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Reflections From Damaged Life

Saturday, 21 January 2017

Graham MacPhee on Trump's Inauguration

Today I wish to announce a new development at [Reflectionsfromdamagedlife](#), a guest-posting by Graham MacPhee on the intellectual implications of Trump's inauguration. I am delighted that Graham has offered this essay to my blog, and I'd encourage any other friends, comrades or interested persons to contact me too, if you are interested in doing likewise.

Conor

Trump's Inauguration: What Could Critical Theory Learn? **Guest post by Graham MacPhee**

The inauguration of Donald Trump as the forty-fifth president of the United States raises immediate questions about the current state of democracy and the priorities for political action both within the US and beyond. But it might also cause those of us involved in the academic discourse of critical theory to reflect on our own theoretical frameworks and assumptions, not least because of the apparent inability of contemporary theoretical discourses in the humanities to account for the current predicament. Is there anything to be learned for our own theoretical endeavors from the dynamics of social resentment and political disenchantment which Trump's campaign was able to harness, exploit, and channel to such effect?

Although published a year before the election, I'd suggest that Wendy Brown's recent book *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism's Stealth Revolution* (Zone, 2015) suggests that *there is*, even if the nature of the election poses significant challenges to her analysis. But for the purposes of addressing the theoretical lessons of the Trump's election, what is remarkable is the extent of her revision of some of the basic assumptions of contemporary theory, a revision whose implications, it seems to me, have been insufficiently acknowledged or thought through.

As Brown makes clear, and as reviewers have noted, the book uses but also criticizes Michel Foucault's account of neoliberalism; but the character and implications of Brown's critique are far beyond what we've seen in orthodox theory for a long time. Startlingly, given the extent of her indebtedness to Foucault, Brown points out that his all-encompassing vision of power is wholly bereft of a conception of politics or political action: "there is no *political* body, no demos acting in concert (even episodically) or expressing aspirational sovereignty; there are few social forces from below and no shared powers of rule or shared struggles for freedom" (73). Observing that "*homo politicus* is not a character in Foucault's story" (86), Brown further notes that in constructing his account of neoliberalism, "Foucault averted his glance from capital itself as a historical and social force" (75).

Reviewers (as far as I can see) have tended to regard these insights as tactical adjustments to a theoretical edifice that remains largely intact. But given the extraordinary preeminence accorded to Foucault's notions of governmentality and biopower in the Anglophone academy, I would suggest they amount to much more than this. Indeed, in working through the implications of this critique, *Undoing the Demos* significantly revises what might be regarded as the network of unacknowledged assumptions that—in the wake of "critical theory" and the "theory wars"—have coalesced as "theory."

Most obvious is Brown's rehabilitation of the "demos" or "people"—presumably not so far away from the (non-ethnically defined) people (*Volk*) that Hegel had identified as locating any formation of ethical life (*Sittlichkeit*). Equally explicit is her retrieval of "freedom" as an open and revisable political concept, "precisely the kind of individual and collaborative freedom associated with *homo politicus* for self-rule and rule with others" (110). More obliquely, though unmistakably, *Undoing the Demos* envisages a subjectivity whose cogency far exceeds the dispersal of deconstruction and the passivity of "subject position": rather, it is "the resource for opposing [neoliberalism] with another set of claims and *another vision of existence*" (87; emphasis added). And at a more technical level, but just as challenging for contemporary orthodoxy, is her insistence that "capital and capitalism are not reducible to an order of reason," and that "capitalism has drives that no discourse can deny" (75–76).

Together demos, freedom, and an operative subjectivity allow a critical return to the language of the Western philosophical tradition, to the language of "city and soul" (22). The extent of Brown's rewriting of the last three decades of theory in the Anglophone academy is surely remarkable: against the dominance of theoretical anti-humanism, she can write without irony of "human striving" as a value (11); and against the anti-political language of governmentality, she can affirm that "moral reflection and association making—these are the qualities that generate our politicalness" (88).

To be quite clear, my intention here is not to accuse Wendy Brown of intellectual bad faith, of dodging between positions without owning up to it: indeed, far from it. In my view, *Undoing the Demos* exhibits a refreshing sense of intellectual responsibility in rethinking a theoretical orthodoxy that has become manifestly disabling in the face of the deepening political catastrophe of neoliberal globalization. Her critical retrieval of the demos, of freedom, of a cogent subjectivity, and of a sense of the dynamics of capital that exceed discourse, are intellectually honest responses to a predicament that is growing worse daily. And if reviewers have not picked up on the profound nature of her book's challenge to prevailing orthodoxy, that's hardly her fault. Brown is quite upfront in her critique of Foucault, and if she remains tentative about the implications of this critique for reconceiving subjectivity, history, freedom, and the shape of democracy, there are perhaps good historical reasons why.

