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ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/cele20

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To cite this article: Geoffrey Pfeifer (2022) Authoritarianism, or the Decline of Democracy in America, The European Legacy, 27:2, 194-198, DOI: 10.1080/10848770.2021.1921918

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/10848770.2021.1921918

Published online: 02 May 2021.

THE EUROPEAN LEGACY
2022, VOL. 27, NO. 2, 194–198
https://doi.org/10.1080/10848770.2021.1921918

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REVIEW

Authoritarianism, or the Decline of Democracy in America

Authoritarianism: Three Inquiries in Critical Theory, by Wendy Brown, Peter E. Gordon, and Max Pensky, Chicago, IL, University of Chicago Press, 2018, 160 pp., $60.00 (cloth), $20.00 (paper)

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If read immediately after the U.S. presidential election of November 4, 2020, which resulted in the decisive victory of Joe Biden and the democratic party, followed by Donald Trump's refusal to concede the election result, some may have found Wendy Brown, Perter Gordon, and Max Pensky's *Authoritarianism* a bit dated. However, this view would have soon been shaken—if it was ever realistic—by the attempted rightwing putsch at the U.S. Capitol during the certification of the electoral college votes on January 6, 2021. Though our democracy may have won in the short term, the authoritarian impulse is coursing through the veins of America's body politic, and it seems that what we have witnessed over the four years of Trump's presidency is only the tip of the iceberg. In their book the authors offer thoughtful readings of our political conjuncture that can guide us in understanding where we are and what is likely to come.

In "Neoliberalism's Frankenstein: Authoritarian Freedom in Twenty-First Century 'Democracies'," Wendy Brown notes that the majority of Trump's political base in his 2016 presidential win were non-college educated white men. It is this group that propelled Trump to the White House, she argues, because Trump was able to mobilize "not simply [their] class resentment but white rancor, especially white male rancor, provoked by loss of pride of place (social, economic, cultural, and political) in the context of four decades of neoliberalism and globalization" (10). Brown is interested in the subjective construction of this particular voting bloc, and in order to further explore it, she unites neoliberal thinkers Thomas Friedman and Friedrich Hayek with Friedrich Nietzsche and Herbert Marcuse.

As Brown notes, neoliberal governance, as theorized by Hayek and others, and as implemented in America and in other states, is a "set of economic policies promoting unrestricted actions, flows, and accumulations of capital by means of low tariffs and taxes, deregulation of industries, privatization of formerly public goods, stripped out welfare states, and the break-up organized labor." But it is not just this, for once these ideas are implemented they also produce what Brown describes—with reference to Michel Foucault's work—as "neoliberal rationality," which "becomes our ubiquitous common sense" that not only emerges in government and economic policies but extends to "all manner of human desire and decision" (11–12). This process then reorients conceptions of

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freedom to favor the marketization of everything. Freedom is found in the market and private ends that are driven by market rationality, not in democratic and publicly governed institutions held in common. This also translates into the "abstract principle of securing personal freedom against the presumed coerciveness of political life" and is "widely mobilized by the right to challenge the norms of equality, tolerance, and inclusion in the name of freedom and choice" (18). This form of neoliberalization is the counterpart of neoliberal governance. Both forms of governance are antidemocratic and seek to upend the concern for equality and for a society that works for everyone. It is this latter form of neoliberalism that generates what Brown terms the movement for an "authoritarian freedom" upon which Trump rode to power and that was solidified and extended during his term in office. Brown is clear that it is not that Hayek and other neoliberal thinkers intended their theories and policies to end in the racist, sexist, and xenophobic movement Trump cultivated, but rather that it is a byproduct of the privatization and, to use Quinn Slobodian's helpful term, *encasement* of the economy in the attempts to shield it from democratic rule.

When the social is hollowed out and freedom is of the neoliberal, privatized, and individualized kind, then any demands to right historical and structural wrongs for groups of people tend to be seen as coercion and cutting into individual rights. The neoliberal rejection of the social and the common extends also to the rejection of notions of redistributive social and economic justice as those too are seen as coercive and non-market driven.

