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Climbing the Oak of Freedom:

*An analysis of Wendy Brown's
understanding of freedom*

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Abstract

Furthered as one of the core values behind neoliberal ideas, freedom becomes a contested site in contemporary critiques of neoliberalism. As one of the leading scholars on—and critics of—neoliberalism, Wendy Brown argues that neoliberal rationality undermines the prospect of democracy, as well as freedom. By using a contextualizing and reconstructive method, this study analyzes multiple works of Brown to gain a granular understanding of her notion of freedom and evaluate its consistency and coherence. The essay also situates Brown's understanding of freedom in regards to well-known academic concepts of freedom by introducing the theoretical framework of the *Oak of Freedom*, which allows concepts to build on each other. The study concludes that Brown's understanding of freedom consists of a mutually reinforcing relationship between ruling oneself and participating in ruling together with others. This freedom requires political equality and is guided by moral deliberation and contemplation. Furthermore, the study illuminates the paradoxical nature of Brown's freedom that follows from its democratic foundation. Brown is also found to be inconsistent in connecting freedom to autocracies and incoherent when relating freedom to equality. Comparing Brown's freedom to other concepts, her notion is placed as a positive concept in the *Oak*.

Keywords: *Freedom, Wendy Brown, Neoliberalism, Democracy, Homo politicus*

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Table of Contents

1. Introduction.....	4
1.1 Aim of the study and research question.....	5
1.2 Roadmap.....	5
2. Background.....	6
3. Material.....	7
3.1 Why these texts?.....	7
3.2 Freedom and the Plastic Cage.....	8
3.3 Undoing the Demos.....	8
3.4 In the Ruins of Neoliberalism.....	8
4. Method.....	9
4.1 Contextualization.....	9
4.1.1 Textual context.....	9
4.1.2 Intellectual context.....	10
4.2 Reconstruction.....	10
4.3 Executing the study.....	10
4.4 Methodological objections.....	11
4.4.1 Intersubjectivity.....	11
4.4.2 Operationalization.....	12
5. Theory.....	13
5.1 Freedom as non-interference.....	13
5.2 Freedom as non-domination.....	14
5.3 Positive freedom - freedom to what?.....	14
5.3.1 Capabilities and authenticity.....	15
5.3.2 Self-development and democracy.....	16
5.4 The Oak of Freedom.....	16
6. Analysis.....	18
6.1 Neoliberalism according to Brown.....	18
6.2 Brown's understanding of freedom.....	19
6.2.1 Freedom explicitly.....	19
6.2.2 Homo politicus and the political.....	20
6.2.3 'Self-rule' and 'participation in rule by the demos'.....	21
6.3 Brown's freedom, dissected.....	23
6.3.1 Democracy and autocracy.....	23
6.3.2 Equality and institutionalization.....	24
6.4 Climbing the Oak of Freedom.....	26
7. Conclusion.....	28
Bibliography.....	29

1. Introduction

What is freedom? Theorized by thinkers spanning from Marx (1981, 959) to Friedman (1962/2002), championed by politicians as diverse as Donald Trump (Bradner et al. 2023) and John F Kennedy (National Archives 2022), and furthered by political movements from the French Revolution (*liberté!*) to covid protests (BBC 2022). As a value constantly alluded to, *freedom* has the peculiar character of being something most people strive for yet something very unique to every one. Although extensively conceptualized within academia, the notion has not become less obscure. In this sense, freedom truly is an “essentially contested concept” (Christman 2005, 79).

Yet, in an historical-political context some ideas of freedom have been more influential on contemporary times. During the Cold War, the West advanced a specific idea of freedom as opposition to communism. Spinning on the neoliberal theories of Friedrich Hayek, freedom was believed to be furthered by free markets and the absence of state intervention (De Dijn 2020, 333, 340; Steger & Roy 2021, 15-16). Following the fall of the Berlin Wall and communism, the neoliberal conception of freedom echoed triumphantly. As the West developed democracies according to the neoliberal framework of economic liberalization, Francis Fukuyama could famously declare the arrival at history’s end station (Fukuyama 1992, 41-51).

A little over 30 years later, neoliberalism has become the target for a wide array of critiques, from a broad variety of fields. For example, neoliberalism has been accused of infusing feminism, entrenching women’s role as caregivers and domestic laborers (Rottenberg 2018), and of taking advantage of crises to consolidate its principles (Mirowski 2013). Even Fukuyama himself has criticized it, claiming—among other things—that neoliberal trimming of the state undermines necessary social protections (Fukuyama 2022).

One of the most extensive and elaborate critiques of neoliberalism comes from Wendy Brown. As Professor Emerita at UC Berkeley, the world renowned political philosopher has theorized and criticized neoliberalism in a number of books and essays. Viewing neoliberalism as a political rationality, Brown argues that neoliberal reasoning has infused all spheres of society. Not only does this lead to a dissolution of the idea of citizens, integral for democracy, but to actively antidemocratic politics (Brown 2015; Brown 2019).

In the light of Brown’s critique of neoliberalism, the notion of freedom resurfaces. If not neoliberal freedom, what freedom? The view of freedom becomes important, not only to understand her critique of neoliberalism but to understand what could be proposed instead. However, while her staunch opposition to neoliberalism is eloquently expressed, Brown’s idea of freedom has yet to be explicitly articulated. Uncovering and tracing Brown’s understanding of freedom is therefore the task of this essay.

1.1 Aim of the study and research question

The aim of this essay is to gain a granular understanding of Wendy Brown's notion of freedom. As a case of conceptualized freedom in political thinking, the relevance of the investigation is twofold. Academically, Wendy Brown's research is influential and widely referenced. Understanding her concept of freedom therefore serves a greater purpose within academia and for those reading Brown. The unique theoretical comprehensiveness of Brown's critique of neoliberalism also makes her understanding of freedom relevant for other scholarly interactions with neoliberalism. Outside academia, Brown's position as a prominent thinker of the political Left is likely to influence progressive political movements. Understanding her concept of freedom might thus be important to comprehend the political claims of such groups.

The essay aims to answer the following research questions:

- What is Wendy Brown's understanding of freedom?
- Is Brown's understanding of freedom afflicted with any inconsistency and/or incoherence, and if so how?
- Where is Brown's understanding of freedom situated in regards to well-known academic conceptualizations of freedom?

1.2 Roadmap

The essay will proceed with a brief background chapter, focusing on what neoliberalism is and its relation to freedom. After this, the material chapter will describe which of Brown's texts that have been analyzed and why. The method chapter will then explain how the study employs a contextualizing and reconstructive method. This will be followed by a theory chapter, highlighting a number of theories on freedom to create a theoretical framework shaped as the *Oak Tree of Freedom*. The analysis will then trace Brown's understanding of freedom, investigate if it is afflicted with inconsistencies or incoherence, and let it climb the Oak. The essay will conclude by summarizing the findings and answer the research questions.

2. Background

In order to grasp Brown's notion of freedom, it is worth addressing what she is reacting to. Therefore, this chapter will focus on neoliberalism; what it is and its relation to freedom.

