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In the Ruins of Neoliberalism: The Rise of Antidemocratic Politics in the West , Brown, Wendy. New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2019

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Published in:
Constellations

DOI:
[10.1111/1467-8675.12559](https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-8675.12559)

IMPORTANT NOTE: You are advised to consult the publisher's version (publisher's PDF) if you wish to cite from it. Please check the document version below.

Document Version
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Publication date:
2021

[Link to publication in University of Groningen/UMCG research database](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

Serrano Zamora, J. (2021). In the Ruins of Neoliberalism: The Rise of Antidemocratic Politics in the West , Brown, Wendy. New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2019. *Constellations*, 28(2), 285-287.
<https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-8675.12559>

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Worldmaking after empire: the rise and fall of self-determination

Adom Getachew

Princeton University Press, Princeton, NJ, 2019

Ideas of incisive change in global politics continue to structure debates in the theory of international relations. The periodization of modern international politics has traditionally revolved around Westphalian statehood, the “Wilsonian Moment,” post-World War II decolonization, and—at least for a while—a post-Cold War “end of history.” With such supposedly transformative moments came key concepts: sovereignty and self-determination continue to guide our political theorizing.

One of the groundbreaking achievements of the history of international political thought in recent years has been to go beyond such clear-cut stages by highlighting more complex dynamics. Changes are understood as much more incremental, but also less unidirectional than the conventional periodization of international politics suggests. Political institutions are shaped by peculiar continuities and ambiguities, not least because of the continuous contestation over their guiding norms. As recent works, such as Or Rosenboim’s *The Emergence of Globalism*, have demonstrated, unrealized or partly successful schemes and utopias can highlight the tension between hierarchical and emancipatory undercurrents of the history of international politics particularly well. They can serve, as Adom Getachew shows in her extraordinary book, beyond their historical role, as a reminder of buried treasures of critiques of domination.

Getachew’s book follows the theoretical role of postcolonial nationalism after World War II as a potent catalyst for cosmopolitan thought. The resulting history, however, is decidedly not one of the canonical theorists detached from real-world politics, but one of the debates at the juncture between politics and theory. These debates are part of a globalized contestation over norms; they also had significant impact within the key institutions of their time. The book’s comprehensive exploration follows two generations of postcolonial nationalism—that is, of the establishment and defense of independent nationhood in the presence or aftermath of colonialism—and their complicated relationship with the dominant regimes of international hierarchy. What these postcolonial nationalists in the Black Atlantic, among them Nnamdi Azikiwe, Kwame Nkrumah, Eric Williams, Julius Nyerere, and Michael Manley, championed, Getachew argues, was not a mere inward-looking domestic nationalism, but an effective account of the impossibility of having true independence and equality in a deeply hierarchical world system. Out of necessity—and sometimes out of deeper internationalist commitment—Nkrumah, Nyerere, and others became both “nation-builders” and “world-makers” (p. 3) in the realms of thought and politics.

That this history is one of the present, and one touching upon key questions of political theory, becomes clear in chapter 1, which lays out the anticolonialists’ theoretical framework. Decolonization here is not—as claimed by the “empire-to-nation narrative”—a “culmination of a long history in which the nation-state is progressively globalized and becomes the counterpoint to empire” (p. 16). Rather, empire has not ended through decolonization and instead remains present as an underlying structure of international hierarchy—politically and economically. Against this ongoing imperial reality, anticolonialism demanded a nationalistic internationalism. Instead of a liberal notion of freedom as mere noninterference, and instead of the anti-statism of cosmopolitanism, this decolonial theory proposes a far-reaching strategy against domination and for international equality.

Chapter 2 sets the stage to demonstrate how this doctrine was developed and put forth, reconstructing the forces and concepts Pan-Africanists were up against after World War I. Woodrow Wilson’s and Jan Smuts’ “counterrevolution,” ostensibly defending the notion of self-determination, in fact recast it “in the service of empire” (p. 40). The

consequences for the political reality of the League of Nations—and not only its mandate system—were cataclysmic. Former colonies were rendered unable to sever the colonial ties. Ethiopia, for instance, was held under the League's "humanitarian jurisdiction" as a nonmember and under unequal membership jurisdiction after its accession 1923—culminating in the League's acceptance of Italy's invasion of Abyssinia. Though formally independent, Ethiopia seemed doomed to remain in a colonial role.

