Sovereignty and Other Neoliberal Fantasies[*]

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There is a common belief in political theory that we need to pay more attention to the political. Against what is held to be a domination of economic power and technocratic thinking in contemporary capitalism, political theorists call for us to give a greater role for distinctly political concepts such as agonism, the will, or popular sovereignty.[1] The conditions undermining the political, and hence requiring that political theory restore the political, are often identified by the name neoliberalism, where neoliberalism is understood as an ideology or political rationality in which economic logic takes the place of older political logics. The defence of the political would thus be a way of resisting neoliberalism.

In this paper, I want to consider a turn to the political in another discipline. In international development scholarship and practice in the past ten years there has been a movement, variously called "political economy analysis," "thinking and working politically," or the "new politics agenda," which has been successful in persuading the international development community to think about development as a political process. This is perhaps surprising from the point of view of political theory, inasmuch as the agencies involved in international development – western states or large NGOs – are just the sorts of institutions political theorists suspect of putting forward a technocratic, depoliticized, neoliberal agenda. What explains this apparent paradox, I will argue, is that in the new politics agenda in development studies, "politics" is understood in a particular and quite novel way, in which central concepts of politics are reinterpreted according to a neoliberal logic.

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[1]   See, for example, Chantal Mouffe, *The Return of the Political* (London: Verso, 1993); Peter Hallward, "The Will of the People," *Radical Philosophy*, no. 155 (2009); Jodi Dean, *The Communist Horizon* (New York: Verso, 2012).

In the first part of this paper, I will explore the distinct understanding of the political in development studies through a discussion of academic and practice-focussed literature advocating the "new politics agenda." I will then compare this approach to politics with theories of neoliberalism, first quite specifically with Wendy Brown's recent work on neoliberalism, then more generally with Michel Foucault's account of neoliberalism as a particular form of governmentality. The neoliberalization of politics that we can see in development studies can best be understood by paying attention to moments in Foucault's work were he does not *oppose* sovereignty to governmentality, but rather discusses the mutual modifications of these two modes of rule. I conclude by arguing that, in the light of the way political categories can themselves be turned towards neoliberal ends, the attempt to revive political categories that we see in much political theory cannot by itself provide an adequate response to neoliberalism.

1 What's New about Politics in Development Studies?

It may be difficult, particularly from the disciplinary perspective of political science, to understand how considering international development as a political enterprise was ever an unusual enough position to be considered a distinctive approach. For political scientists, after all, to consider some phenomenon political is our usual assumption, not a position requiring a radical rethinking of our discipline. Indeed, some international development academics share the view that development is obviously political. In their survey of the rise of "the new political agenda" in development, Thomas Carothers and Diane de Gramont describe "a certain frustration or even snippishness" from critical scholars who have long been arguing about the inescapably political character of development aid.[2] Nonetheless, there are long-term historical

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2   Thomas Carothers and Diane de Gramont, *Development Aid Confronts Politics: The Almost Revolution* (Washington, DC:

and disciplinary reasons why the international development community has tended to think of itself as primarily non-political. These historical developments explain why "politics" has recently become such a keyword in international development circles, and, more importantly, this history helps explain why a quite particular understanding of politics is operating in this "new political agenda" in development.

The field of international development developed out of the aid programs set up by Western states in the 50s and 60s. That state-centred genesis of aid in the cold-war context provides ample reasons to think of development as fundamentally political, but this context also gave development actors good reasons to view themselves as non-political, and perhaps more importantly to act in ways which encouraged others to think of them as non-political. Aid organizations had both internal and external reasons to assert their autonomy from Western governments. The supposedly apolitical ("technical" or economic) role of development aid ministries or departments (the fore-runners of USAID or the UK's DFID) marked a difference between these departments and diplomatic institutions (the Foreign Office or Department of State) tasked with advancing the state's political interests abroad. This allowed staff within these departments to make the bureaucratic case for their continued, organizationally separate existence, and also helped allay some of the concerns among the countries being aided that this aid was ultimately more in the interests of Western governments than their own. As Carothers and de Gramont put it, the "temptation of the technical" is the "hope that emphasizing economic goals and technical methods will help avoid controversy and overcome local suspicions within developing countries about what these putatively well-intentioned outsiders are really up to."[3]

Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2013), 8.
3   Carothers and de Gramont, *Development Aid Confronts Politics*, 3–4.