Neoliberal thought was organized with the establishment of the Mont Pelerin Society, including thinkers such as Friedrich Hayek and Milton Friedman (Harvey 2005, 19-20). The society and its founder, Hayek, saw the economic market's capacity to regulate itself and create knowledge as integral for the enhancement of freedom and inventiveness. Hayek believed that economic liberty was not only a material concern which was dependent on political freedom, but itself a power with moral and political connotations. As such, government intervention was deemed dangerous (Steger & Roy 2021, 15-17). These neoliberal theories materialized politically as a reaction to Keynesian economics in the wake of the economic crisis in the 1970s. Most commonly associated with politicians such as Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan, the politics of neoliberalism aimed to reverse the detrimental effects they saw from government spending and state regulation (Harvey 2005, 11-13, 22-25; Steger & Roy 2021, 10-11, 24).

Freedom—clearly—is the foundation of many neoliberal claims. The focus on economic freedom was believed to further individuals' ability to choose and decide for themselves. These ideas were a reaction to what was seen as the dangers of collectivism, most clearly articulated in communism (Eagleton-Pierce 2016, 82). To avoid such danger, the protection of free markets was deemed essential (Harvey 2005, 7).

3. Material

This chapter deals with material of the essay. The material constituting the objects of analysis are Wendy Brown's two books *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism's Stealth Revolution* (2015) and *In the Ruins of Neoliberalism: The Rise of Antidemocratic Politics in the West* (2019), and the essay "Freedom and the Plastic Cage" which is found in her collection of essays *States of Injury: Power and Freedom in Late Modernity* (1995). In addition to that, the study also employs literature on freedom as analytical tools. These texts are Berlin's essay "Two Concepts of Liberty" (1958/2002), and the chapter called "Liberty as Non-Domination" in Pettit's *Republicanism* (1999). Besides that, multiples essays in Christman's anthology *Positive Freedom: Past, Present, and Future* (2021) as well as Christman's essay "Freedom in Times of Struggle: Positive Liberty, Again" (2015) has been used for theories on positive freedom.

The rest of this chapter will focus on the material comprising the object of analysis. First, the reasoning behind using the specific texts will be explained. This will be followed by a brief description of the main points of each text.

3.1 Why these texts?

Two points make these specific texts adequate objects of analysis. First, the two books comprise Brown's most extensive critique of neoliberalism, arguing that freedom is one of many values it undermines. As freedom advantageously can be understood in contrast to what it is not—which Brown agrees with (1995, 6)—these books are illuminating. For the empirically minded, the books are also those of Brown's works that use the words 'freedom' and 'liberty' most frequently, besides the essay collection. Second, the essay deals hands-on with freedom and sketches a framework in which Brown's idea of freedom ought to be understood. These two points complement each other, and make for an elaborate and granular understanding of how Brown views freedom. While other texts of Brown surely would have contributed to understanding her notion of freedom, these texts are considered both sufficient and most adequate for the endeavor. Now, let's delve a little deeper into the main points of the material.

3.2 Freedom and the Plastic Cage

In *Freedom*, Brown deals explicitly with freedom. Arguing for its historically specific and non-conceptual character, she means that freedom can only be understood in relation to a specific domination. This makes freedom constantly run the risk of mutating into new types of domination, making attempts to institutionalize freedom potential sites of unfreedom. The essay also criticizes Leftist theorists on multiple fronts, for example for what she deems the Left's shift of focus from freedom to equality, and for overlooking the state's potential dominating power. Moreover, Brown examines freedom's relation to ideas of resistance and emancipation (Brown 1995).

3.3 Undoing the Demos

In *Undoing*, Brown argues that neoliberalism diffuses the ethos *homo oeconomicus* into society, making market principles dominate all domains of human existence. Building on Michel Foucault's theories on neoliberalism, Brown sees neoliberalism as a political rationality that has extinguished the political being, *homo politicus*. By infusing spheres as diverse as non-profits, education, and even politics via law—Brown highlights a number of US Supreme Court cases—neoliberal rationality has undermined the idea of citizenship and consequently the prospect of democracy (Brown 2015).

3.4 In the Ruins of Neoliberalism

In the Ruins argues that neoliberal perpetuation of tradition underlies the antidemocratic tide haunting the West in the early twenty-first century. Looking closely at neoliberal figures such as Milton Friedman, the Ordoliberals, and especially Friedrich Hayek, Brown highlights their dismissal of the idea of a political and social sphere. Focusing on Hayek's embrace of market and morals, Brown highlights how the distorted materialization of these ideas have led to the export of traditional values into the public sphere—a process bolstered by decisions from the US Supreme Court. Concluding the book, Brown argues that ideas of nihilism and fatalism have been enfolded into neoliberal reasoning (Brown 2019).

4. Method

This chapter outlines the study's contextualizing and reconstructive methods. It will start by explaining both methods respectively, followed by a clarification of the practical execution of the study. Lastly, there will be a discussion of the challenges of this methodological approach.

4.1 Contextualization

The contextual analysis will use Adrian Blau's definition of context as "the circumstances of an idea or passage which informs some aspect of its meaning" (2019, 1199), with 'meaning' referring to Brown's own meaning and not the reader's. More specifically the study will focus on the *textual* and *intellectual* context (Blau 2019, 1192, 1200).

4.1.1 Textual context

To begin with, the key to any contextualization is to read the text closely. Using a definition of textual context as "an aspect of an author's text which informs another aspect of that author's text" (Blau 2019, 1200), this contextualization aims to uncover meaning by placing specific passages in relation to the arguments made in its textual proximity, in the larger scope of the text, and in other works by the same author (Blau 2017, 246). Three textual contexts will thus be in focus: *immediate*, *intermediate* and Brown's *other texts* under analysis.

The *immediate* context refers to the sentence or adjacent sentences in which the expression of 'freedom' is found. The *intermediate* context regards parts of the same text that deal with aspects that Brown connects to 'freedom,' but which are not in close proximity to the analyzed expression. As Brown's ideas are likely to connect throughout her scholarly practice, the context given by the *other texts* under analysis is also of interest. Drawing parallels between the works will illuminate the interpretive practice further (Blau 2019, 1200-1201).

4.1.2 Intellectual context

The textual context is complimented with an intellectual contextualization. This is about being attentive to the political and philosophical foundations from which Brown's critique and her concept of freedom takes shape. Recovering such a context tells us what interdiscursive practice Brown is taking part in (Blau 2017, 247, 252).

4.2 Reconstruction

Following Blau's methodological reasoning, the contextual analysis can be furthered by philosophical thinking (2017, 253). As a good interpretation cannot solely rely on the author's own ideas, philosophical thinking is essential to disclose what Brown means. This is a tool for improving the contextualization, evaluating rather than describing the text (Blau 2019, 1195, 1198-1206).