Against the League's problematic notion of self-determination, which gained popularity again after 1945, postcolonial nationalists proposed a different concept. Chapter 3 shows how until 1960, anticolonialists managed to transform debates within the UN General Assembly and shape Resolution 1514's right to self-determination. Against imperialist concepts such as "trusteeship," they demanded self-determination as a human right and a prerequisite for all other rights. The hollow promise of Wilsonian self-determination had to be finally fulfilled because individual liberty could only be realized in settings of collective liberty. This "juridical limit on domination" (p. 98) was, however, as Getachew emphasizes, seen as only the minimal basis for actual "anticolonial world-making": Only measures actively addressing the political and economic hierarchy of decolonized empires would be able to transform the world into one of actual independence and liberty.

How, then, could newly independent nations such as Ghana achieve true self-determination? One answer was the pooling of political and economic power through federal integration. Chapter 4 centers on schemes of regional federation on both sides of the Black Atlantic as tools for the reduction of dependence in the international sphere. Nkrumah's goal of integrating Ghana into a tightly knit Union of African States was even less successful than Williams' plan of a West Indian Federation, mainly due to their allies' unwillingness to give up any of the newly gained national sovereignty. But both schemes were powerful manifestations of the desire to expand influence while preserving heterogeneity. This insistence on diversity among the United Nations, however, overshadowed attention for domestic pluralism, and over time became a call for a relatively high degree of centralization in the envisioned federations.

The third tier of the anti-imperial strategy, besides legal self-determination and regional federation, entailed nothing less than the transformation of the global economy. The New International Economic Order that Manley and Nyerere envisioned was a comprehensive reform plan: By increasing the postcolonial states' economic power, through international redistribution and the democratization of economic decision-making, the roots of international hierarchy—unequal trade and an unfair international division of labor—were intended to wither away. Based on a development theory identifying underdevelopment as a consequence of domination, Getachew's protagonists fought for increased "self-reliance" of both nations and citizens *within* an improved global economy. The suggested policy was, once again, not protectionist nationalism, but an "internationalism of the nation-state" (p. 25).

What makes Getachew's discursive cartography of this three-pronged strategy particularly illuminating for political theorists and historians of political thought is her insight that the anticolonial project was of a deeply conceptual nature. Key concepts became the subject of reevaluation and reshaping under the cardinal diagnosis of long-standing imperial hierarchy. The book's protagonists propose not only a new understanding of self-determination, but also of sovereignty, the functionality of the nation-state, and empire. That the political projects—from regional federation to the New International Economic Order—ultimately did not succeed seems slightly less sobering in light of these conceptual achievements. "Anticolonial appropriation" (p. 117) was exerted not only on the old and new colonizers' terms and phrases, but also on their histories: As Getachew recounts throughout the book, Williams, Nkrumah, and their contemporaries reinterpreted and weaponized established "Western" political models and analogies. Both, for instance, turned to the American independence to bolster their federal schemes. The year 1776 appeared, in Nkrumah's view, as a moment of precarity, necessitating further centralization; to Williams, it demonstrated that successful federalism did not require complete unity or a united people, but diversity among its members. That these interpretations had considerable weaknesses—not least their blindness to the imperial character of the early United States—hardly diminishes their strength as anticolonial acts.

Getachew not only brilliantly reconstructs these appropriations, but adds to them her own, very effective terminological interventions. She extracts from historical debates a vocabulary of pointed utility that should enrich our conceptual repertoire of political theory. Speaking of "burdened membership," "distorted sovereignty," or "unequal

integration” points to the relentless need for making our terminological repertoire vigilant for hierarchy and power differentials.

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DOI: 10.1111/1467-8675.12559

In the Ruins of Neoliberalism: The Rise of Antidemocratic Politics in the West

Wendy Brown

New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2019.