This began to change in the 90s, however, in part because, in the immediate aftermath of the cold war, the reputational risks of tying development to explicit political goals seemed less severe, and in part because of the development of a new language for talking about politics which addressed some of the same concerns that had previously led to the retreat to technical and economic discourses: the language of governance. Advocates of "thinking politically" in development writing today tend to take "governance" as simply a synonym for politics adopted as a euphemism at a time when the term itself was out of favour. Adrian Leftwhich writes that "in its earliest manifestations, recognition of the importance of politics was expressed as an interest in governance, largely to avoid the p-word,"[4] while for Carothers and de Gramont governance was "adopted as a relatively nonthreatening, apolitical way to talk about such clearly political issues as governmental incentives, strategies and actions."[5]

Treating "governance" as simply a euphemism for politics, however, obscures the important discursive shift involved in governance talk. Governance was indeed a "way to talk about" politics, but not just in the sense of being a euphemistic vocabulary, but rather in the sense that governance introduces a different conceptual or discursive framework, which changes the kinds of things one can say or think about politics. This change has now become so mainstream in development that it can be hard to see, which his why Leftich and Carothers and de Gramont can treat governance as simply a euphemism for what politics (has now come to) mean, but a trace of that change can be seen in Carothers and de Gramont's description of governance as an "apolitical way to talk about" politics. The rise of governance discourse in policy circles allowed for politics to be grasped as an object, as something to be acted on. The problem that development agencies identified in developing countries was widespread "failures of

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4   Adrian Leftwich, "Thinking and Working Politically: What Does It Mean, Why Is It Important and How Do You Do It?," in *Politics, Leadership and Coalitions in Development: Policy Implications of the DLP Research Evidence* (Birmingham: Developmental Leadership Program, 2011), 4n4.

5   Carothers and de Gramont, *Development Aid Confronts Politics*, 6.

governance,"[6] and so the remedy was to introduce good governance, that is, to reorganize the political institutions of a country to make them more effective at pursuing certain ends. More generally, this apolitical way of talking about politics reconceptualizes politics as instrumentally valuable: rather than being an arena of conflict over ends, politics is now understood as one particular means that may be employed to achieve certain ends.

This new instrumental understanding of politics is cemented in the development literature through two related distinctions: one is the distinction between political processes and political agendas, and the other is the idea of the separability of political methods from political goals. The distinction between processes and agendas denotes the idea that development organizations can intervene to promote the development of political processes in a way which is indifferent to the agendas particular political actors are pursuing within these processes. Political processes are here understood as skills or capacities that are neutral with regard to specific outcomes. Leftwich even draws an explicit parallel between "investing" in "the political capacity of organizations" and the "technical skills" which are "the traditional domain of capacity building."[7] The separability of political goals and political methods also renders politics instrumental but in a slightly different way. Carothers and de Gramont emphasize the ways in which development actors can use "politically smart methods" to achieve their goals. They need to "operate from a genuine understanding of the political realities of the local context, engage with a diverse array of relevant actors both inside and outside the government, and insert aid strategically and subtly as a facilitating element in local processes of change."[8] In both cases, politics is something done by other people (for development agencies, people in developing

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6   Carothers and de Gramont, *Development Aid Confronts Politics*, 6.
7   Leftwich, "Thinking and Working Politically," 8.
8   Carothers and de Gramont, *Development Aid Confronts Politics*, 11.

countries), which development agencies must use strategically, either facilitating political processes or manipulating them. , in order to achieve their ends.

In discussing this view of politics as a space or background within which development agencies act strategically, Leftwich describes political contexts as providing "room for manoeuvre," a phrase which I think is particularly revealing.[9] "Manoeuvre" is initially a military term for a "planned or regulated movement,"[10] particularly one in which soldiers are drilled. That is, a manoeuvre is a movement considered as a separable piece, a movement that can be abstracted and repeated, treated as a lesson that can be transmitted and learned. This is what is distinctive about politics as it is understood in much contemporary policy literature, as opposed to traditional understandings of politics in political theory: politics is understood here as something that can be abstracted as a skill or set of techniques to be employed instrumentally by development practitioners. The currently fashionable jargon in development is to ask of any sphere of knowledge or practice, "what works," and politics is subject to the same criteria. As Alina Rocha Menocal puts it, "some shared characteristics of 'what works' when working politically are emerging."[11] But in the very idea that "what works" would be the primary way of evaluating politics, we can see the emergence of a much broader trend, a discursive shift that is central to the rise of neoliberalism in the past 40 years.