My point is different. The lesson I take from *Undoing the Demos* is that we are enjoined to rethink our theoretical coordinates in light of the political collapse that confronts us. But in that case, we need to be attentive both to the changing shape of our unfolding predicament and to the problems or blockages in our own ways of registering and thinking it. The recent election of Donald Trump as president (notwithstanding his losing the popular vote) does not, to my mind, square with Brown's account of the absolute subordination of city and soul to the market in neoliberalism. And therefore it requires us to reexamine even her remarkable revision of the coordinates of contemporary theory.

For all its critique of Foucault's exclusion of subjectivity, intersubjectivity, and therefore politics, *Undoing the Demos* nonetheless reimposes these very same exclusions—but *subsequently*. While the political experience of subjectivity as *homo politicus* may once have been operative, neoliberalism is seen as "a distinctive mode of reason, of the production of subjects" (21) in which *homo oeconomicus*—the register of subjectivity exercised in the market—liquidates *homo politicus*, so "undoing the demos." Further, *homo oeconomicus* is denied the possibility of ever generating a new political response, of ever resuscitating *homo politicus*, since it is now said to have been hollowed out of the interest that traditionally drove civil society. "With the ascendancy of neoliberalism," Brown writes, "interest has ceased to anchor or characterize *homo oeconomicus*" (78): and so, she concludes, "*homo oeconomicus* today may no longer have interest at its heart, indeed, may no longer have a heart at all" (84).

Without a heart, the residual *homo oeconomicus* is bereft of the chaotic and nonidentical striving of interest, which means that there is no difference, no nonidentity, between soul, city, and market. The economic rationality of "neoliberal reason," now shorn even of the heart's self-love, "configures both soul and city" without remainder, residue, or nonidentity (27). Which means that the new face of power—

neoliberalism as a mode of rationality—is at once absolute and everywhere, pervading and dominating subjectivity, city, and market.

Brown's reduction of neoliberalism to an abstract "order of normative reason" (30) thus takes with one hand what it gives with the other. If the city is made identical with the market, and the soul, excluded from the political, has no heart, then where is the basis of that "moral reflection and association making" which "are the qualities that generate our politicalness" (88)?

Whatever else might be said of the social dynamics capitalized on by Donald Trump, they cannot be accused of being "heartless" in this sense—of lacking the chaotic and nonidentical striving of interest and the anger and self-deceit of the heart (see Arlie Hochschild, "I Spent Five Years with Some of Trump's Biggest Fans," *Mother Jones*, September/October 2016). Driving the Republicans' massive electoral gains in 2016 (and underpinning the staggering irony of the Democratic Party's rejection of Senator Sander's candidacy) is a significant divergence between popular sentiment and the dominant neoliberal accounts of political and economic reality—even if the neoliberal project is the ultimate beneficiary.

However we are to characterize the Republican sweep of presidency, Congress, governorships, and state houses in 2016, Brown's conception of the subordination of soul and city to the abstract economic logics of neoliberalism does not work. This outcome happened precisely because market, soul, and city are *not* identical; and equally, this nonidentity could have fostered other outcomes, had the political forces squared up differently. Brown's absolutization of power as neoliberal rationality ignores not only the irrationality of this upsurge but also the potency of subjectivity and its responsiveness to the dynamics of capital, elements that are by no means inseparable.

For all its ironies, Trump's election urgently points to the need to revise many of contemporary theory's orthodoxies and assumptions. Most obviously, the inability to develop a conception of subjectivity as plural yet cogent has not only made theory blind to the ways in which the dynamics of subjectivity are actually unfolding, but has left it unable to defend and develop public institutions—which emerge through the *nonidentity* of city, soul, and market—that might substantiate a vision of freedom and justice.

This connection was articulated two decades ago by the British philosopher Gillian Rose in her *Mourning Becomes Law* (Cambridge University Press, 1996):

The presentation of power as plural yet total and all pervasive, and of opposition to power . . . as the anarchic community, unwittingly and unwillingly participates in a restructuring of power which undermines those semi-autonomous institutions . . . which alleviate the pressure of the modern state on the individual.

The plural but total way of conceiving power leaves the individual more not less exposed to the unmitigated power of the state. (21)

Perhaps one lesson we might learn from the contradictory, often irrational, yet also understandable dynamics that led to Trump's election is to recognize how the generalization of difference in abstract schemas (discourse, language, power/knowledge, or governmentality) means not only the absolutization of power but also the liquidation of the nonidentity of social and political experience upon which any alternative politics relies. As Rose had warned, "when a monolithic [and] plural character is attributed to power . . . this attribution perpetuates blindness to the reconfiguration of power which we may be assisting by our unarticulated characterization of it" (21).

Graham MacPhee is an academic based in Philadelphia. He is the author of *The Architecture of the Visible* (2002) and *Postwar British Literature and Postcolonial Studies* (2011).

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