In this study, a reconstructive approach is adopted to enable such philosophical thinking. Three types of reconstruction are considered: *empirical*, *systematic* and *adaptive*. *Empirical* reconstruction is about figuring out what Brown means when talking about 'freedom'. *Systematic* reconstruction refers to connecting Brown's ideas to each other, explicating latent distinctions, evaluating the argumentation's consistency, and reflecting on Brown's own awareness of these factors. An *adaptive* approach aims to calibrate and improve Brown's reasoning according to the findings. While the aim of the study is not to modify Brown's theory in a pure *adaptive* sense, the three types of reconstruction are by necessity always performed to some extent (Blau 2017, 251).

Two aspects of *systematic* reconstruction are of specific interest to this study: *consistency* and *coherence*. *Consistency* is about investigating whether Brown's understanding of freedom is employed without contradictions. *Coherence* means evaluating whether Brown's treatment of 'freedom' is done according to an underlying, cohesive principle. Identification of incoherence can lead to uncovering deeper inconsistencies within the reasoning (Beckman 2005, 59, 72-73). Both aspects require explicating underlying distinctions and connecting Brown's ideas.

4.3 Executing the study

The first step in executing the study was to read the material closely and carefully. This facilitated a full understanding of Brown's argumentation. After this, the usages of 'freedom' and 'liberty'—which have been equated—were located in each text, and the passages that most

articulately dealt with ‘freedom’ were analyzed more closely. Starting at the sentence level—the *immediate* context—the meaning of ‘freedom’ was traced by looking at what words it was linked to. This enabled consideration of the *intermediate* context, where the ideas and concepts connected to ‘freedom’ in the immediate context were closely examined. These aspects have then been viewed in the light of the *other texts* under analysis, examining whether those illuminates new features, contradicts the earlier sayings or confirms the interpretation.

In this way, the contextualization is performed in tandem with the reconstruction. It also shows how the three types of reconstruction must occur simultaneously: the meaning of ‘freedom’ can only be uncovered by illuminating implicit distinctions and linking ideas.

It is also worth emphasizing that the examination holds the coherence of Brown’s work, as well as her understanding of freedom, to be an open question which will be decided by the interpretive practice sketched above.

4.4 Methodological objections

As a work of political theory, it might be worth taking some space to elaborate on how this differs from a more traditional empirical practice. This segment will highlight some potential methodological objections, and explain how they are mended.

4.4.1 Intersubjectivity

The most salient aspect on this topic is the requirement of intersubjectivity, a prerequisite for a study to be considered ‘scientific’. The interpretive practice of political theory inherently makes the fulfillment of its two principles, criticizability and reproducibility, more vague compared to empirical studies. This is true for the efforts of contextualization and reconstruction as well. For example, in a contextualization, several contexts could simultaneously be relevant (Blau 2017, 248). The potential issue of intersubjectivity is mended by clearly and transparently stating the principles on which the analysis is made—which has been done above—consequently making the analysis easy to follow and possible to recreate. Doing this clarifies what is being justified and how it is justified, as well as what conclusions are made and how those are reached (Badersten 2006, 75-76, 78). Furthermore, when encountering a potentially contentious interpretive aspect—such as a passage with seemingly incoherent reasoning—the intersubjectivity is strengthened by transparency in the argumentation for why a certain interpretation is correct. This also entails being explicit about what the evidence for the reasoning is and where it is found (Blau 2017, 263).

4.4.2 Operationalization

Another point worth considering is operationalization. Understood as giving theoretical concepts empirical and measurable indicators, a successful operationalization is characterized by strong validity and reliability (Teorell & Svensson 2007, 39, 55-57). To achieve this, an analytical apparatus is often applied. This study does not undertake an operationalization in the traditional sense, and has no conventional analytical apparatus. The tools of analysis are instead, by necessity, given by Brown herself—the words she uses, the ideas she expresses. This simply has to do with the character of the study: In order to uncover Brown’s understanding of freedom, assuming a specific notion of freedom through an operationalization would inherently subvert that intention. In this sense, it is only by letting Brown’s own words function as indicators that the validity can be strong—that is, it is only then that it is possible to ‘measure’ what the study aims to ‘measure’. Securing strong reliability will—again—consist in full transparency regarding the evidence behind the reasoning, so that another scholar can redo the study and expose eventual misreadings.

This does not mean that the theoretical concepts have no role to play. Rather, they will create a framework in which Brown’s understanding of freedom can be situated, and thus also work as tools of analysis. It does neither mean that the methods lack serious obstacles. The fact that a passage always can be interpreted differently is perhaps the biggest. Yet, this is addressed by—besides having strong intersubjectivity—expressing the level of conviction in the specific interpretation. When unsure of an interpretation, it can also be tested against the text to see if it fits better with Brown’s reasoning than alternative interpretations (Blau 2017, 261-262).

5. Theory

This chapter deals with some influential theories of freedom, through which Brown's freedom will be analyzed. It will highlight Isaiah Berlin's freedom as non-interference, followed by Philip Pettit's freedom as non-domination. Tying back to Berlin, the chapter will end by highlighting the characteristics of positive freedom, and present Christman and Gould's positive concepts. The exposition has no intention of being exhaustive but aims to illuminate significant freedom concepts.

5.1 Freedom as non-interference

Isaiah Berlin famously divided freedom into two separate categories: positive and negative freedom. This section will deal with the latter. Negative freedom regards freedom from interference, meaning that an individual is free if there are no other humans intentionally obstructing what the individual wants to do. The wider this sphere of non-interference is, the more freedom the individual has attained. Berlin separates this view of unfreedom from incapacity. Inabilities, such as blindness, are thus cases of incapacity and not unfreedom (1958/2002, 169-170).

Berlin acknowledges the need to curtail freedom to a certain extent. Total freedom of interference would undermine itself, leading to everyone's total interference with everyone else. His argument is based on an idea of individuality and plurality: different persons want different things. A private sphere is therefore essential. Acknowledging the inescapable interdependence of human activity, the question becomes how big this sphere ought to be (Berlin 1958/2002, 170-171).

Furthermore, negative freedom is only called for when a certain material threshold is reached. Individuals who are hungry and illiterate will be unable to enjoy negative freedom, if given to them. In that sense, "[i]ndividual freedom is not everyone's primary need" (Berlin 1958/2002, 171). A person with a lot of freedom—possibly gained from taking advantage of others—might be willing to give this up to amend injustices of, for example, poverty. Although seemingly desirable, Berlin maintains that one must hold these values separate: If an individual gives up freedom to increase equality and this does not boost the freedom of others, what has occurred is still a *decrease* of freedom (1958/2002, 172).

5.2 Freedom as non-domination

Freedom as non-domination, or republican freedom, was articulated by Philip Pettit (1999) and further developed by Quentin Skinner (2001/2019). The concept is based on the idea of domination. According to Pettit, one is dominating another when “(1) they have the *capacity* to *interfere* (2) on an *arbitrary* basis (3) in *certain choices* that the other is in a position to make” (1999, 52). The dominating force can only come from an agent and not a structure, while such an agent could be a collective or company (Pettit 1999, 52). Accordingly, these factors have to be absent in order for an individual to be free.