2   The Autonomy of Practice

The World Bank advocates considering the political aspects of development in order "to develop a results focussed diagnostic protocol that helps operational staff."[12] This is a long way from

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9   Leftwich, "Thinking and Working Politically," 5.
10   *Oxford English Dictionary*, 3rd ed., 2000, s.v. "manoeuvre."
11   Alina Rocha Menocal, "Getting Real about Politics" (London: Overseas Development Institute, 2014), 8, http://www.odi.org/sites/odi.org.uk/files/odi-assets/publications-opinion-files/8887.pdf.
12   World Bank, "The World Bank Approach to Public Sector Management 2011-2020: Better Results from Public Sector Institutions," 2012, 15, http://siteresources.worldbank.org/EXTGOVANTICORR/Resources/3035863-

definitions of the political in terms of action in common or friend-enemy antagonism. How did

understandings of politics transform in such a stark way? The analysis of neoliberalism that

draws on Michel Foucault can help us understand what is going on here. Jonathan Fisher and

Heather Marquette describe the way politics has become operationalized in policy discourse,

that is, how thinking about politics has become one instrumental "tool" which policymakers

can employ to their own ends, or a component of a "good practice framework" which can be

applied indifferently to any area of policy.[13] In this, international development is in line with a

more general trend identified by Wendy Brown within neoliberalism, the depoliticizing

discourse of "best practices." Brown sees in the commonplace jargon of best practices a very

specific "fusion of business, political and knowledge concerns" which is an important

organizing principle of neoliberalism.[14] Practices are presented as distinct from "purposes or

missions" in that practices are not goals but instead "pure means," and as such are formally

neutral.[15] It is this formal neutrality, however, which allows the idea of best practices to do its

"normative work."[16] The very idea, that is, of practices as pure means depends on a particular

way of thinking of means and ends as disconnected, a disconnect which Brown identifies as an

element of the market rationality of neoliberalism.

Best practices are understood as pure means, and so as processes which can be detached from

products or goals, and so can be transferred across sectors – from the manufacture of cars to the

manufacture of aeroplanes, from fast food restaurants to funeral homes, or from the computer

industry to education. This is possible because best practices have a certain abstractness – they

1285601351606/PSM-Approach.pdf.

13 Jonathan Fisher and Heather Marquette, "Donors Doing Political Economy Analysis™: From Process to Product
    (and Back Again?)," Research report (Birmingham: Developmental Leadership Program, 2014), 8,
    http://publications.dlprog.org/Donors%20Doing%20Political%20Economy%20Analysis%20-%20From
    %20Process%20to%20Product%20(and%20Back%20Again).pdf.

14 Wendy Brown, *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism's Stealth Revolution* (New York: Zone Books, 2015), 136.

15 Brown, *Undoing the Demos*, 136.

16 Brown, *Undoing the Demos*, 135.

are conceived of as processes, but as processes which are abstracted from any of the concrete activities that make up any actual process. Put another way, best practices are an especially developed form of abstract labour. Abstract labour, as Marx argues, is a result of the processes within capitalism that homogenize labour and treat all labour as equivalent.[17] The idea of abstract "best practices" is a reflection of this fundamental abstraction of labour, but crucially the jargon of "best practices" is held to apply equally (that is, abstractly) to commercial and non-commercial activities alike. The abstraction that allows for this generalization, however, is itself representative of a particular logic that derives specifically from the organization of capitalism. It is because of this role in transmitting a commercial logic to non-commercial activities that Brown identifies "best practices" as a privileged example of "marketization," that is, the universalization of market logic which is characteristic of neoliberalism: "extractable in principle only, best practices bring with them the ends and values with which they are imbricated; by the experts own accounts, these are market values."[18]

It is in this generalization of a particular, marketized, logic, Brown argues, that best practices "are not merely claiming to be unpolitical, but constitute an anti-politics and thereby construct a particular image of the political."[19] Best practices, that is, are opposed, explicitly or implicitly, to a politics defined by contestation and partisanship, where these are painted as negative attributes:

> From the epistemological standpoint of best practices, politics appears as a
> combination of dicta or commands where there should be expertise, as particular
> interests or debates about ends where there should be teamwork for a goal, as
> partisanship where there should be neutrality and objectivity in both knowledge and

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17 Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, trans. Ben Fowkes (London: Penguin Books, 1992), 166–7.
18 Brown, *Undoing the Demos*, 138.
19 Brown, *Undoing the Demos*, 139.

practice, as provincialism where there should be the open doors and the lingua franca of the market.[20]

This is strikingly similar to how Carothers and de Gramont describe the characterization of politics which the "economic-centric, technocratic approach to development" fears:

> While economics appears as a rational, scientific domain, politics seems to imply inevitable entanglement with the irrational side of human affairs – with ideological fervor, nationalistic impulses, and other volatile passions. Economics emphasizes consensual ideas, like the universal appeal of prosperity and the tragedy of poverty. In contrast, politics is all about conflicting visions and objectives. Economics deals in definite goals, with easily measurable signs of improvement. Politics is about subjective values, with signs of progress hard to agree on, let alone measure.[21]

The technocratic approach to development thus adopts the neoliberal approach to best practices in just the way Brown describes. In this approach, "best practices are intended to displace and replace politics in whatever domain they govern."[22] What we see in the development authors I have been discussing, however, is rather different: in the "new politics agenda," where a political approach is operationalized, politics itself becomes a best practice. We see a further twist on neoliberal rationality, in which politics is not posited as the opposite to best practices approaches, which by contrast show best practices to indeed be best. Now, we see politics itself being reconceptualized along neoliberal lines.

What is involved in this neoliberal reconceptualization of politics? The first thing to notice is who this development discourse about "working politically" is directed towards. The "new politics agenda" has primarily been discussed by western development academics and

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20 Brown, *Undoing the Demos*, 139.
21 Carothers and de Gramont, *Development Aid Confronts Politics*, 3–4.
22 Brown, *Undoing the Demos*, 139.

development agencies, and is primarily intended to alter the behaviour of western governments and NGOs (in the jargon, "donors"). "Thinking politically," or political economy analysis (PEA) as practised in development today is, Fisher and Marquette write, "an approach designed by donors and Western consultants alone, undertaken primarily (though not always) by donors and Western consultants (albeit usually with assistance from local counterparts) and envisaged, ultimately, as primarily of relevance for donor staff."[23] This exclusion of actors within developing countries is not merely an oversight: Western development organizations "have, in fact, often deliberately tried to keep their developing country counterparts 'in the dark' about the entire PEA enterprise."[24] This secretiveness has the more-or-less explicit intention of aprising development agencies of politically sensitive issues without alerting the recipients of development aid to this knowledge. Political analysis, then, has "more in common with the practice of 'opposition research' or intelligence gathering" than the ideals of partnership usually espoused by western development agencies.[25]

Here, then, we can see the particular kind of power involved in the knowledge that goes under the name of "thinking politically." Western governments and NGOs attempt to acquire knowledge of political contexts and processes in developing countries in order to strengthen their ability to intervene in these processes. This is not just a neoliberal anti-politics, but is an inversion of previous understandings of politics. Politics has traditionally been seen as the domain of action and agency: to be a political subject is to be an active participant, a free agent. In the operationalized understanding of politics now current in development, however, politics it the object of knowledge and manipulation. In this understanding, it is because people in developing countries act politically that they can be grasped (that is, understood and acted on)

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23   Fisher and Marquette, "Donors Doing Political Economy Analysis," 13.
24   Fisher and Marquette, "Donors Doing Political Economy Analysis," 13.
25   Fisher and Marquette, "Donors Doing Political Economy Analysis," 6; see also 15–16.

by development interventions. This reconfiguration of politics raises problems for opponents of neoliberalism who see a return to politics as a way to resist neoliberalism. Relatedly, the spectre of the neoliberalization of politics that we see in contemporary development studies raises difficulties for analyses of neoliberalism that define it in terms of a market rationality *replacing* a political sphere. Such analyses often draw on Foucault, but, as I will now try to argue, Foucault's analysis can help us understand this rather different landscape of neoliberalism in which politics persists, but in a reconfigured form.