Neoliberal rationality only tells part of the story, though. We need other resources to help explain the specific ways in which it is converted into authoritarian sympathies and investments by mostly white constituencies. Brown is clear that we have to remember that neoliberal policies and programs hurt everyone outside of the super wealthy and that the working class in America is by and large made up of those communities that are the target of white supremacist misogyny (i.e., women, black and brown folks, and immigrants). But, she notes, the economic degradation that comes with neoliberalism's hollowing of the social safety net and erosion of democratic rights is "mainly experienced not as economic decline but as loss of entitlement to politically, socially, and economically reproduced supremacism" for those who held those entitlements (i.e., mainly white men) (25).

To further explore the ideological mystification of real circumstances that produces the aggrieved politics of resentment, Brown turns to Nietzsche and Marcuse. Drawing on recent work by Hans Sluga on Nietzschean themes, she argues that the combination of neoliberalism's critique and destruction of the social, along with the economic displacement it entails, gives rise to a form of nihilism described by Nietzsche more than a century ago in which long standing value systems are eroded and meaning and truth are unmoored from their foundations in ways that are then exploited by the right. The turning away from concern for others reveals "nihilism's own radical depression of conscience" (28).

Authoritarian freedom's lack of concern for others and the planet offers those who think they have nothing to lose a perverse sense of satisfaction, whereby they replace their pride and the security once provided by economic and social forms of safety with blaming and degrading others. Yet the more desire is reoriented, individualized, and put in the service of consumption and capitalist accumulation, the weaker conscience becomes and the more subservient to capital and thus open to criticism and erosion.

This is where Brown brings in Marcuse's notion of repressive desublimation, for Marcuse, like no other, showed how conscience is debased in the process of capital's reorientation of desire. This suggests that people were predisposed to the kind of politics of authoritarian freedom exploited by Trump and other would-be strongmen. It is this triad of neoliberal rationality, combined with the reorientation of desire by capital, and topped off by the aggrieved nihilism of Trump's base that, according to Brown, created the socio-political conditions in which we find ourselves today.

While Brown draws on neoliberalism, Nietzsche, and Marcuse, Peter E. Gordon looks back to Theodor Adorno's contribution to the landmark study, *The Authoritarian Personality* (1950), and specifically to his unpublished remarks on that study. Gordon argues that the study showed that the "authoritarian personality signifies not merely a type but an emergent and generalized feature of modern society as such" (47).

The goal of the empirical study was to assess people's authoritarian tendencies along a scale of identifiers so as to build a profile of authoritarian personality types. It was an attempt to "correlate political identity with psychoanalysis" (50). Although Adorno was involved and interested in the findings, he was concerned about some of the outcomes of the study. Specifically, he was wary of the idea that there could be an 'authoritarian' personality apart from social influence and that such an identity was one that belonged to individuals and could be identified and treated on a case by case basis, without reference to, or thinking through, the role of social and political structures in the cultivation of such traits.

For Adorno those individuals who scored high on the authoritarianism scale should not be seen as deviations from the norm but as "paradigmatic, or intensified instances of trends that were increasingly visible across the whole of modern society" (61). And further, those who scored lower on the scale should be seen "as a kind of remnant of a society verging on disappearance," given that "people are inevitably as irrational as the world in which they live" (63). So ultimately, the emergence of the authoritarian personality is not related only to the individual psyche but rather a symptom of social decay.

It is this lesson from Adorno that Gordon finds helpful for making sense of the Trump phenomenon. He argues that Trump is a symptom of the prevailing social "thoughtlessness" in the culture and across the political spectrum. This thoughtlessness and standardization is seen in "the eclipse of serious journalism by punchy soundbites and outraged tweets, and the polarized, standardized reflection of opinion into forms of humor and theatricalized outrage within narrow niche markets" (69). These niche markets come to dominate and determine our own political and related views rather than critical thought and evidence-based reasoning. We are subsumed under the standardized dictates of these information and position markets, told by them what is true and how to act.