The *interference* that Pettit alludes to has to have an intentionally negative effect on the other, while *capacity* for such interference means that it can occur rather immediately. The *arbitrariness* refers to an agent’s disregard of the interest of the dominated, basing the interference on her own inclination. Pettit’s third point highlights how domination can happen in certain spheres but does not necessitate domination in every sphere. Importantly, these conditions do not demand that the dominating part *uses* its capacity to interfere. The relation of domination is simply constituted by the *capacity* to interfere arbitrarily, and not its employment. In this sense, domination regards a position of dependence where the dominated agent cannot see itself as an equal (Pettit 1999, 53-55, 58, 63).

Pettit highlights the social aspects of this concept, which he means differ from freedom as non-interference. This is based on domination’s character of common knowledge, where everyone can see that domination is taking place and all people know that all other people also can see it. As such, freedom as non-domination has an intersubjective character and regards people’s subjective self-perception, where free individuals are recognized as social and legal persons. For Pettit, the resulting potential of feeling free is something that is overlooked by freedom of non-interference in its attempt to separate values (Pettit 1999, 59-61, 71-72).¹

5.3 Positive freedom - freedom to what?

For Berlin, positive freedom concerns an individual’s freedom to lead a life according to personal ambitions and views, and is about being responsible for one’s choices. This idea builds on a belief that all actors in society reach the same conclusions if their rationality governs. Berlin means that such freedom could lead some individuals to claim rationality and on this basis coerce others, who they deem irrational, into what they will. Thus, they dismiss

¹Following Pettit’s theory, scholars have attempted to develop the idea of non-domination further. Sharon Krause, for example, argues that power could work unintentionally and in multiple directions. To her, this makes non-domination unable to account for the consequences of systematic inequality through patterned social structures, such as race and gender. Krause therefore argues for freedom as “non-oppression,” which allows for all individuals to engage in self-development (2013).

what people *actually* want. For Berlin, this is how totalitarian movements reason (1958/2002, 191-192).

Critics do, however, deem Berlin's conceptualization of positive freedom inconsistent in multiple ways (Garnett 2021, 8-9) and positive theorists argue for a freedom that goes beyond non-interference. Besides that, positive accounts also share some other uniting features. John Christman provides four common conditions of notions of positive freedom, although positive theorists emphasize these to various extent. First, positive theorists tend to include *internal factors*. Positive accounts illuminate how self-determination, despite enjoying external non-interference, still can be crippled by an individual's internal ineptitude to take charge over her actions. Second, positive freedom incorporates *capabilities*. This refers to the requirements that enable an individual to undertake certain actions, such as health care and food. Third, *value conditions* are essential. Positive notions usually consider freedom in relation to certain values and as acts towards certain purposes with virtuous connotations. Fourth, positive freedom involves *social and political practices*. Stemming from freedom as an idea of governing oneself, interactions with other humans are fundamental and consequently also the formation of political and social procedures (Christman 2021, 2-7).

Despite these unifying features, the positive tradition clearly lacks the rigid conceptual clarity that Berlin seemed preoccupied with (Ingram 2021, 85). Developing—like other philosophical traditions—in dialogue with specific theories and intellectual contexts (Garnett 2021, 9), there is no one general concept of positive freedom that works as a master-key. The rest of this section will however present two positive concepts, highlighting how positive theories can take different shapes. These accounts have been chosen on the basis of their relatively clear structure and their differing relation to the four conditions. Christman's account emphasizes *internal factors* and *capabilities*, and Gould's more clearly focuses on *social and political practices* and *value conditions*.

5.3.1 Capabilities and authenticity

John Christman highlights two elements essential for freedom: capabilities and authenticity. Building on Amartya Sen's theorizing, *capabilities* regards the power to shape aims and undertake actions that are required to live a life in which an individual can accept herself. In order to do so while still maintaining a plurality of values and avoiding insistence on pursuing certain idealized values, these capabilities are connected to authenticity. *Authenticity* alludes to the possibility to cultivate one's identity and act upon personal inclinations in a way that resists social and internal manipulation, and enables acceptance for one's values (Christman 2015, 177-180).

As such, Christman argues for a freedom “that involves the opportunity to pursue courses of action deemed minimally worthwhile according to one's authentic practical identity” (2015, 180). ‘Authentic practical identity’ refers to an identity that has been cultivated so that the person can accept her principles without trying to change them when

considering how they were acquired. An individual therefore is free when she is able to commit to actions that are regarded as desirable according to her authentic identity, given that she has the capacity to do so. Following this, an individual's valuation of different options of action plays a part in freedom, where options deemed lacking importance does not affect freedom (Christman 2015, 180, 182).

5.3.2 Self-development and democracy

Carol Gould's positive freedom incorporates both a non-interference and non-domination approach, promoting a freedom to independently and socially develop one's capacities. Capacities, for Gould, exceeds capabilities for self-preservation. The concept also includes freedom to actualize self-chosen projects and to nurture relationships with others (Gould 2021, 145).

Gould's concept is based on a developmental idea of agency, ingrained into an individual's changing relations with others and the natural world. It also regards individuals' relation to themselves and thus incorporates Christman's authenticity, while going further than this to consider biographical aspects that are relevant for an individual's self-development. The concept holds that free choice can only occur if an individual relates to conditions that facilitate freedom of action. Conditions of social and material character are therefore not tools that enable free activity but are deeply intertwined with the practice itself (2021, 145-147). Gould connects this to a principle of "equal positive freedom" (2021, 148), which recognizes that everyone has an equal claim to freedom's facilitating conditions due to the fact that everyone—as humans—have an equal capacity for choosing freely (2021, 147).

Gould also applies this reasoning to collective human activities with joint ends, giving it bearing on democratic and political practices. Since participation in shared activities are essential for self-development and everyone has an equal right to make free decisions, self-determination necessitates the ability to partake in common decision-making regarding such self-developing activities. Mutual activities must therefore be determined collectively, making democracy a right which enables people to deliberate and engage actively across wide institutional settings. Gould also argues that freedom's inherent connection to social and material circumstances, and its demands of equality, prescribes an equal allocation of wealth in society (2021, 147, 151-153).

5.4 The Oak of Freedom

This chapter has illustrated a number of different concepts of freedom. But how do they relate to each other? While Berlin separates positive and negative concepts, Pettit argues that republican freedom forms an independent concept drawing from both traditions (1999, 51).

Others, such as Eric Nelson (2005), means that all notions of freedom essentially collapse into a negative concept. This essay will understand the different concepts as building upon each other. Following the idea that positive freedom incorporates non-interference but deem it insufficient (Christman 2015, 177), the argument is that also non-domination is integrated into positive accounts. Following the exposition above, both non-interference and non-domination appear integral for positive freedom but do not allow for engaging elaborately with Christman's four conditions. This renders a theoretical framework in the form of a tree: *the Oak of Freedom*.