In *In the Ruins of Neoliberalism*, Wendy Brown provides an extraordinarily rich account of neoliberalism's contribution to what she describes as the “rise of antidemocratic politics” in current liberal democracies. This account explicitly departs both from economist critiques of neoliberalism and approaches that understand the present crisis in terms of political regression. Beyond the former (among which she counts her previous book *Undoing the Demos*), neoliberalism and its antidemocratic effects should be understood as involving a complex relation between economic *and* moral dimensions. For Brown, marketization and the reintroduction of traditional values in civic and public life, the two basic elements of what she calls “neoliberal reason,” have worked hand in hand in undermining the basis of democracy. However, the moral front of neoliberalism's attack on democracy has not been sufficiently theorized by leftist critiques. In turn, Brown moves beyond analyses based on the ideas of regress and progress, pointing rather to the specificity of current antidemocratic politics in contrast to previous phenomena. However, rejecting the idea of regression does not mean that a story cannot be told about what has happened to Western societies in the aftermath of WW II. This story is one of the (partial) historical implementation of the neoliberal project—formulated by its classical authors, most centrally Friedrich von Hayek, but also Milton Friedman and the Ordoliberals, among others—and of the “twists” by which the basic intended goals of neoliberalism have turned into their exact contrary: from an intended technocratic state-governance into a plutocratic control of the state by economic elites; from the project of weakening political conflict into the current political struggles of enraged masses; and from the ideal of social integration through traditional morality to the nihilistic deterioration of traditional values and the undermining of fundamental liberal principles.

Brown's book convincingly shows that the grounds for such historical twists of neoliberalism are not external but intrinsic to both the goals and the means chosen by the promoters of the neoliberal project. It argues that neoliberalism's attempts to counteract totalitarianism and to secure freedom have actually turned into the biggest threats to

freedom. This concerns even the most reduced version of freedom as noncoercion neoliberals are willing to accept. In fact, Brown focuses on how the attempt of neoliberal reason to implement this limited (nonsocial, nonpolitical) version of freedom has set the ground for such anti-democratic developments. This thesis is present in her analysis of the three different fronts of the neoliberal project: what she calls the “dismantlement” of society, the attack on democratic politics and the state, and the reintroduction of traditional morals in civic life through the legal instrumentalization of personal freedoms.

Regarding the first front, Brown shows how neoliberalism’s attacks on society both as a pure fiction—in Margaret Thatcher’s words: “There is no such thing as society”—and as a dangerous instrument for totalitarian control, undermine the material and normative conditions for true democracy. Neoliberalism’s strategy involves imposing an unsocial understanding of freedom—freedom purely as non-coercion, without reference to social ties—that undermines the possibility of criticizing and effectively fighting *social* structures of domination and exploitation. For Brown, when a project of unsocial freedom dominates society, the very foundations of democracy are weakened, the conditions for equal democratic participation are undermined and the possibility of democratic imaginary demolished. This is why any leftist attempt to save democracy from current attacks should not be detached from recovering the value of society as central to it. Next to the dismantlement of society, the second pillar of neoliberalism’s attack on the grounds of democracy is directed to the political as a space of expression of social conflict and deliberation, and particularly to its democratic variations, as well as to the sphere of state power. In the name of a restricted notion of freedom, a market-based ideal of social integration, and a technocratic understanding of state action, neoliberalism has aimed at eliminating the political, though only with partial success. Due to this “political deficit” (William Callison) of neoliberalism, democracies and states have visibly lost their ability to protect themselves from plutocratic control by economic elites on the one side, and to give to social conflicts a reasonable and democratic form, on the other side.

Next to these two fronts, Brown puts special emphasis on the third front of the neoliberal project, namely, the (legal) attempts to reintroduce traditional moral values in civic life. Against those views contrasting neoliberalism’s market-orientation with its complicity with US-American white evangelical conservatism, Brown shows how this development is in fact intrinsic to the neoliberal project. Hayek had already found in traditional values the necessary counterpart of a market-integrated society, not as an external complement to it, but as a version of the same social ontology shared both by markets and tradition. Hence, contrary to any leftist project of conscious social transformation, for Hayek social integration through markets and traditional markets is characterized by spontaneous processes of adaptive learning that ensure the implicit compliance of social actors. This social-ontological view of integration through spontaneity represents the core of rationality that governs the neoliberal project.

