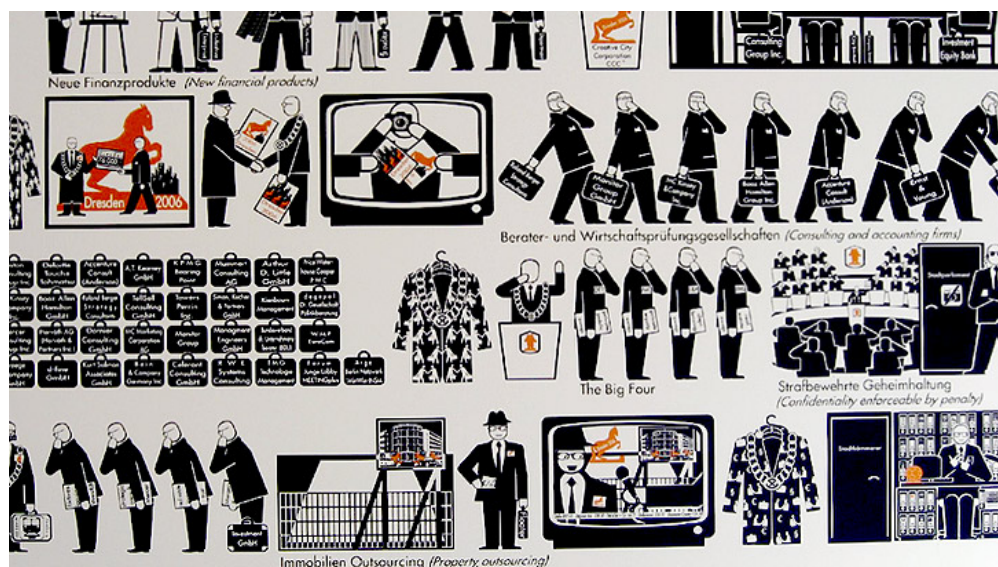


## Neoliberalism and Political Theory: an Introduction to Wendy Brown



Dr. Rafael Khachaturian

[Rafael.khachaturian@gmail.com](mailto:Rafael.khachaturian@gmail.com)

September 16-October 7

Thursdays 6:30-9:30 pm (EST)

Are we living through the death pangs of neoliberalism? And if so, what follows in its wake? For political theorist Wendy Brown, neoliberalism isn't simply an economic system, but a "governing rationality" that, pervading every aspect of modern life, turns us "into market actors and nothing but..." Having substituted market mechanisms for democratic politics, neoliberalism leaves a void—to be filled, in a moment of crisis, by the very forces its anti-politics engender: nihilism, nationalism, white supremacy, and authoritarianism. In conversation with thinkers including Nietzsche, Marx, Freud, Marcuse, and Foucault, Brown offers a diagnosis of neoliberal pathology—the evacuation of social and political possibility, a depreciation of sovereignty, a totalizing mania for markets—and theorizes its apparent opposite: a radical and genuine popular democracy. But what, for Brown, does democracy look like? What, exactly, is the nature of "neoliberal rationality," and what can be done to defeat the "ferociously antidemocratic forces" that, for Brown, are neoliberalism's natural successors?

In this course, we will read Brown alongside some of her canonical influences as we explore the questions and themes that have preoccupied her work: On what grounds can we demarcate neoliberalism as a cultural and political phase of modernity—or, perhaps, post-modernity? Why do democratic aspirations today clash with technocratic and punitive forms of governance? And what types of political subjects—both acquiescent and insurrectionary—have been produced as a result? Working through these topics, we will ask what is living and what is dead in the neoliberal project, and what freedom and social emancipation could mean in its wake. Readings will include selections from Brown's *In the Ruins of Neoliberalism*, *Undoing the Demos*, *Walled States Waning Sovereignty*, and *States of Injury*, as well as selections from Foucault, Hayek, Marx, Nietzsche, Schmitt, and Weber.

**Format:** This course is a seminar! The only expectations are completing the reading assignments, attending our meetings, and participating in our discussion. In each of our meetings, I will provide an

overarching summary of that evening's class topic and its relation to the theme of the course. I will facilitate the discussion and do my best to clarify passages and answer questions that arise. But this class is best thought of as a common, collaborative inquiry—the most important thing is how you read these texts and what you get out of them. In other words, our discussions will be largely guided by *your* interests and reasons for taking this class. Naturally, this depends on your ongoing attendance, participation, and engagement!

**Communication:** You are encouraged to use our shared Google Doc to post interesting or unclear selections from the reading, to raise broader questions, and to suggest topics for our upcoming class discussions. You are also encouraged to reply to each other's posts. These notes and conversations will be launching points for our weekly in-person discussion. I will also provide opportunities for interested volunteers to give a short summary presentation on a reading of your choice. Please feel free to email me if you would like to share any thoughts, comments, or questions individually outside of this format.

**Readings:** I have tried to assign a manageable set of weekly readings of under one hundred pages per week (not including the strictly optional supplemental readings.) I also reserve the right to alter the syllabus after the start of the class.

You do not have to purchase any books for this class—all course readings will be available either as PDFs in the Dropbox folder (please let me know if you have trouble accessing the readings) or linked to in the syllabus. However, if you would like to purchase any of the course texts, I suggest helping support independent bookstores by using [www.bookshop.org](http://www.bookshop.org).

## Meeting Schedule

### Session 1 (9/16): Our Morbid Political Symptoms

Brown, "Neoliberalism's Scorpion Tail" pp. 48-69

Brown, "Neoliberalism's Frankenstein: Authoritarian Freedom in Twenty-First Century 'Democracies'" pp. 7-43

Interview: "[Explaining our Morbid Political Symptoms](#)"

Interview: "[Who is not a neoliberal today?](#)"

Interview: "[A Worldwide Mutual Pact](#)"

*Supplemental:*

F.A. Hayek, *The Constitution of Liberty*, pp. 73-90

Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morality*, pp. 61-63

### Session 2 (9/23): Neoliberalism Unleashed

Brown, *Undoing the Demos*, pp. 17-45, 115-150

Brown, "We are All Democrats Now..." pp. 44-57

Interview: "[What Exactly Is Neoliberalism?](#)"

Interview: "[Ruins and Renewal](#)"

Interview (video): "[How Neoliberalism Threatens Democracy](#)"

*Supplemental:*

Michel Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics*, pp. 239-265

### **Session 3 (9/30): States, Sovereigns, Patriarchs**

Brown, *Walled States Waning Sovereignty*, pp. 73-105

Brown, "Finding the Man in the State" pp. 166-196

Interview: "[Beyond the Wall](#)"

*Supplemental:*

Max Weber, "Politics as a Vocation" pp. 1-8

Carl Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*, pp. 25-37, 45-53

### **Session 4 (10/7): Politics and Emancipation**

Brown, "Wounded Attachments," pp. 52-76

Brown, "Feminism Unbound: Revolution, Mourning, Politics," pp. 98-115

Brown, "Rights and Losses" pp. 96-134

Interview: "Redoing the Demos" pp. 1-8

*Supplemental:*

Karl Marx, "[On the Jewish Question](#)" (Section I)