The lower parts of the tree trunk contain freedom as *non-interference*. Climbing higher up the tree, the capacity to interfere arbitrarily is included. Here, we have reached freedom as *non-domination*. Arriving at the crown of the oak, freedom is described in *positive* terms. Due to the conceptual variation at this height, each positive theory symbolizes a different branch in the tree. Some branches are closer than others, resembling each other in many ways. Others are further apart and clearly conceptualize freedom differently. Still, all concepts in the crown extensively engage with Christman's four conditions. They also share the incorporation of all concepts contained in the tree trunk.

In summary, the higher up the tree one gets, the more comprehensive the notion of freedom. The rest of the essay will examine Brown's freedom, eventually letting her climb the Oak.

6. Analysis

This chapter will analyze Wendy Brown's understanding of freedom. After identifying how Brown conceptualizes neoliberalism, the attempt to uncover her freedom will be undertaken. When such understanding can be traced, the ramifications of the findings will be examined in debt. Lastly, Brown's notion of freedom will be situated in the *Oak of Freedom*.

First, however, it might be worth elaborating on why the analysis starts in neoliberalism. In *Freedom*, Brown argues that freedom is not a constant or universal concept, but is formed in relation to a perceived domination (1995, 6). As she holds neoliberal rationality to eradicate freedom from human life (Brown 2015, 41-42), Brown's critique of neoliberalism is an adequate site of domination in which to locate her freedom.

6.1 Neoliberalism according to Brown

Brown understands neoliberalism through the ideas of Michel Foucault and neo-Marxism. Drawing from Foucault's lectures from the late 1970s, Brown means that neoliberalism makes the logic of the market to be the guiding feature of every sphere of life. Characterized as a *political rationality* with hegemonic and world altering characteristics, it shapes individuals as well as the domains and structures they dwell in. As a rationality, neoliberalism is conditioned on history and dominates until some other rationality prevails (Brown 2015, 61, 121). Neoliberal reasoning then, contrary to the classical liberal separation of market and state, makes the market the ideal of the state, the state's highest purpose, and the template through which the state aims to economize all spheres of society—even those not concerning money (Brown 2015, 31, 62).

As all domains of society get economized, competition overtakes the idea of exchange as governing the market and individuals become human capital that competes with each other. *Homo oeconomicus*—the part of the human character concerned with economy—gets predominant everywhere, all the time. This being aims to enhance its value rather than satisfy its interest through exchange. To Brown, the enhancement of value for the contemporary *homo oeconomicus* increasingly resembles practices of investment and financialization, where individuals aim to self-invest in order to increase their future value (2015, 33-34, 64-66).

Arguing that Foucault overlooks capital as a structure of domination, Brown compliments his theories with Marxian ideas. The argument is that capital necessarily conditions the world in which humans dwell and, for example, the relationship they create.

This, Brown means, reaches beyond Foucauldian discourse (2015, 75-76). To understand the dominating force of capital and “grasp the extent and depth of neoliberalism’s power in making this world and unfreedom with it,” she incorporates these features in her account of neoliberalism (Brown 2015, 76).

In sum, Brown holds neoliberalism as a political rationality that transforms individuals into *homo oeconomicus* and diffuses market principles into all domains of human existence. This allows neoliberalism and its theorists to attack the idea of society and depreciate “unfreedom to coercion” (Brown 2019, 41), while subordinating the political to the logic of the economy (Brown 2019, 63). It is now time to examine how Brown’s own idea of freedom relates to this.

6.2 Brown’s understanding of freedom

This section will trace Brown’s idea of freedom. First, we will see how Brown deals with freedom more explicitly. This will lead to a discussion of *homo politicus* and the political. The connection between Brown’s different conceptions of freedom will then be investigated. After that, we are ready to sketch an idea of Brown’s understanding of freedom.

6.2.1 Freedom explicitly

In *Freedom*, Brown holds freedom to be a signal for when people, at least to some extent, are in charge of the circumstances of their life and have the ability to act upon the world. She also connects freedom to democracy, of which freedom is both a consequence and an indicator. Democracy in this sense is “that humans might govern themselves by governing together” and does not refer to specific institutional settings, but is seen as a practice that comprises and allocates political power (Brown 1995, 5). In fact, Brown sees attempts to institutionalize freedom against domination as a risk of cementing that idea of unfreedom, blocking attempts to foresee new kinds of domination produced by the specific institutionalization (Brown 1995, 7-8). Politics in the name of freedom then becomes less focused on prescribing specific laws or ways of ordering things, but requires “a formulation of the political that is richer, more complicated, and also perhaps more fragile than that circumscribed by institutions, procedures, and political representation” (Brown 1995, 9). With this as a backdrop, we are in a position to take on Brown’s understanding of freedom through the lens of neoliberalism. Arguing, in *Undoing*, that neoliberalism redresses democratic values from a political to an economic understanding, Brown states:

As liberty is relocated from political to economic life, it becomes subject to the inherent inequality of the latter and is part of what secures that inequality. The guarantee of equality through the rule of law and participation in popular sovereignty is replaced with a market formulation of winners

and losers. Liberty itself is narrowed to market conduct, divested of association with mastering the conditions of life, existential freedom, or securing the rule of the demos. Freedom conceived minimally as self-rule and more robustly as participation in rule by the demos gives way to comportment with a market instrumental rationality that radically constrains both choices and ambitions. With the vanquishing of *homo politicus*, the creature who rules itself and rules as part of the demos, no longer is there an open question of how to craft the self or what paths to travel in life. (Brown 2015, 41)

The passage says a lot about a lot, but two points are worth stressing. First, Brown specifies two types of freedom that neoliberalism hollows out: ‘self-rule’ and ‘participation in rule by the demos’. Seemingly on different ends on a freedom-spectrum, the former is conceived as a threshold while the latter is more substantive. ‘Self-rule’ appears to be connected to the ability to control ‘the conditions of life,’ which resonates with the notion of controlling the circumstances of one’s life highlighted in *Freedom*. The second point of specific interest is the centrality of *homo politicus*. The passage describes this being as the creature of freedom, enabling both the narrow and the more substantive notion. Before returning to the first point, the role of this being deserves greater attention.

6.2.2 *Homo politicus* and the political

Brown argues that *homo politicus* is a subject that Foucault looked past and simultaneously neoliberalism’s greatest victim, crowded out by the bloating figure of *homo oeconomicus*. For Brown, this being is *created for* and *created by* the attainment of individual and popular sovereignty (2015, 78, 86-87), making *homo politicus* and these sovereignties reflexively reinforce one another. Inhabiting the political sphere, *homo politicus* becomes the subject of Brown’s complex and fragile understanding of a politics of freedom. In *In the Ruins*, Brown elaborates on this political sphere, portraying it as “a theater of deliberations, powers, actions, and values where common existence is thought, shaped, and governed. The political is inescapably concerned with plotting coordinates of justice and order, but also with security, ecology, exigency, and emergency” (Brown 2019, 56). The power of this sphere is produced by the collective which it assembles and works as a rationality. It is therefore influenced by other spheres, such as the economical and social. The political is also the domain for people to develop an individual and common identity. Most of all, only this sphere can enable democracy (Brown 2019, 56-57).