More importantly, following Hayek’s recipes, traditional morals are being introduced into public life through the legal strategy of expanding the sphere of personal freedom. Brown provides a compelling analysis of two examples of this neoliberal jurisprudence in the United States: legal support both for an “expert baker’s” refusal to make a wedding cake for a gay couple and the refusal of “crisis pregnancy centers” to inform patients about their actual religious purposes. In both cases, legal rights of free speech and free exercise are expanded and mobilized in order to make traditional religious beliefs prevail in civic encounters. With this strategy, the defense of personal freedoms becomes an excuse to reproduce social injustice, impose antidemocratic values, and challenge democratic pluralism.

Brown’s particularly interesting thesis is that the concrete mode in which moral conservatism comes back into public life—namely, through the legal expansion of the sphere of personal freedom—is responsible for an increasing nihilism concerning both truth and morals, a nihilism that in turn reduces current civic and political life to a raw struggle for power. By using personal rights to introduce traditional values, the latter become disconnected from their traditional grounding—they are rationalized (Max Weber)—and lose their integrative function. This is the main reason why traditional moral is currently compatible with cynical approaches to politics, a nihilistic struggle for power, and the imposition of clearly anti-democratic agenda. Combined with nationalism, and the sort of social resentment that goes hand in hand with the dethronement of previously privileged groups such as white, heterosexual males, the nihilism of current moral conservatism represents one of the biggest menaces to current liberal democracies. The question

remains for Brown if the left might be able to shape the negative emotions arising from the ruinous effects of neoliberalism and put them instead at the service of a truly democratic project.

Brown's analysis represents an impressive attempt to understand the internal link between apparently paradoxical phenomena such as the complicity of free markets and traditional morals, of neoliberal government and anti-liberal politics, and of certain religious groups and nihilistic political power struggles. To conclude, I would like to introduce two brief critical remarks. Firstly, readers may miss a more detailed discussion about the connection between neoliberalism and non-traditional values. As Brown herself suggests in the introduction, progressive neoliberalism shows how some strains within feminist, environmentalist or LGBTQ+-rights movements, for example, also been put at the service of the neoliberal project. A critical approach surely also needs to account for the (paradoxical?) complicity between nontraditional moral forms and neoliberalism and the ways it contributes to the erosion of democracy and the rise of the far-right.

Secondly, one might raise the question what is the exact relation of Brown's account to what she takes to be the hegemonic leftist narrative aiming at explaining current developments. According to Brown, a part from its limited focus on some economic and cultural aspects, one of the main problems of the narrative is that it tends to conflate current anti-democratic trends with the old forms of fascism and authoritarianism we are acquainted with. For Brown, the narrative is not wrong, but incomplete. Her own account should complement it by giving the historical keys for accounting for the specific shape taken by current anti-democratic politics. However, it is not clear how close are for Brown current anti-democratic movements to authoritarianism of the old kind: are they fully different kind of co-existing phenomena, do they have "elective affinities," have the latter been substituted by the former, or do current anti-democratic movements constitute the specific version of authoritarianism that is prevalent today? In my view, Brown's book would have certainly profited from a more nuanced analysis of the common elements and the differences between old forms of authoritarianism and current anti-democratic movements as well as of their developments and mutual relation. Hence, it is evident to many that, in some sense, features of old authoritarian trends are gaining new relevance such as the hatred against ethnic minorities, the longing for authoritarian leaders or the questioning of truth in public debate. Theodor W. Adorno's newly transcribed lectures on Right-Extremism are really insightful in this respect. There are definitely important lessons we can learn from the past analysis of those phenomena both regarding the diagnose and the proposals for ways out from the present crisis. Hence, finding the right equilibrium between the lessons of past experiences and the challenges of current particularities is crucial for critical theorizing and future social transformation.

