

Left History and the Political Economy

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Eugene D. Genovese, *In Red and Black: Marxian Explorations in Southern and Afro-American History* (New York: Allen Lane, 1971). 435 pp. Paperback \$24.99

Wendy Brown, *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism's Stealth Revolution* (New York: Zone Books, 2015). 296 pp. Hardcover \$18.95

Tim Rogan, *The Moral Economists: R.H. Tawney, Karl Polanyi, E.P. Thompson, and the Critique of Capitalism* (Princeton & Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2017). 280 pp. Hardcover \$39.95

(Editor's Note) This article is part of a special *Left History* series reflecting upon changing boundaries in the practice of left history, and outlining the challenges historians of the left must face in the current tumultuous political climate. This series extends a conversation first convened in a 2006 special edition of *Left History* (11.1), which asked the question, “what is left history?” In the updated series, contributors were asked a slightly modified question: “what does it mean to write ‘left’ history?”

In the introductory essay to his 1971 book *In Red and Black*, the (in)famous American historian Eugene Genovese discussed the role of the socialist historian. At the time, he identified two prevailing normative prescriptions for radical scholars in general, both of which he opposed. The first of these prescriptions was one that emphasized political action, over and above scholarly pursuits, as a foremost imperative. “After all,” Genovese asked in imitation of those who defended this view, “how can we sit around and discuss medieval France while children are being napalmed in Vietnam?”¹ The second prescription, which allowed more significance for scholarly activity, demanded that research be focused in those particular areas that were pertinent to and engaged with contemporary struggles. For Genovese, this model encouraged engagement with the quite-recent past. In each case, he argued, the fundamental assumption was that a socialist historian, as a kind of radical scholar, also ought to be a political activist and thus the only appropriate history was that which was written explicitly because it was relevant in the present. The result, as Genovese saw it, was that leftist historians, especially younger ones, had their energies stretched

counterproductively in two directions until they reached an eventual realization that “being a good historian is full-time work.”² Genovese’s own perspective was that the role of the socialist historian was to be, simply, a good historian.³ He dismissed the imperative of relevance as “irrelevant to anything of importance beyond the egos of those who prate about it,” and contended instead “that the study of history, and in fact all humane learning, is the major responsibility of those intellectuals who would work for a better society.”⁴

The animating context for Genovese’s essay is important to note. Among the issues he discussed were the Vietnam War, the Cold War, the New Left, and an American academy in which, as he saw it at the time, “it sometimes appears that everyone on the campuses who does not like Spiro Agnew finds it necessary to be ‘a bit of a Marxist’ in order to get students to listen to him.”⁵ The discussion of these issues marks the essay as a product of a particular historical moment very different from our own. In 1971, the “stakes” for writing history from the left were established perhaps most clearly by a violent global struggle between communist and capitalist powers and the existence of transnational movements—decolonization, the anti-war movement, New Leftism, and so on—that could be readily identified and readily identified with. This was a world in which ideological struggles and political-economic alternatives were front of mind, and not just for historians. The contemporary left historian exists in a much different context. In the intervening decades since Genovese wrote, political, economic, and social changes have rendered an altogether distinct and novel conjuncture in which historians with counter-hegemonic commitments now find themselves. Those inclined to name this conjuncture have typically called it “neoliberalism.”

Describing the current epoch under the banner of neoliberalism is a somewhat fraught endeavour. Hardly anyone denies that, from some point in the 1970s, the post-war Keynesian settlement in Western nation-states was dismantled as a fundamentally distinct political economy took shape. In 1971, the Bretton Woods system and its associated capital controls collapsed, clearing the way for financialization, deregulation, and privatization in states across the world.⁶ This transformative political economy has often been called neoliberal, though there are a number of other ways in which the term has been used. In addition to its general function in identifying a political-economic epoch, neoliberalism has also been understood variously as an economic policy package, an ideology, an intellectual movement, and a new rationality. This multivalence has contributed to the growth of rich historical and theoretical literatures, though it has also prompted sustained criticism of neoliberalism’s conceptual utility. Adding to the discussion recently is an emerging sense that the global rise of far-right nationalism—from Trump’s America to Modi’s India—might represent either a looming reorientation away from the neoliberal consensus or a realization of the anti-democratic tendencies long nascent in neoliberal practice. From a left perspective, these debates about the meaning and the current state of neoliberalism are of significance for the ways in which they

have and will continue to shape counter-hegemonic challenges. More particularly, for historians with a sense that historical writing can serve a counter-hegemonic function, how we choose to understand neoliberalism has serious ramifications for how we might identify the purpose(s) of writing history today. In view of how the world has changed since the 1970s, it is now worth asking whether, in addition to the indisputable need for left history to be “good” history, there might be some particularly urgent purposes that left history ought to serve.