The connection to democracy gets clearer in *Undoing*. Brown describes *homo politicus*—who inhabits the political domain—as the being that legitimizes and gives democracy essence beyond ensuring personal self-preservation by enabling values of “political equality and freedom, representation, popular sovereignty, and deliberation and judgment about the public good and the common” (Brown 2015, 87). *Homo politicus* then facilitates freedom, but also a number of other values. Yet, the characteristics of this creature still appear slightly vague. Things become a little clearer with Brown’s historical exposition of *homo politicus*’ presence in the history of ideas (2015, 87-99). Among others, Brown highlights Aristotle’s idea of humans’ political nature as given from “[m]oral reflection and

association making” (2015, 87), Adam Smith’s description of the human traits of “deliberation, self-direction, and restraint, all basic ingredients of sovereignty” (2015, 93), and John Locke’s characterization of the human abilities to “discerning, judging, and executing the law of nature on behalf of the commons” (2015, 94).

As proposed by Brown, the character of the political and *homo politicus* clearly seems complicated and ambiguous. While she appears reluctant to specify the attributes of *homo politicus*, the account illustrates the significance of abilities to contemplate and deliberate with others in order to govern itself individually and with others. Drawing on Aristotle, this character also seems to employ a moral side. Brown’s appreciation for this moral trait seems confirmed when describing how the predominance of *homo oeconomicus*—the being that crowds out *homo politicus*—makes individuals unable to rule themselves “through moral autonomy” (Brown 2015, 79). The attributes of *homo politicus* then appear to amount to abilities to contemplate and deliberate in a moral manner together with others, which facilitates a life beyond self-preservation. These are then also the characteristics that enable freedom.

6.2.3 ‘Self-rule’ and ‘participation in rule by the demos’

With knowledge of the political and *homo politicus*, we are in a position to better grasp Brown’s two notions of freedom, the narrow ‘self-rule’ and more substantive ‘participation in rule by the demos’. The latter notion will be examined first.

As has been shown, Brown sees freedom as an indicator of democracy. Yet, the relation between the two seems even deeper than that. Equating democracy with “popular sovereignty and shared political power” (Brown 2019, 15), Brown remarks that this “contains nothing beyond the principle that the demos rules” (2015, 202). Following logically must be that ‘participation in rule by the demos’ is equivalent to ‘participate in a democracy’. Admittedly adhering to an open and non-specified idea of democracy (Brown 2015, 20), this freedom has no articulated form. Yet, following from the elaboration of *homo politicus*, Brown’s idea of participation in democracy is focused on deliberative, contemplative, and moral practices that exceeds simple self-sustenance. Furthermore, such participation is also dependent on political equality, which Brown deems totally fundamental for democracy (2019, 23). It is therefore not surprising that Brown holds freedom to be validated by equality. Discussing neoliberal attacks on the the idea of a society in *In the Ruins*, Brown says:

Freedom without society destroys the lexicon by which freedom is made democratic, paired with social consciousness, and nested in political equality. Freedom without society is a pure instrument of power, shorn of concern for others, the world, or the future. (Brown 2019, 44-45)

Freedom in the democratic sense then *has* to be deeply connected to equality, or else it becomes a destructive force. These demands for equality, and moral deliberation and contemplation, appear to turn Brown’s open definition of democracy into an ideal. Confirming this suspicion, Brown recognizes that such rule by the demos has yet to be

realized and is not lived up to in liberal democracies or modern states (Brown 2015, 203, 207). Consequently, the robust notion of freedom also becomes an ideal.

Where does this place freedom in the narrow sense, as ‘self-rule’? As was seen above, this has to do with an ability to control the circumstances of life. Brown appears to equate this with individual sovereignty, which she refers to as the ability to determine and undertake the aims one wants (2015, 185). However, the reflexive connection between *homo politicus* and individual sovereignty gives even the minimal idea of freedom a political sense, where freedom is more than just individual self-sustenance. While this narrow freedom regards managing the conditions of one’s life, it therefore cannot be reduced to individuals working for their own aims. The profound intermixing with *homo politicus* also requires ‘self-rule’ to have characteristics of moral deliberation and contemplation. This appears related to how Brown holds individual sovereignty and popular sovereignty—again, equivalent to democracy—as safeguarding each other (Brown 2015, 108). The two definitions of freedom are thus dependent on each other, resulting in a triangular relation of mutual reinforcement between *homo politicus* and these types of sovereignty.

What these freedoms amount to, and their relation to each other, gets clearer when Brown deals with the consequences of neoliberal rationality. Brown means that neoliberalism, disseminating in the name of freedom, in fact detaches freedom from its foundation in state sovereignty and individual sovereignty, and diminishes the possibility of freedom in a social and political context. This makes states and individuals colonized by the logics of the market: States as being ruled with regard to the market; individuals in attempting to increase their value as human capital according to economic objectives (2015, 108-109). In other words, the perverse influence of economic thinking prohibits both individuals and states to themselves determine what ambitions to pursue. The loss of sovereignty for the individual—equivalent to freedom—is as prevalent for states. It is this that leads Brown to state the following:

The hegemony of *homo oeconomicus* and the neoliberal “economization” of the political transform both state and citizen as both are converted, in identity and conduct, from figures of political sovereignty to figures of financialized firms. This conversion in turn effects two significant reorientations: on the one hand, it reorients the subject’s relation to itself and its freedom. Rather than a creature of power and interest, the self becomes capital to be invested in, enhanced according to specified criteria and norms as well as available inputs. On the other hand, this conversion reorients the relationship of the state to the citizen. No longer are citizens most importantly constituent elements of sovereignty, members of publics, or even bearers of rights. Rather, as human capital, they may contribute to or be a drag on economic growth; they may be invested in or divested from depending on their potential for GDP enhancement. (Brown 2015, 109-110)

The passage highlights how, for Brown, the loss of sovereignty alters an individual’s relationship to their own person *and* their state. This leads to an “existential disappearance of freedom from the world, precisely the kind of individual and collaborative freedom associated with *homo politicus* for self-rule and rule with others” (Brown 2015, 110). The diminishing of sovereignty—the capacity to manage the conditions of one’s life—then undermines freedom in *both* the minimal and substantive sense. This clarifies how these freedoms relate to each other. Citizens, described as losing their role as ‘constituent elements of sovereignty,’ are not only deprived of their own personal sovereignty—the narrow

freedom—but also their role as an elementary unit in the *state's* sovereignty. In other words, it is the citizens that together constitute what the state wants and its ability to pursue these aims. Seemingly, Brown here sees state sovereignty as the vehicle for popular sovereignty: If the state is to be sovereign, it has to be ruled by the demos. Citizens are then not only containers of individual sovereignty, but the constitutive parts in deciding the path of the state and, as such, participants in the rule by a demos. Following from the reflexive triangularity between individual sovereignty, popular sovereignty, and *homo politicus*, the minimal and more robust notion of freedom cannot be logically separated. It is thus impossible to participate in rule by the demos if one cannot control the circumstances of one's life and, in the reverse, impossible to control the circumstances of one's life if cannot participate in common rule.