This is especially relevant if we recall the image of the Trump inspired mob that ransacked the Capitol in an attempt to disrupt the certification of the electoral college votes for incoming president Joe Biden. There we saw such theatrics on full display—the costumed, almost comical images of people in fur covered, horned Viking helmets, faces painted and sitting at desks in congress, police and occupiers taking selfies together to document the incursion, and the media outlets covering the display falling into their prescribed roles in alternately praising and admonishing these people. It was a moment that perfectly illustrates the displacement of complexity and critical analysis by thoughtlessness, standardization, and spectacle (70). As Gordon notes, the concern is that "even if Trump himself had suffered

electoral defeat [in 2016], the social phenomena that made him possible can be expected to grow only more powerful in the future" (79).

Max Pensky's essay, "Radical Critique and Late Epistemology: Tocqueville, Adorno, and Authoritarianism," rounds off the volume by discussing the ways Adorno's critique of American democracy can help us understand the Trumpian moment. He does this by putting Adorno in dialogue with an earlier critic of American democracy—Alexis de Tocqueville. As Pensky notes, despite the century that separates them, both Tocqueville and Adorno wrote from the "late" or "epistemically antiquated" position of witnessing the remnants of a social order that was dying out, which gave them special insight into the ways in which America was sliding into democratic decline (91). For Tocqueville this lateness stemmed from his recognition of the "vanishing aristocratic world," while for Adorno, it was experienced as a "loss of self" in the "waning of the institution of (bourgeois) subjectivity and its replacement with a mode of administered consciousness" (92). This "administered consciousness" is akin to what Gordon describes as a culture of thoughtlessness.

Pensky, like Gordon, dwells on Adorno's account of how administered consciousness is fomented and reinforced by institutions and social structures, which he links to Tocqueville's reflections on American life. He extends and deepens the analysis of how this consciousness takes root and reproduces those very institutions that lead to decline. For Tocqueville, Pensky argues, the decline was partly due to the particular kind of formal equality mixed with, and further producing, individualist ideologies. He saw the effect of these two structures as manifesting "a general loss of political solidarity" and individualism in particular as "aris[ing] from the misjudgement that political life is at every point compatible with increasing material well-being and spiritual self-sufficiency" (95). This process precipitates the decline into a form of despotism that leads to large scale "social disaggregation" and suspicion of democratic political authority (92).

Thus, for Tocqueville, this disaggregation generates "the contradictory expectations on the part of subjects: a simultaneous insistence that their individual autonomy suffer no injury, and a longing for an all-powerful state to attend to their resentments in response to perceived inequality" (95–96). We see then, in Pensky's words, "on the one hand, an increasing preference for pure negative liberty—to be let alone with one's things, not to be messed with—and on the other, a longing to be led, disburdened of the anxiety that accompanies negative freedom," to be protected by a "tutelary power that will ensure 'tranquility' and public order with minimal popular consultation" (101).

If, for Pensky, Tocqueville reveals the problematic foundations of "democratic despotism," Adorno follows up the critique through to our authoritarian moment insofar as he discerns the end-point of Tocqueville's analysis in the rise of mass culture and the "post-individual" (113–-14). With the rise of mass culture, individuation itself is "administered" in such a way that individuals need no longer exert themselves to cultivate their own identity as culture and its institutions do this for us.

This, as noted earlier, is what administered consciousness is all about: The self is left alone, but is at the same time also a product of mass culture. So we find ourselves in a situation where desire for the totally administered tutelary power gives way to the administered self with a proscribed, unthinking identity and an illusion of negative freedom (ibid.). This is where authoritarian impulses run deep: what this self desires most is to not have to do the hard and critical work of cultivation *in the same way* that it desires society to be under the sway of a tutelary political power without need for intervention or

action on the part of individuals. So we arrive at Gordon's conclusion: Adorno offers us a window into the ways in which mass culture, identity production, and consumerist impulses produce the conditions in which authoritarian leaders thrive and citizens desire an administered negative freedom so much that they come to see such would-be authoritarians as the answer to their desire to do nothing, to be left alone with their things, disconnected from the social sphere.

In sum, this short volume offers theoretical insights into the rise of Trump and the authoritarian tendencies that brought him to power, which tendencies will, no doubt, persist in the coming years. There is, to be sure, not much by way of prescription on ways to combat this creeping authoritarianism. But that was not the authors' goal. Ultimately, in order to combat authoritarianism, we need to first understand it, which is precisely what these three essays set out to do.

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