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Authoritarianism: Three Inquiries in Critical Theory by Wendy Brown, Peter E. Gordon, and Max Pensky, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2018, 160 pp., ISBN: 9780226597270, \$20.

Liberal democracy is under threat. In Latin America, Brazil under Jair Bolsonaro's far-right policies and discourses have introduced policies that are seen as detrimental to the welfare of many vulnerable groups including indigenous populations. In the Asia-Pacific, two of the most vibrant electoral democracies in the region — Thailand and the Philippines — have recently backtracked from its democratic commitments and have violently repressed peaceful political dissent in the public sphere. In Europe, the rise of far-right politicians and social movements have undermined European integration, democracy, and multiculturalism. This perception of a crisis gained traction when Donald Trump was elected President of the United States, which in turn, facilitated the emergence of blatantly racist, sexist, and anti-democratic political discourses in the global and transnational public spheres.

Social scientists have struggled to explain the causes and consequences of this contemporary crisis. Wendy Brown, Peter E. Gordon, and Max Pensky provide an insightful and theoretically rich intervention in this burgeoning scholarship concerning the contemporary crisis of democracy. The three beautifully written essays in *Authoritarianism* were inspired by insights from critical theory, particularly by making sense of the subjective attitudes held by individuals vis-à-vis macro-social historical developments, with an analytic focus on the capitalist order and the transformations of state and social formations. The essays were inspired by key insights from Frankfurt school of critical theory and amplified by other theoretical perspectives from postcolonial, feminist, and antiracist practices. The unifying theme of the three essays is the emancipatory purpose of critical theory.

In the first essay, Brown examines how the contemporary crisis of liberal democracies has been created by ongoing neoliberalization of our political economy. Lamenting how un-emancipatory movements have rallied on 'freedom', Brown acknowledges that right and left political movements try to respond to the neoliberal destruction of sustainable and decent living wages, sense of economic security, and access to a necessary social welfare protection. In that context, Brown admits that the era of the "secure white male provider *and* nation-state sovereignty in the Global North is finished" and that context is irreversible (24). For Brown, the crisis is generated by neoliberalism, which destroys the social fabric through its supposedly depoliticized state that guarantees support for the unconditional flourishing of the personal sphere. That paradigm empowers the markets, which in turn, undermines the social fabric and democratic debates — a scenario that prioritizes ownership rather than citizenship. Drawing insights from Nietzsche and Marcuse, Brown highlights the nihilistic nature of neoliberalism as well as its shallow notion of freedom that disregards the social contract, power without constitutive legitimacy, and development without regard for the future.

In the second essay, Gordon underscores that the majority of Trump's voters did not come from the white working class but from suburban and middle-class Americans, who simply

chose whoever is the candidate of the Republican party. Accordingly, Trumpism is much greater than Trump, who is demonstrative of the “general pathology that is American political culture” (68). Trumpism, for Gordon, represents the “thoughtlessness of the entire culture” (69). Gordon zooms into this crisis particularly through the compartmentalization of society based on socio-economic cleavages and publicity-focused politics amidst a politically lethargic public. He dismisses the belief that fascism emerges from the individual psychology of citizens, rather he maintains the macro-social and political circumstances that fuel fascist politics.

In the final essay, Pensky highlights the prioritization of instrumental reason as fundamentally dominant in various social spheres and underscores the formation of a culture industry that is specifically developed for mass distraction, particularly in ways that undermines meaningful participation in various spheres of the civil society. The current crisis shows the emergence of a post-truth context, whereby individual subjects have lost their capacities for discernment and the collapse of objective institutions that uphold logical evidence. He calls for dialectical thinking, or ‘late epistemology’, as a form of resistance to what is seemingly an impending authoritarian world. Invoking Adorno’s views, Pensky underscores dialectical thinking as the subjective capability to oppose permitting notions and to reframe particular issues through the ‘totality’ or the macro-social view. Hence, dialectical thinking is a form of resistance, or a ‘psychic bulwark against authoritarianism’ (117). It demands from us, as thinking subjects, to avoid cognitive and epistemic shortcuts as well as blunt forms of instrumental rationality that neoliberal capitalist logic engenders upon its subjects.

This short book is an indispensable resource in understanding the contemporary crisis of democracy, which is often objectified through Trump and the rise of the far-right. The organizational logic of the book is compelling: particularly, it starts with Brown’s careful dissection of the crisis’ constitutive features (ontology), followed by Gordon’s insistence that the crisis is both a subjective and structural limitations of democratic politics (ontology), and concluded by Pensky’s call for dialectical thinking as a solution to our contemporary miseries (praxeology).

The book raises important but difficult puzzles about this crisis of democracy. First, how does dialectical thinking lead to sustainable and emancipatory mobilization especially in a post-truth context? It is logistically difficult to promote rational deliberation and effective political resistance when society is fundamentally fragmented by their own versions of truths and social realities. Second, domination and manipulation are rampant in representative politics, as exemplified by vote-buying and other corrupt tactics. Hence, considering the limitations for emancipatory politics in electoral processes, what are the alternative collective acts of resistance, participation, and democratic politics that are needed for emancipation? Third, what sort of political utopia should be imagined with an emancipatory purpose? What is the alternative to the current paradigms and social systems that have facilitated this current crisis? While those questions may be beyond the original analytic remit of this volume, *Authoritarianism* offers an accurate diagnosis of the causes and broad conditions that facilitated our current political ills.

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