We are now in a position to summarize the findings. The analysis has shown how Brown's understanding of freedom emanates from an intricate formulation of the political, a domain in which *homo politicus* is the subject. Characterized by its abilities of moral deliberation and contemplation to rule itself and others, this being allows for freedom in both a narrow and more substantive sense. The former regards 'self-rule,' as the ability to choose and act on one's aims, while the latter concerns freedom as participation in an idealized idea of democracy. While these are practically separable, they are deeply intertwined and enable each other: One cannot exist without the other.

6.3 Brown's freedom, dissected

Starting in the findings above, this section will further scrutinize what this idea of freedom entails. We will start by delving deeper into Brown's freedom in relation to democracy and autocracy. After that, her freedom's connection to equality and institutionalization will be dealt with.

6.3.1 Democracy and autocracy

As has been evidenced, Brown's two notions of freedom, 'self-rule' and 'participating in the rule by the demos,' are deeply intertwined and secure each other. An individual's ability to craft life according to her own preferences both requires and is required for participating in collective rule. Yet, Brown does not appear to be consistent on their interwoven nature.

In *Undoing*, Brown argues that democracy could undermine freedom if the people wanted it, while freedom could flourish in an authoritarian regime. Freedom, Brown says, is not an inherent quality of democracy (2015, 204-205). The idea seems to be that individuals theoretically could self-rule, the minimal idea of freedom, in an authoritarian regime while such a possibility could be equally undermined in a democracy. Yet, this seems odd following the convoluted relation between the two notions of freedom.

However, what Brown appears to acknowledge is the paradox of tying freedom closely to an idealized idea of democratic decision-making. For if freedom means participating in rule by the demos, people could democratically participate in the undermining of their own democratic participation, just like they could democratically participate in doing away with their individual ‘self-rule’. A democratic account of freedom is therefore inherently afflicted with contradiction. Democracy, and thus freedom, can simply abolish itself democratically (and freely). This autocratic tendency of Brown’s freedom highlights the fragility she assigns to politics of freedom (1995, 9). This probably contributes to Brown’s attempt to validate democracy and freedom through equality and the attributes of *homo politicus*.

Still, this does not settle the claim that freedom could prosper in authoritarian regimes. While freedom as democratic participation can undo that same freedom, an authoritarian regime does not have robust freedom to begin with. Accordingly, freedom in this case has to refer to freedom as ‘self-rule’. Brown is therefore inconsistent in that freedom as ‘self-rule’ cannot simultaneously be intertwined in partaking in democracy *and* be furthered in authoritarian regimes. Does this mean that the understanding of freedom that has been assigned to Brown ought to be revised? It does not seem so. Rather, Brown appears to try to make her argument—that neoliberalism undermines the prospect of freedom—appeal to those who do not share her more robust understanding of freedom. By separating freedom into two distinct notions, her main argument becomes more covering. This idea gets support in the texts. When discussing the neoliberal intrusion in liberal arts education in *Undoing*, Brown asks:

Even when liberty is thinned to the ideal of crafting one’s own life and equality is reduced to equal opportunity or equal standing before the law—that is, even bracketing more substantive formulations of freedom and equality than those featured by classical political liberalism—can these values survive the evisceration of an educated public? (Brown 2015, 181)

Designating her own minimal definition as classical liberal, Brown appears to reject the idea herself. Clearly, the potential freedom she ascribes to an autocracy is not in accordance with her own view of freedom. This gives us reason re-emphasis what was illustrated in the previous section: That ‘self-rule’ is an important component of Brown’s freedom, but it has to be understood in relation to a democratic foundation.

So further interactions with Brown’s idea of freedom illuminates a paradox and an inconsistency. While the paradox appears to be a necessary feature of Brown’s fragile politics of freedom, the inconsistency seems to be a way for Brown to make her main argument more covering and has no bearing on her genuine idea of freedom.

6.3.2 Equality and institutionalization

Another interesting feature of Brown’s theorizing is the relation between freedom and equality. As has been noted, equality is crucial for Brown’s conception of democracy. It is

only through political equality that rule by the whole demos is assured and that everyone is equally held accountable for the decisions made (Brown 2019, 23). Political equality is thus integral for freedom, as it enables participation in democratic rule and consequently the ability to control the conditions of one's life. In order to secure democracy Brown argues for the state to further equality, for example through measures of redistribution and affirmative action "to guarantee adequate conditions of existence (income, housing, health care)" (Brown 2019, 26).

At the same time, Brown argues that the strife for freedom constantly stands the risk of mutating into a site of domination. From this reasoning, she argues that institutionalized politics for freedom preserves the figure of domination and becomes an obstacle to locating unfreedoms emanating from the institutionalizing measures taken to redress earlier domination (Brown 1995, 7-8). As such, it leads to "the codification of injury and powerlessness—the marked turn away from freedom's pursuit" (Brown 1995, 27).

These parallel tracks seem to constitute an incoherence in Brown's work. For when promoting state action in order to overcome inequality, she prescribes the kind of institutionalization of equality that she argues perpetuates unfreedom. In other words, Brown appears to assert the danger she warns of. But is this really what she is saying? After all, her argument is that institutionalizing *freedom*—not equality—could lead to unfreedom. The risk of generating unfreedom do, however, apply for measures of institutionalizing equality as well. This becomes evident when Brown, discussing feminist formulations of the need for legally protected *equality*, asks the leading question of whether such laws could "codify within the law the very powerlessness it aims to redress?" (Brown 1995, 21). Regardless of if the institutionalizing aims to mend unfreedom or inequality, it appears to create unfreedom.

Still, there seems to be another point that could save Brown from the allegation. When discussing the mutational tendency of pursuits of freedom (more specifically, the invertive potential of reactions to unfreedom), she exclusively deals with social injustices based on identity: *women, workers, blacks*. Does the reasoning applied on identity hold true for Brown's seemingly non-identity-based measures to institutionalize equality? Two factors seem to be essential (Brown 1995, 7). First, Brown holds identity-based struggles for freedom to disregard the arrangement that generates hardship. However, the measures she proposes (affirmative action, for example) can neither be said to remodel the arrangement that creates the need for affirmative actions. Second, Brown means that the identity-based pursuit of freedom does not deal with how these identities are constructed. Regarding the proposed measures of institutionalization, individuals eligibility for affirmative action (for example) is not connected to a specified identity. While it seems likely that many of the affected people can be attributed such—for example as a specific type of worker—attempts to separate an identity from material reality appear to be difficult. Either way, the proposed measures of institutionalization do not engage with how such an eventual identity is created. Following this, the reasoning behind identity-based mutations of freedom seems to hold true for Brown's proposed measures to institutionalize equality.

In other words, Brown does seem guilty of prescribing the same kind of institutionalization of equality that she deems generative of unfreedoms. This makes her incoherent. While these institutionalizing measures appear integral to achieve the equality

needed for democracy—and consequently freedom—they are simultaneously afflicted with entrenching figures of domination.

