mostly appeals to the majority of white, Christian and male population who have an obsession with making 'America great again' through the promotion and enforcement of old traditional and conservative values that once ruled the country – a country free of social justice warriors.

Democracy is regarded as a threat by the far-right and one can assume that neoliberal thinkers, such as Hayek, do not seek democracy. Groups consisting of radical evangelicals and white supremacists, who support a patriarchal society, do not seek equality. They seek to be above it.

*In the Ruins of Neoliberalism* is compelling and well-argued. It is helpful in the study of hard-right ideologies and in understanding how neoliberalism threatens to destroy democracy.

## References

- Brown, Wendy. 2019. *In the Ruins of Neoliberalism: The Rise of Antidemocratic Politics in the West*. New York: Columbia University Press. <https://doi.org/10.7312/brow19384>
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## Cases

- Masterpiece Cakeshop v Colorado Civil Rights Commission* 2018 584 U.S.
- National Institute of Family Life Advocates, DBA NIFLA, et al. v Becerra, Attorney General of California* 2018 585 U.S.