RESPONSE to WENDY BROWN *Undoing the Demos,* LSE 30 June 2015

1.I will not try and summarise the argument of *Undoing the Demos* but, for those who know Wendy's early essay on neoliberalism, reprinted in *Edgeworks,* this new book is an inspiringly clear development of that argument, which brings out even more forcibly than before the prescience of Foucault's analysis of neoliberal discourse in *The Birth of Biopolitics.* The key point of neoliberalism on this view is not for the state to regulate the economy in a distinctive way, even in the form of allowing the economy to do what it wants (laissez faire), but that the economy provides a model - the privileged and only model - for how the state (and society) should operate and be: the goal of neoliberalism becomes, as she writes, quoting Foucault (on page 62) to 'regulate society *by* the market'. That remodelling translates to the level of the individual subject through a new account of the individual not as a reflexive political actor, but as an entity defined by whether or not it possesses capital, capital to be used up in various spaces of competition, since, through the same reformulation, all possible domains of action are reconceived as nothing more than spaces for the realisation of capital through the operation of competitive markets.

2.As noted on page 54 of *Undoing the Demos*, Foucault's analysis is focussed on *identifying* these implications of early forms of neoliberal discourse, and does not manage, as Foucault usually does, to go further and trace the effects of that discourse through to later times, and how that discourse is materialized in practice. So Foucault's argument, and any development of it, inevitably raises *two basic questions*: a) how far has this discourse spread across social space, and with what degree of effectiveness in each domain? And b) by what means exactly has it, and does it, achieve this effectiveness, working through what mechanisms, allocations of resource, bureaucratic shortcuts, and so on? My comments will focus around those questions.

3.Starting with the *where and to what extent*, the book focusses particularly on the evacuation of the notion of *homo politicus*, political rationality. Clearly, this works not only through the continual repetition of neoliberalism's own preferred model of rationality, *homo economicus*. Older rationalities do not die overnight, even though attempts can be made to exclude them or avoid relying on them, and so we always need to ask: how do we think about the practical encounters between new and old? how exactly does the new neoliberal rationality *win out* over old rationalities? That it has done so in many domains is not in dispute, and I argue in my own book on neoliberalism, *Why Voice Matters,* that on many levels (as doctrine, discourse, and culture) neoliberalism operates as a voice-*denying* rationality, denying the operation of voice, one of the key elements of that older political rationality. But deny *how* exactly?

4.In part this is a sociological question, and one starting-point is Luc Boltanski and Laurent Thévenot's argument (in their book *On Justification*) that in a world *prima facie* of value plurality, one value regime wins out over another by developing practical *proofs*, decisive ways in particular situations of *trumping* other values and changing the course of action taken. Those proofs, when successful, come to justify the *automatic* discounting of the values they oppose: the reference to what the global markets 'want', 'say', etc being the most obvious form of this in daily politics.

5.But we have to go beyond those obvious forms of trumping and think about the disincentives that have emerged against even *trying to* introduce alternative non-neoliberal forms of argument in political discourse. Those disincentives cannot operate at the level of rhetoric trope alone. They must work also at the level of the fit, or lack of fit, between certain rationalities and the *organization* of discourse (and the *resources* for argument) in particular domains. And this is the first area where I think that the argument of *Undoing the Demos* can be supplemented. The competitive domain of *media*, generally market-funded, but even if not

as with the UK's BBC, increasingly market-*orientated*, has come over the past two decades to operate as a space with an elective affinity for neoliberal modes of reasoning. The rise of reality *game* in many countries across the world is a perfect form for this – all games are by definition about competition, the rules of the competition are always, by definition, not up for debate or reflection; with a heavy discount against performing reflexivity rather than simply playing the game; with any challenge to the rules being heavily punished through the meting out of humiliation within the boundaries of the game. . . .. The reality television show, in many versions, is a practical *proof* of neoliberal reasoning in the wider domain of social performance, a 'secret theatre of neoliberalism', as I argued a while ago (Couldry 2006). . . .

5.But that is not all. Social media platforms (both the main ones such as Facebook and Instagram, and derivatives such as dating sites and platforms for planning lecture schedules, as Wendy notes in passing: 2015: 38, 269) are good places to look for banal realizations of neoliberal rationality. Those platforms are all the more effective for *not* taking the spectacular, ritualized form of reality media (ritual and spectacle can always, in the end, be spurned and mocked, but the practical requirements of an infrastructure for social interaction cannot so easily). In little more than a decade, social media platforms have established themselves in many countries, and for large sectors of population, as privileged sites of social interaction. Which matters because they operate as spaces of quasi-competition, as pseudo-markets of social appearance that puts market reasoning to work not just in the political domain, but in its social hinterland. I'd like to explore this a little more.

6.The rise of social platforms involves three key moves. First, an appropriation of social space: although apparently valuing competition, the goal of social media platforms is totalizing: the goal is to become *the* place which encompasses all the connections of social life, as Dave Eggers' novel *The Circle* brilliantly satirises. Second, such platforms *need* to be totalising, since their business model relies predominantly on the data value generated by

users' activities in the space of the platform: the more inclusive the platform's overall social capture, the greater the potential value of any data, although its specific value depends on discriminating details too, which in turn require nudging users towards specific types of data-rich activity. Because selling *specific* platform services is not the goal, social media platforms and infrastructures, ironically, all sell themselves as spaces of open-ended *freedom*, even if the price of that freedom is indenture to permanent datafication.

7. Third, datafication itself – the constant encouragement to act so as to generate more, and better, data, not for oneself but for the very platforms that encourage us to act – necessarily instals devices which measure individuals' activities *against* those of others. A double enforcement: not being on the platform means no longermatter; being on the platform means already *submitting* to competitive measurement against others as vicarious producers of data-capital. The very spaces across which we now seem to communicate 'naturally', such as twitter, only appear to us *through* the outputs of such competitive measuring (of our and others' numbers of followers, retweets, favourites, and so on). *Competitive* submission to data-collection becomes the *sign* of social presence (even if, sometimes, platforms can be played against the grain and for short-term political mobilisation), and the platform demands that *promote* that sign get accepted almost unnoticed.

8. What Wendy Brown's book helps us to see is that neoliberal culture does not just propagate *itself*, but it actively seeks to *erase* what came before it. In both the domains of media I have discussed, reality programmes and social media platforms, 'play', of various sorts - is the unaccountable *form* that the forceful degrading of older frameworks of political rationality and even social value takes. Yet thankfully the patterns of erasure are uneven: thankfully there are still some sources of political experiment which appear to escape, even challenge, the dominance of neoliberal reason. The attempt of Podemos in Spain to use

alternative media resources, such as TV documentary and talk-shows, as fora where the terms of political discourse can still be reopened is worth following.

9.My main point however is that the current corporate wager on appropriating the spaces of the social and turning them, *de facto* and *de iure*, into spaces for profitable data-extraction is just that, a vast wager that relies on the settlement of habit around that infrastructure. The emerging tensions and disquiet around that settlement need to be noticed and brought into focus. Which is why we have to thank Wendy Brown for making *so clear* in her new book *how high* are the stakes in *not* accepting neoliberalism's scorched earth campaign across the landscape of political practice.

References

Couldry, N. (2006) 'La Téléréalité ou le théâtre du néolibéralisme', *Hermes* special edition on Economy and Communication, 44: 121-128**.**

Couldry, N. (2010) *Why Voice Matters*. London: Sage.