6.4 Climbing the Oak of Freedom

Where does this place Brown in the *Oak of Freedom*? Before starting the climb it is worth to note that Brown herself probably would situate her freedom besides the Oak, as a fungi mycelium that surfaces every time there is a perceived unfreedom. This is based on her view of freedom as a circumstantial exercise that cannot be conceived as a universal and rigid concept, but is dependent on the presence of a specific domination.

However, the essay has shown how Brown's freedom does have more general characteristics with its foundation in *homo politicus*. Therefore it can be placed in the Oak. Immediately, one can establish that she reaches above freedom as non-interference, evidenced in her critique of “neoliberalism's reduction of unfreedom to coercion” (Brown 2019, 41). The notion of ‘coercion’ seemingly overlaps with the idea of unfreedom as intentional interference with what one wants to do, making it seem like Brown holds neoliberal freedom to the height of non-interference. Deeming this a ‘reduction,’ Brown's democratically embedded freedom continues the climb.

Reaching freedom as non-domination, one has to consider whether Brown's freedom accounts for others' capacity to interfere arbitrarily in one's choices. It appears so. Having another person constantly able to negatively intervene in one's decisions is incompatible with controlling the conditions of one's life, as Brown's ‘self-rule’ entails. Brown's insistence on self-rule's embeddedness in democratic participation in fact appears to secure this non-domination. Ruling together as an equal demos, guided by moral deliberation and contemplation, protects people from the prospect of some individuals having the capacity to arbitrarily interfere. This also makes Brown's freedom cover non-domination's intersubjective character and its attentiveness to subjective self-perception. In other words, the morally contemplative and deliberative nature of democratic engagement seems to enable the recognition of all citizens as social and legal persons. For Brown, however, unfreedom cannot solely be caused by agents but also by political rationalities, as evidenced with neoliberalism. Therefore, Brown climbs past this height.

She now reaches the crown of the Oak and positive freedom. It might be worth thinking about what Brown says at this height, in relation to Christman's four conditions. Highlighting freedom's situational and relational character, and the constant risk of freedom to invert into unfreedom or cement an unfreedom by institutionalization (Brown 1995, 7), Brown's theorizing can be illuminated by the image of a pendulum. When meeting an unfreedom the pendulum goes in one direction. When trying to mend this, the struggle for freedom either risks swinging the pendulum in the opposite direction or fixing it in the current position of unfreedom. According to this logic, freedom for Brown is when the pendulum is at its lowest point—when there is no unfreedom to respond to. This would

deprive Brown's understanding of freedom of Christman's aspect of *value conditions*. In other words, freedom would not entail the prescription of any values.

Yet, the analysis has shown that *value conditions* seep through the reasoning after all, as Brown's freedom as 'self-rule' and partaking in democratic rule depends on equality and *homo politicus*' capacity for moral deliberation and contemplation. Not only are there *value conditions*, but they also reflexively enable the *social and political practices* in which freedom is grounded. Contained in this dynamic are the two other conditions of positive freedom. *Capabilities* are a consequence of freedom as something exceeding self-preservation and *internal factors* are enclosed in 'self-rule' as governing the conditions of one's life. The question then becomes where in the crown of the Oak that Brown settles. Positioning her in relation to Christman and Gould's theorizing is a good place to start.

Brown's emphasis on 'self-rule' appears to incorporate Christman's 'authenticity'. Her description of the effects of neoliberalism on individual freedom seem to engage with those socially and internally manipulating effects that Christman associates with unfreedom as being unable to pursue actions of one's genuine choice. But Brown's freedom is more extensive than that, incorporating political aspects. Branching out beyond Christman, Brown's freedom initially appears strikingly comparable to Gould's democratic concept. Both hold equality and consequent redistribution as a necessity for freedom. Both also see participation in democracy as integral to freedom. Yet, they differ on small but important points in regards to *value conditions*.

Brown's freedom emphasizes values of moral deliberation and contemplation in order for individuals to control their life conditions and participate in controlling the conditions of the people. Gould's freedom, on the other hand, focuses on developing capacities, actualizing self-chosen projects, and cultivating relations. So while Brown's freedom considers the values associated with *homo politicus*, the purpose of those are different from the purposes of Gould's freedom. The latter's idea of freedom appears more closely associated with ideals of flourishing. This marks a small but significant difference in their understanding of freedom. That said, Brown's focus on control of conditions seems to be a foundation for being able to pursue such flourishing practices.

In summary, Brown's understanding of freedom ought to be classified as a positive freedom, situated in the crown of the *Oak of Freedom*. Incorporating all four characteristics of positive freedom, its focus on *social and political practices* makes it branch out from Christman's account. While Brown's freedom resonates with Gould's concept in such practices, an important difference between the two lies in *value conditions* and the prescribed purpose of the freedom. Brown then appears to occupy her own branch, slightly above Christman but not as far grown as Gould.

7. Conclusion

This essay has analyzed Wendy Brown's understanding of freedom through a contextualizing and reconstructive method. The analysis has shown how Brown's understanding of freedom is constituted by a mutually reinforcing relationship between individuals' ability to control the conditions of their lives and their participation in ruling together with others. The notion's basis in an idealized democracy requires equality and is guided by individuals' political ability to morally deliberate and contemplate.

The study has also spelled out inconsistency, incoherence, and a paradox in Brown's freedom. Highlighting the paradoxical nature of Brown's idealized democratic rule, the essay illuminated the inherent contradictions in her freedom. As such a democracy inevitably can abolish itself, the same is true for Brown's freedom. Furthermore, Brown has been evidenced to tamper with her freedom by detaching 'self-rule' from 'participation in rule by the demos'. Arguing for freedom to be a possible feature of autocratic regimes, this detachment generated inconsistency. Yet, further scrutiny showed this to be inconceivable according to Brown's genuine understanding of freedom. The study has also shown how Brown is incoherent in freedom's relation to equality. While freedom—as participating in democracy—requires institutionalized actions for equality, such measures also entrench unfreedom. In sum, while Brown appears aware of the paradoxical nature of her freedom, this and the incoherence in its interaction with equality ought to be considered for those who engage with Brown's understanding of freedom.

Climbing the *Oak of Freedom*, the study has demonstrated how Brown's freedom incorporates freedom as non-interference and non-domination. Ending up as a positive account in the tree crown, her freedom is situated on a branch containing all four of Christman's conditions for positive freedom. This branch is characterized by its deep foundation in *social and political practices* while not elaborately asserting *value conditions* to certain purposes. Brown's freedom has thus been shown to have similarities with Gould and Christman's positive concepts but differ from them in significant aspects.

Besides this, the essay has also provided a novel and useful framework to analyze theories of freedom. The *Oak of Freedom* allows positive theories to build upon those of non-interference and non-domination, while still acknowledging their varying and utterly complex composition. In a larger context, the essay has shown how freedom, despite its complex character, continues to be a relevant and important concept within political thinking.

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