3 Sovereignty as Neoliberal Fantasy

What do I mean by calling sovereignty a neoliberal fantasy? First, I mean that sovereignty – that is, a particular image of politics as the domain of the sovereign state – is fantasized by neoliberalism in order to serve as its ideological opposite and adversary, as Brown argues. However, the reason neoliberalism projects this particular image of sovereignty as its opponent is that this idea of sovereignty is deeply embedded in political discourse up to the present day, and so in its attempt to fashion a new discourse neoliberalism draws on and repurposes this tradition of theorizing sovereignty, or at least certain aspects of it.[26] So sovereignty is also a neoliberal fantasy in the sense that it structures neoliberal imagination without neoliberals necessarily being aware of it.

Sovereignty as a fantasized opponent is essential to what Foucault calls "state-phobia," the "anti-state suspicion" which, he says, "currently circulates in such varied forms of our thought."[27] Foucault's objection to this "great fantasy of the paranoic and devouring state" is a

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26 The neoliberal approach to sovereignty, that is to say, is the outcome of what Foucault calls "the hazardous play of dominations," a particular interpretation imposed on past theories to appropriate them for neoliberal purposes ("Nietzsche, Genealogy, History," in *The Foucault Reader* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984), 81, 83).

27 Michel Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1978 - 79*, trans. Michel Senellart (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 188.

matter of what he calls "critical morality," that is, a lack of self-critique or self-analysis which would ask how the state has became the privileged object of critique.[28] The problem with state-phobic discourses is that they do not study *processes* of "statification," that is, the "incessant transactions which modify, or move, or drastically change, or insidiously shift sources of finance, modes of investment, decision-making centers, forms and types of control, relationships between local powers, the central authority, and so on,"[29] of which the state is an effect. Rather than paying attention to these processes, the state-phobic discourse of neoliberalism proceeds on the assumption that the state has an essence, "a kinship, a sort of genetic continuity or evolving implication between different forms of the state."[30] This construction of the essence of the state prevents neoliberals from considering how the state became a phobic object, and also prevents those of us caught in the grip of state-phobia from considering how the elements of discourse that have been assembled to form the essence of the state might be resignified and used in other ways.

It is particularly important to understand statification as a process to understand neoliberalism, because neoliberalism is, at bottom, a change in form of these processes of statification. If the state is "the mobile effect of a regime of multiple governmentalities," it will of course be extremely important in studying any determinate period of time to look at what governmentalities are in play and what kind of state they structure.[31] This indeed is central to Foucault's analysis of ordoliberalism (i.e., German neoliberalism), which is, he says, a regime in which "the economy produces legitimacy for the state which is its guarantor."[32] "In contemporary Germany," Foucault writes (meaning the Germany of 1979 which he believes to

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28 Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics*, 188, 186.
29 Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics*, 77.
30 Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics*, 187.
31 Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics*, 77.
32 Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics*, 84.

be fundamentally an ordoliberal state), "the economy, economic development and economic growth produces sovereignty; it produces political sovereignty through the institution and institutional game that, precisely, makes this economy work."[33] Here we can see the primacy of economic rationality which is central to neoliberalism, but we can also see something else, which might be surprising if we assumed that neoliberal governmentality displaced political sovereignty. Here (and throughout *The Birth of Biopolitics*) Foucault insists on the continued existence of sovereignty, in forms that are nonetheless reshaped or appropriated by the novel governmentality of neoliberalism.

If, as Foucault argues, historical continuity is built from discontinuities,[34] it is important to pay attention to the way new discourses reappropriate, rather than simply neglect, old terms, and the term sovereignty is, I think, an old term that is particularly important to neoliberalism. Neoliberal state-phobia is the latest of many ways in which liberalism has appropriated sovereignty, which itself responds to the earlier appropriation of sovereignty in the discourse of *raison d'état*. This is why Foucault's discussion of neoliberalism in *The Birth of Biopolitics* follows on from his earlier discussion of *raison d'état*. The focus on the political maintenance of state sovereignty, which defines *raison d'état*, and the focus on the economic limitation and support of the political, which defines liberalism, including neoliberalism, are two modes of a more general transformation in how power was exercised and how this exercise was understood. Prior to the early modern period, government was understood in terms of the wisdom of the ruler, "governing in accordance with the order of things … according to the knowledge of human and divine laws," in which "one basically tried to regulate and model government in terms of truth."[35] In the governmentalities which follow, both *raison d'état* and neoliberalism,

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33 Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics*, 84.
34 *Herkunft* (descent) and *Entstehung* (emergence) are the two terms Foucault takes from Nietzsche in his discussion of genealogy ("Nietzsche, Genealogy, History," 80, 83.).
35 Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics*, 311.

power is not exercised "in accordance with wisdom, but according to calculation, that is to say,

the calculation of force, relations, wealth, and factors of strength. That is to say, one no longer

tries to peg government to the truth; one tries to peg government to rationality."[36] The question

of what role sovereignty plays as a discursive element of neoliberalism, then, can be approached

by asking how neoliberalism interpreted sovereignty according to its own understanding of

rationality.