Among the existing interpretations of neoliberalism, the most alarming is that of the “new rationality,” advanced in its most recent and most convincing form by political theorist Wendy Brown. In *Undoing the Demos*, Brown writes that

“as a normative order of reason developed over three decades into a widely and deeply disseminated governing rationality, neoliberalism transmogrifies every human domain and endeavor, along with humans themselves, according to a specific image of the economic.”⁷

Neoliberalism thus has a totalizing effect, extending its logic into all areas of life and rendering the neoliberal subject as a purely economic actor whose central task is to develop and position itself as a bit of what, in contemporary parlance, is often called “human capital.”⁸ This understanding of neoliberal reason then serves, for Brown, as an origin point for an investigation of the effect that neoliberalism has upon the operation of democracy. What Brown ultimately finds is that, from the institutional structures of democracy to its cultural underpinnings, the neoliberal economization of all life represents a profound threat to democratic practice.⁹

Brown locates the novelty of neoliberal economization in three areas. First, whereas classical liberal theorists were always very much concerned about the relationship between the political and the economic, neoliberal logic collapses the distinction between the two. As Brown puts it, this means that “we are everywhere *homo oeconomicus* and only *homo oeconomicus*.”¹⁰ Furthermore, human capital in a neoliberal context is not deemed useful in terms of exchange or interest but in terms of the ways it can be leveraged competitively. This is related to Brown’s third point, which is that the neoliberal subject now tends to be molded according to the template of finance capital, rather than in a more straightforwardly productive fashion. Collectively, these distinguishing features of the neoliberal period differentiate it from earlier periods in the history of liberal capitalism by removing the political brakes, as it were. While at times in the past it could, at least, be hoped that liberal democracy might represent some faint promise of rule by the people and in accordance with the principles of freedom and equality, neoliberalism seems to foreclose upon such hope as it normalizes and extends rule by capital.¹¹

Neoliberalism’s usurpation of democratic possibility, Brown points out in the epilogue to her book, applies not just to liberal democracy but to radical democ-

racy as well. The disappearance of a political brake on the mechanisms of economization, in the form of meaningful liberal democracy, is also the disappearance of an important terrain for radical agitation. While in earlier conjunctures liberal democratic ideals could be put to use in criticizing and even limiting the excesses of the market, sometimes serving in the development of counter-hegemonic alternatives to liberal capitalism, neoliberalism extinguishes these prospects. As Brown writes, “when liberal democracy is fully transformed into market democracy, what disappears is this capacity to limit, this platform of critique, and this source of radical democratic inspiration and aspiration.”¹² For the left, she concludes by noting, the implications of this process of democratic destruction are profound. As democratic horizons recede into increasing blurriness and the exigencies of getting by consume ever more of people’s time and energy, the tasks of challenging neoliberal rationality and offering a viable alternative become increasingly difficult. In a world that relentlessly encourages people to think and act exclusively in economic terms, the project of developing a democratic counter-hegemony that encourages living and thinking otherwise is made both challenging and urgent.¹³

For left historians, Brown’s book suggests the crucial task of writing histories that challenge neoliberal common sense and recover a sense of alterity in the past and the future. Of course, writing against some ingrained common sense is not new as far as the left-historical tradition is concerned. Thus, Brown’s account of neoliberalism does not require some grand initiation of an unseen critical mode. Rather, it implies the contemporary significance of renewing, increasing, and refining this kind of counter-hegemonic scholarly energy. Fortunately, writing left history against neoliberalism need not imply the sort of narrowness that Genovese was concerned with as he discussed the role of the socialist historian almost 50 years ago. Surely, fodder for critique and evidence of alterity can be found in a great variety of pasts, both recent and not-so-recent. Accordingly, any attempt to delineate topical or temporal boundaries beyond which left historians cannot go is not a worthwhile endeavour. While writing the history of neoliberalism itself surely stands out as among the most pressing concerns for left historians today, it need not be an all-consuming focus.¹⁴