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DOI: 10.1111/1467-8675.12574

Capitalism on edge: how fighting precarity can achieve radical change without crisis or utopia

Albena Azmanova

Columbia University Press, New York, 2020

What could it mean to overcome capitalism today? This timely question is at the heart of Albena Azmanova's brilliant and provocative *Capitalism on Edge*. Azmanova's book represents critical theory at its best, seamlessly integrating philosophical, sociological, and political perspectives and debates to produce a compelling account of the (non)crisis of capitalism and the current conditions of social change. While political economy had, for a time, become a surprisingly neglected topic among critical theory scholarship, *Capitalism on Edge* returns critical theory to its roots: the interdisciplinary evaluation of capitalism as a social form.

Azmanova argues that we have entered a new stage of capitalism, which she calls precarity capitalism. "In the new circumstances of closely integrated markets, global production chains, and intensified competition," Azmanova observes, "maintaining the competitiveness of national economies became a top policy concern" (p. 106). The constant striving for national competitiveness makes precarity the dominant motif of this mode of capitalism. This has given rise to two tendencies: one, demands for redistribution in the face of skyrocketing inequality, and the other, increasing realization that the competitive pursuit of profit itself drives precarity.

The demands for redistribution, Azmanova argues, embody the "paradox of emancipation." This paradox harkens back to the reform versus revolution debate within socialism. Azmanova worries that demands to reform capitalism through redistribution end up reinforcing the appeal of the capitalist form of life. In seeking to ameliorate the new inequalities produced by precarity capitalism, such demands leave untouched the underlying systemic driving logic of capitalism itself: the competitive production of profit.

At the same time, in good dialectic fashion, precarity capitalism increasingly calls into question that very systemic logic. Insofar as its dominant motif is *precarity* rather than *inequality*, precarity capitalism shifts politics away from *distributing* the social surplus created by capitalism to questioning how that mode of producing a social surplus itself generates constant precarity. Under precarity capitalism, the very logic of capitalism itself becomes a potential political issue.

To advance this core argument, Azmanova also engages insightfully with a number of other concerns. She develops a revised critical theory of capitalism that focuses on capitalism as a social formation that reproduces domination along three different levels—relational, systemic, and structural. She historicizes capitalism, examining its transformations toward its current form of precarity capitalism. And she examines the interrelated economic and political tendencies of precarity capitalism, showing how the deep structural shifts in capitalism manifest as new political cleavages and can help explain the rise of political phenomena such as populism.

My discussion cannot do justice to the richness and breadth of Azmanova's argument. Here, I want to focus on Azmanova's account of capitalism, pressing on several fault lines in the argument—all of which reflect, I think, larger tensions within a critical approach to capitalism. All circle around how to balance approaching capitalism as a set of *systemic forces or imperatives* that structure diverse activities (what Azmanova calls capitalism's "systemic dimension") and approaching it as a *political order* that must manage constant conflict, contradictions, and challenges (what Azmanova calls its "structural dimension").

One of the core ambitions of *Capitalism on Edge* is to refocus critical theory on capitalism without returning to older forms of economic reductionism and determinism. To do so, Azmanova approaches democratic capitalism through three lenses: as *constituted* by the competitive production of profit, as *mediated* by a liberal democratic institutional

order, and as *justified* by a legitimacy matrix and legitimacy deal. But I worry that Azmanova's more concrete analysis remains under the shadow of economic reductionism, explaining the operation of both the institutional domain and the legitimacy domain in terms of how they protect and justify the competitive production of profit.

Much hangs on the exact significance of the competitive production of profit—and an ambiguity between it as a *constitutive feature* of capitalism and as a *systemic imperative*. I concur with Azmanova's estimation that it is a constitutive feature, one compatible with a variety of institutional organizations of the ownership of productive resources. However, something can be a constitutive feature of a practice or social order without it necessarily having primary explanatory significance. Rather, it can interact in complex ways both with other constitutive features of that practice and with other practices with their own constitutive traits. For example, during a military conflict, a society could retain the constitutive features of capitalism, even as their systemic importance is subordinated to other systems with their own constitutive traits, such as the dynamics of interstate rivalry. Now, it could be that the structure of that interstate rivalry is part of the dynamics of primitive accumulation, which Azmanova identifies as a secondary, enabling systemic dynamic within capitalist societies. But that is an open-ended question, one that would have to be answered without assuming the explanatory primacy of capitalism's constitutive features.