The specifically neoliberal understanding of rationality is perhaps expressed most clearly in

the neoliberalism of the Chicago school, and particularly Gary Becker.[37] In Becker's work

rationality comes to be identified with economics. "In the end," Foucault paraphrases Becker, "is

not economics the analysis of forms of rational conduct, and does not all rational conduct,

whatever it may be, fall under something like economic analysis?"[38] The equation comes about

because neoliberalism defines both rationality and economic behaviour the same way: as "any

purposeful behavior which involves, broadly speaking, a strategic choice of means, ways and

instruments."[39] This equation is not, however, just a case of neoliberalism generalizing

economic criteria to other domains. As Foucault points out, the definition of the economic is

itself a result of "the essential epistemological transformation" of neoliberalism, which changed

"the general field of reference of economic analysis."[40] 18th and 19th century economics had a

determinate object: it studied mechanisms of production and mechanisms of exchange.

Neoliberal economics, on the other hand, has a broader and more abstract object: it is "the

study and analysis of the way in which scarce means are allocated to competing ends."[41]

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36 Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics*, 311.
37 Gary S. Becker, *The Economic Approach to Human Behavior* (University of Chicago Press, 1976).
38 Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics*, 269.
39 Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics*, 268–9.
40 Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics*, 222.
41 Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics*, 222. In rejecting the possibility of "a single end or cumulative ends,"
     neoliberalism is rejecting a tradition of rationality, going back at least to Aristotle, in which rationality would
     precisely be about discovering how apparently conflicting ends were in fact means to a single ultimate end.

Neoliberalism reinterprets sovereignty in terms of this particular understanding of rationality. *Raison d'état* understood itself in terms of the strategic rationality of the state as personified in the sovereign. The sovereign manoeuvres to maintain his state in a competition with other sovereigns.[42] The modification of rationality in neoliberalism, however, carries with it a modification of this idea of strategic manoeuvering characteristic of the sovereign. Strategic thinking is narrowed to the neoliberal economic model of efficient pursuit of conflicting choices, and this pursuit comes to be lodged in the individual as the subject of interest. The idea of an individual, subjective interest reveals, Foucault says, "something which absolutely did not exist before," an "immediately and absolutely subjective will."[43] The type of will associated with interest then introduces into liberal discourse an alternative account of will to the juridical will that was the foundation of sovereignty in earlier theories. For Foucault, this divergence in understandings of will is fundamental to liberalism: "Liberalism acquired its modern shape precisely with the formulation of this essential incompatibility between the non-totalizable multiplicity of economic subjects of interest and the totalizing unity of the juridical sovereign."[44] Foucault concludes from this incompatibility that "the problematic of the economy is by no means the logical completion of the great problematic of sovereignty,"[45] but I don't think we should interpret this to mean that the problematic of sovereignty simply disappears in liberalism and neoliberalism. Rather, the problematic of the economy is not the completion of the problematic of sovereignty because history is not a history of completion, but of rupture and and reappropriation, and neoliberalism is a reappropriation of the problematic of sovereignty. When the idea of the strategizing sovereign is reinterpreted in accordance with the narrowed economic conception of strategy in neoliberal rationality,

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42 Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics*, 6.
43 Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics*, 273.
44 Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics*, 282.
45 Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics*, 282.

sovereignty becomes transposed on to the individual subject. This transposition, however, has extremely significant consequences, because where strategic action is where the power of the sovereign state resides, strategic action by the subject of interest is precisely the "grid of intelligibility" through which "the individual becomes governmentalizable."[46]

