GOVERNING through FREEDOM

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Neoliberal Culture: Living with American Neoliberalism, by Patricia Ventura, Farnham, Surrey: Ashgate, 2012, 148 pages, £55 (hardcover), IBSN 978-1-4094-4343-8

Theoretical neoliberalism is the long work of reconstruction of economic theory led by Friedrich Hayek and Milton Friedman and others to forge a mode of intervention that sees big state planning as a harbinger of new threats to individual independence and freedom—the road to a new serfdom. What should not be underestimated is the vast intellectual labor of this tradition—it can be traced from the famous Walter Lippmann Colloquium in Paris in 1938 and from the creation in 1947 of the Mont Pèlerin Society—its internal divisions and rifts and, toward the end, a certain disillusionment. An obituary of the latest president of the Mont Pèlerin Society, Kenneth Minogue, reports (*Daily Telegraph*, July 3, 2013) an ironic disillusionment at the very summit of the society: democratic governments inspired by neoliberalism have become quasi-totalitarian, tending a servile population: Saint George having seen off one dragon endlessly invents more and more dragons to slay. This ironic effect had not gone unnoticed in the debates in the neoliberal camp: state spending increases, debt increases, interventions expand in number and scope; even ultraneoliberalism produces a paradoxical effect, which might be called inverted socialism (a state that favors and provides for the direct and indirect benefit of the corporations and the rich and stigmatizes the poor).

For the ideologists of right-wing neoliberalism, Keynesian welfare-statism was/is a form of serfdom producing high levels of bureaucracy and individual dependency. The attack on this state form, led by Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher,

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brought deregulation, privatization, and tax reform, a program that unleashed the cult of capital accumulation. Its unintended outcome was mass impoverishment on the one side and the detachment of a hyperwealthy elite on the other. If Patricia Ventura does not draw on very much theory, in effect she puts Michel Foucault back into a neo-Marxian frame. This move has been made many times before; is it valid now? Can it deal with the obvious difficulty that the proletariat as revolutionary agency is no longer with us? Ventura argues that after 1990 "neoliberalism rises up to replace postmodernism as the cultural dominant" (6). The virtue of Ventura's approach is that her analysis does not isolate a culture that is distinct from vast institutional and structural change but emerges out of an assemblage of component elements—reorganization of the welfare state where "hyperlegalism" (bureaucracy) is used to inhibit welfare claimants, biopower, rise and consolidation of unaccountable corporate power, and globalization (notably the extension of free trade that has large trade deficits as a consequence). The analysis itself looks at transformations in the family, in work, and in the media; the social composition of cities, war, and politics; and the shifts toward the dominance of finance capital. All this is a consequence of "governing through freedom" where the individual is faced with having to manage choices, form an identity, and nurture a personal capital (in the new sense). Certainly, the idea that there has been a failure of opposition to neoliberalism because of the novelty of the way that new styles of government have a paradoxical effect—the welfare state is withdrawn, yet the state persists, even extends its domains in new ways that seem to defy sociopolitical logic (to the despair of the radical Right itself)—is compelling. The aim of the book is to reveal what that logic is as "a structure of feeling" and cultural logic.

Ventura suggests that the new culture emerges on the basis of shifts in this institutional capitalism: corporations take advantage of the changing shape and disposition of the state as it is privatized and financialized. The neoliberal doctrine holds that the state usurped natural social altruism, so when the state withdraws welfare support this natural altruism will return. What emerges is not quite that. Into the space of welfare vacated by the state step countless experts oriented to self-help ideologies. Under the radical drive to cut and reconstruct welfare, to open up markets to global competition, corporations developed new forms of labor discipline (both at home and abroad) so that prices are driven down—the Walmart supermarket chain is the exemplar here. The shift is relentless, "privatization is the way" is the mantra, and the individual must morph into a self-enterprising citizen, taking responsibility for a life lived in a market. A culture emerges in this void, according to Ventura: the old public service ideology changes to one of self-interest, cynically exploiting images of altruism. What emerges in this analysis is a reevaluation of the image of the patriarchal family, for conservative neoliberalism is a kind of nostalgic fundamentalism.