Even as Azmanova distances herself both from base-superstructure explanations and structural-functionalist explanations, I worry her account, by emphasizing this systemic imperative produced by the intertwined logics of competition, production, and profit, ends up subordinating other features of capitalism as a social order to those logics. And this is because she also presents the competitive production of profit as a *systemic* mechanism that structures other features of capitalist society, often in ways that imply a *functional* subordination of capitalism's institutional order and its ideological legitimation to the reproduction of that constitutive element.

Let me illustrate the issue vis-à-vis Azmanova's account of the relationship between democracy and capitalism, as evinced in her discussion of welfare capitalism, neoliberal capitalism, and precarity capitalism. In Azmanova's telling, liberal capitalism was supported by "the institutional logistics of equal citizenship, from equality before the law to the universal electoral franchise," which helps ensure the correlation of risks and opportunities and prevent material inequalities from translating to social hierarchies (p. 92). Yet what vision of democracy is implied in this reconciliation? As Azmanova herself claims, a highly delimited one, where the competitive logic of profit is extended to the political sphere: "Merit proven in the course of competition allows capitalism, a social system activated by the dynamic of competitive pursuit of profit, to align with liberal democracy, a political system activated by the competitive pursuit of popular endorsement for contenders' acquisition of political office" (p. 40).

I worry this representation of the relationship between democracy and capitalism underestimates the manner in which democratization introduced *dysfunctions* for capitalism's constitutive dynamics, insofar as democracy and capitalism operate according to distinct and often contradictory constitutive logics. The competitive pursuit of political office was the form democracy took after the defeat of the more destabilizing implications of democratization for capitalism. These destabilizing implications range from the need to answer to domestic electorates when managing a country's currency to reducing the market dependency of wages to more fundamental challenges to the organizing role of profit in economic life. In all cases, democratic institutions introduce "countersystemic" principles that exist in tension with the systemic structure of capitalist institutions.

If we take seriously the antagonism side of the dependence/antagonism relationship between democracy and capitalism, then we need to approach the "paradox of emancipation" differently. The paradox of emancipation refers to how fighting different forms of relational domination—Azmanova emphasizes in particular fighting distributive inequality—can reinforce more systemic forms of domination. Insofar as such movements are seeking better terms of inclusion within the capitalist system, they fail to challenge its constitutive features.

But this assumes that political systems can absorb these demands without creating institutions that disrupt the functioning of capitalism's more core, constitutive features. Azmanova underestimates the extent to which the paradox of emancipation cuts both ways: yes, demands for redistribution appear to accept the terms of profit production, and so on do not directly challenge the systemic logic of profit. But they do often undermine it indirectly, partially socializing and democratizing the distribution of social surplus, and so creating contradictory tendencies that political

authorities have difficulty managing. This disruption, I submit, does not just occur at a structural level, by challenging the power relations between different groups within capitalism. Rather, there are aspects of the logic of democracy—cooperation on the basis of political equality—that calls into question the systemic dynamics of capitalism, insofar as sustaining such equal influence on collective life over time is incompatible with the power implied in the private appropriation and allocation of productive resources.

Indeed, from within the crisis politics of precarity capitalism, we can see the germs of institutional possibilities that disrupt not just the structural inequalities produced by capitalism, but some of its systemic features. Under precarity capitalism, for example, central banks have become dirigiste planners against their will, directly intervening in capital markets to sustain value assets and protect fragile financial systems. To be sure, they do so in defense of capitalism, but in so doing unwittingly create institutional dysfunctions within the operating of capitalism itself. Whether or not those dysfunctions will lead to the overcoming of capitalism, however, is a matter of political practice, not theory. To understand the possibility of such political practice today, there are few better places to start than Azmanova's *Capitalism on Edge*.

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