This individualization of sovereignty which also inverts sovereignty from a power to a liability parallels the reinterpretation of the political that we saw in the international development literature. Comparing this development discourse to Foucault's analysis of neoliberalism suggests that the operationalization of politics is not merely a peculiarity of the field of development, but rather represents a more general characteristic of contemporary neoliberalism. This raises some difficult questions for political theory and political practice in a neoliberal era. If neoliberalism is not merely displacing politics, but reinterpreting politics into a category that is supportive of neoliberalism, political engagement risks becoming a mere reinforcement of neoliberalism. At least, this neoliberalization of politics suggests that a theoretical reinvigoration of political concepts, such as sovereignty and the will, will not by itself be able to provide a critical response to neoliberalism. This would be the final sense in which sovereignty is a neoliberal fantasy: a fantasy common to subjects in neoliberal times that some re-energized concept of the political could undo the disempowerment we feel in neoliberalism.[47] So what else might political theory do?

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46 Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics*, 252.
47 This would be an example of what Elisabeth Anker calls melodramatic politics, which "revive[s] the guarantee of sovereign freedom for both the state and the individual in a neoliberal era when both seem out of reach" (*Orgies of Feeling: Melodrama and the Politics of Freedom* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014), 11).

4 What Is to Be Undone?

The title of Brown's book, *Undoing the Demos*, might suggest that the demos is a fragile or lost object to be defended or restored.[48] Brown, however, disclaims such a view, writing that her "critique of neoliberalization does not resolve into a call to rehabilitate liberal democracy, nor, on the other hand, does it specify what kind of democracy might be crafted from neoliberal regimes to resist them."[49] The analysis of neoliberalism I have been putting forward in this paper certainly suggests that any nostalgic attempt to defend the political from neoliberalism would be a mistake. Neoliberalism does not *oppose* our political concepts so much as it reinterprets them in its own image, and so a simple reassertion of these concepts cannot constitute a response to neoliberalism. What might allow for a response to neoliberalism would be to impose a new interpretation on neoliberalism's own reinterpretations, and for this the kind of critique undertaken by Brown is invaluable. I want to conclude this paper by drawing out a suggestion from Brown about how we might think about politics in a way which will not be immediately recaptured by neoliberal politics.

Brown make two related criticisms of Foucault in her assessment of his analysis of neoliberalism. The first criticism is that Foucault concentrates on state and elite discourses of neoliberalism and so, in his account of neoliberalism "there are few social forces from below and no shared processes of rule or shared struggles for freedom."[50] Brown suggests that paying attention to such shared struggles will be helpful in understanding what neoliberalism is undermining. The second criticism that Brown makes of Foucault is that, because Foucault ignores collective political action, his account of the rise of *homo oeconomicus* misses the existence

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48 This would be a view of politics similar to that of Leo Strauss (*What Is Political Philosophy?* (Glencoe, IL: Free Press, 1959)) or Hannah Arendt (*The Human Condition*, 2nd ed (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998)).

49 Brown, *Undoing the Demos*, 201.

50 Brown, *Undoing the Demos*, 73.

of another model of the subject which continues to exist alongside it, *homo politicus*. What Foucault misses, according to Brown, is "the persistence of *homo politicus*, however thinned, through modernity."[51]

Brown does not give a specific definition of *homo politicus*, and the diversity of historical reference in Brown's discussion of *homo politicus* suggests that a single definition may not be possible. *Homo politicus* is active in "eighteenth-century, nineteenth-century and twentieth-century quests for political emancipation, enfranchisement, equality and, in more radical moments, substantive popular sovereignty," and Brown traces the theorization of *homo politicus* through Locke, Rousseau, and Hegel un to Bentham, Mill, and even Freud.[52] This promiscuous movement of *homo politicus* from Lockean theory to the civil rights movement to Occupy Wall Street emphasizes the importance of historical diversity in a Foucauldian approach. To follow Brown's suggestion and rectify Foucault's neglect of political activity would be to give a genealogy of *homo politicus*, that is, to trace the reversals and reappropriations that have overtaken *homo politicus*. This might lead us to wonder how helpful the abstract category of "the political" is; a better repository of ways to think about alternatives to neoliberalism might be the repertoire of different ways of being political at different times. This would disrupt the operationalized understanding of politics that we inherit from neoliberalism and might allow us to see new contingencies hidden within the apparent universalization of neoliberalism's market rationality.

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51   Brown, *Undoing the Demos*, 94.
52   Brown, *Undoing the Demos*, 94–8.

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