In his recent book, *The Moral Economists*, intellectual historian Tim Rogan has elegantly reconstructed a critical historical tradition that contemporary scholars might look to for an indication of just how left history against neoliberalism could be written. Focused mainly on three well-known intellectuals in twentieth century Britain—R.H. Tawney, Karl Polanyi, and E.P. Thompson—Rogan describes a history of “moral critique” that “was a success before it was a failure.”¹⁵ The work of these “moral economists” is posed against what Rogan sees as the dominant mode of contemporary criticism of capitalism, defined by a focus on material inequality. Without disregarding the importance of this inequality and its deeply detrimental social effects, he identifies in Tawney, Polanyi, and Thompson an alternative and complementary model in which a certain notion of human personality sustained

an effort to critically evaluate the history of capitalism.¹⁶ The moral economists' histories of capitalism, as Rogan presents them, are worth considering as exemplars for left history against neoliberalism.

From Tawney's 1926 book *Religion and the Rise of Capitalism*, through Polanyi's *The Great Transformation*, published in 1944, and up to Thompson's 1963 classic on *The Making of the English Working Class*, Rogan sees a developing moral critique becoming increasingly viable at each step. Tawney is thus presented as an inaugural figure who, despite certain limits and inadequacies in his thinking, initiated what was ultimately a productive mode of criticizing capitalism. In *Religion and the Rise of Capitalism*, Tawney focused his attention most especially on the seventeenth century and found in that period an increasing "spiritual blindness" accompanied by the ascendance of property as the governing mechanism of human association. The rise of property was, for Tawney, a social corruption that contributed to a commensurate decline in the significance attributed to human personality. And personality mattered, to Tawney, "because it was the nearest we come to knowing God."¹⁷ In his examination of Tawney, then, Rogan narrates an effort to critique capitalism via the invocation of a theologically derived commitment to human personality as a moral baseline. Tawney's aim was to convince his readers that the moral precepts operant in religious life ought to apply equally in social, economic, and political life as well.¹⁸

Where Tawney based his critique of capitalism in theology, Polanyi gave his a secular grounding. Likewise taking an idea of human personality as fundamental, he first looked to Marx's notion of the "fully human" to make his case. But before Polanyi had even finished *The Great Transformation*, an attempt to recount the rise of liberal capitalism from out of the socioeconomic arrangements of medieval England, he became convinced that Marx was an inadequate guide in this regard. Instead of adopting a Marxian definition of the human in order to criticize the tendency of capitalism to encroach and extend its logic into non-economic life, Polanyi eventually turned, somewhat surprisingly, to Adam Smith. In Smith, notwithstanding some particularities of his work, Polanyi found a humanistic thinker who assumed from the beginning that economic issues were to be considered in the context of existing moral and political paradigms. Thus, he rejected the more strictly utilitarian mode of political economy that emerged in the 1830s and which, he thought, included Marx. This commitment to a humanistic political-economic perspective was, for Polanyi, the best launching point for an historical critique of capitalism and its tendency to economize previously non-economic life.¹⁹

In his time, Polanyi was not all that well received or widely read, facts which Rogan attributes to his limited capabilities as an historian. While Polanyi's reconstituted political economy did enable the development of a novel perspective, the redemption of the promise in such a perspective was dependent upon historical analysis. E.P. Thompson accordingly appears, after Polanyi, as the twentieth century moral critic of capitalism who most capably realized the promise of the tradition.

In Thompson's writings, Rogan argues, the moral critique of capitalism reached the extent of its influence. As the inheritor of the historical analysis initiated by Tawney and secularized by Polanyi, Thompson "perfected their common project by finding new words to articulate what his precursors had been trying to describe."²⁰ In particular, by pioneering the concept of a "moral economy" as an historical development that occurred simultaneously with the rise of capitalism, Thompson was able to conceptualize capitalism not just as a system that had sidelined a pre-existing morality, but one that promoted the emergence of new solidarities in the process.²¹ This account of the transition to capitalism was thus defined by a sense of inconclusiveness that could be extended into the present and encourage a sense that things could, somehow, be different.²²