Ventura provides case studies: Las Vegas, Oprah Winfrey's book club and Walmart, welfare, the Iraq war ("Operation Freedom"), and biopower. The state's shift away from welfare is not a complete abandonment but a move toward making dependency both a judgment of individual failure and procedurally bureaucratic (here called hyperlegalism). Winfrey's reading practices, her television show, and her book club teach the neoliberal life. We are

at the level not of the state but of those forms that are close to the lives of citizens: corporate power. Walmart becomes the local store, becomes home. The logistics of the Iraq war reveal shifts in the same direction: the fighting force is no longer conscripted; important functions are contracted out to private corporations. The government does not in fact aim to deliver freedom as such (the aim of the old liberalism); it aims to govern through freedom. Biopower is a leading example. Whereas in the past the patient went to the physician when ill and entered the sick role, now there is active pressure on the individual to make lifestyle changes, since we are all more or less at risk (while, as Ventura points out, the cultural environment produced by corporations acts in the opposite direction, as in the case of the obesity moral panic—to turn us and the environment into polluted and bloated junk).

Ventura argues that even if Vegas is a kind of fantasy, its history over the past forty years reveals that even excess land has a surprisingly wider logic, here identified as the changes brought about by the immigration of Latinos and their own culture and organization (unionization). The challenge to the real continues apace in a desert city that boasts lakes, fake skies, visitors (39.2 million in 2007), even urban growth (Vegas's population reached nearly 2 million in 2010). There is a loss of postmodern irony to literality, and this has only added to its appeal. But the complex is haunted by new realities: the "neoliberal era" has seen a shift toward a family friendly Vegas, since children were and are not permitted in casinos; it has moved toward a shopping experience, framed in a new way through its physical environment, and as Ventura suggests the whole thing becomes more classy or, as she says, provides "architainment," a "bourgeois vacation paradise" (52–53). Vegas tourists require "excess, expense, and the patina of class" and eat their dinner while looking at Picassos (59). Vegas will not tolerate the counterspectacle of the public feeding the starving (146). But what is striking is the change under way in the social composition in America, most strikingly the shift to a Roman Catholic, Spanish-speaking culture. This shift has brought with it new social solidarities. One instance of this change has been the success of unionization in Las Vegas, the new Detroit.

Strange displacements of solidarity occur. For example, in the Iraq war the soldiers were volunteers (they chose to enter military service), and much of the logical military apparatus was privatized and placed at a distance from direct public control (the Abu Ghraib incident was in a private contractors' sector). Because the soldiers are volunteers they form their "band of brothers" solidarity to engage in their operations rather than become a band of idealists fighting for a cause, and to make them feel at home the zones of action become an extension of America (the troops actually experience significant weight gain). Unlike previous wars, there is no resistance to conscription (there is none) and no spectacle of dead soldiers returning to the homeland.

This unexpected theme of family is also evident in the discussion of corporations via *The Oprah Winfrey Show*. Here the center of analysis is Winfrey's book club and especially one of its recommended novels, *Where the Heart Is* (1995), by Billie Letts, selected in 1998. The Winfrey show answers the question of how to live in a neoliberal culture: to survive in this culture one must learn to be independent, to love oneself, to help oneself, and help is available in a new way offered by

the corporation that loves you; one also needs family, and the family in this novel is to be found around the complex of the supermarket, Walmart, for the corporation wants you and loves you. In the novel even Sam Walton, the owner of the supermarket chain, makes a comforting appearance. One must accommodate to this environment where the state withdraws its welfare and the media counselor tells you which tales to consume and why they are good for you. It is, both in the novel and in reality, to Walmart they go; revel in the fact that wherever you are in America the Walmarts are comforting, for they are all the same (77), like McDonald's. They appear to usurp the position of the carer, to move toward filling the gap left by social agencies, and thus open up a kind of inverted socialism of the corporation, except that the corporation, in fact, doesn't care.

At the same time, neoliberalism works against alternatives: it pursues the basic process of dispossession that capital accumulation requires. Ventura suggests that one of the reasons why resistance to it has been ineffective is that the full effects of radical neoliberalism are not seen as a whole. Then, at the end of the book, Ventura offers some short observations on "resistance" to neoliberalism. Strangely, this discussion is about food and the movements around local sustainability, "gleaning," and public feeding, rather than about any one of the components Ventura has isolated theoretically. There is growing support for Food Not Bombs, a movement that tries to make a public spectacle of feeding the starving, for America has produced a vast population of impoverished people; a staggering 49 million people were in "food insecure" households in 2008 (146). The problem perhaps with this account is that it does not use all the considerable resources available for a critique (virtually nothing on Internet culture is provided), or to connect what is called here resistance to political opposition, or, indeed, to take a closer look at what is going on in the American family and the commercialization of intimacy. Nevertheless, this book is a valuable addition to others that see the period 1978–2008 as a unique stage of American history and to the analysis of a culture that arises out of techniques of government through freedom.

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