After accounting for all the particular contingencies that contributed to the decline of the moral critique of capitalism from the 1970s, Rogan ends his book by suggesting that the work of Tawney, Polanyi, and, especially, Thompson remains highly relevant in the present. His discussion to this end unfolds mainly via a survey of social choice theory as an area in which the moral critique has been helpfully revived.²³ For left historians, however, the most relevant aspect of Rogan's reconstruction has to do more generally with the ways in which the moral economists used history in order to critique extant social and economic arrangements. As Rogan writes, each of the intellectuals he discusses appealed to history in the process of "reminding readers that arrangements some contemporary writers made to seem natural and inevitable were in fact mutable and contingent, making social forms and economic norms malleable, facilitating debate about reform."²⁴ A similar revelation of alternative possibility must be a central aspect of left history in the age of neoliberalism, defined as it is by the spread of an economic rationality that makes such possibility increasingly difficult to imagine.

Taken together, Brown and Rogan's work provide a sense of urgency, a critical precedent, and a lens through which to assess Genovese's claim that mere quality ought to be the defining feature of left history. Surely, the importance of good historical work was as indisputable when Genovese wrote as it is now. But in rendering neoliberalism as such a profoundly deleterious phenomenon for any hopes of genuine, or even limited, democracy, Brown highlights the necessity of a left history that is concerned with revealing alternative possibility outside the totalizing economic logic of the current conjuncture. The moral economists that Rogan discusses, for their part, give an indication of the intellectual spirit in which this left-historical work might be undertaken. Ultimately, if left history is to contribute to the destruction of neoliberal common sense, it is most well-suited to doing so via historical critique that, by revealing latent alternatives in the past, suggests real alternatives for a democratic future.

NOTES

¹ Eugene D. Genovese, “On Being a Socialist and a Historian,” in *In Red and Black: Marxian Explorations in Southern and Afro-American History* (New York: Allen Lane, 1971), 6.

² Genovese, 7.

³ A similar perspective was advanced by Geoff Eley in *Left History* 11.1. See “Writing in Opposition,” *Left History* 11.1 (2006): 20–25.

⁴ Genovese, 8.

⁵ Genovese, 8–17. Quotation on page 15.

⁶ These processes are strongly associated with the United States and Britain, but they were imposed at global scale in what is known as the “Washington Consensus,” whereby organizations like the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank leveraged loans to developing nations to ensure that development took place along neoliberal lines.

⁷ Wendy Brown, *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism’s Stealth Revolution* (New York: Zone Books, 2015), 9. Brown’s interpretation here is substantially indebted to Michel Foucault, though in *Undoing the Demos* she describes her (re)appraisal of his work as being more critical than in her previous publications, “Neoliberalism and the End of Liberal Democracy,” *Theory and Event* 7 no. 1 (2003) and “American Nightmare: Neoconservatism, Neoliberalism, and De-Democratization,” *Political Theory* 34 no. 6 (2006): 690–714. See *Undoing the Demos*, 30 n29.

⁸ Brown, 10.

⁹ Brown, 17.

¹⁰ Brown, 33.

¹¹ Brown, 33–44.

¹² Brown, 208.

¹³ Brown, 222.

¹⁴ Brown, while noting that neoliberalism does name a global phenomenon, is also careful to note that it takes unique forms across space and time: “Yet in different instantiations across countries, regions, and sectors, in its various intersections with extant cultures and political traditions, and above all, in its convergences with and uptakes of other discourses and developments, neoliberalism takes diverse shapes and spawns diverse content and normative details, even different idioms.” This is important for historians. While in some national contexts, especially Britain and the United States, the left history of neoliberalism is well on its way to being written, in other instances, like in Canada, it is much less so. Assuming that some national experiences are the same as others will not do. See Brown, 21.

¹⁵ Tim Rogan, *The Moral Economists: R.H. Tawney, Karl Polanyi, E.P. Thompson, and*

the Critique of Capitalism (Princeton & Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2017),
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¹⁶ Rogan, 2–7.

¹⁷ Rogan, 40.

¹⁸ Rogan, 16–50.

¹⁹ Rogan, 51–91.

²⁰ Rogan, 166.

²¹ Rogan, 166.

²² Rogan, 157–167.

²³ Rogan, 184–200.

²⁴ Rogan, 3.