

Resistance in Post-Realist Times

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Eva Cherniavsky. *Neocitizenship: Political Culture After Democracy*. New York University Press, 2017. 232 pp.

Any scholar of contemporary culture must grapple with neoliberalism: what is it? how does it work? and how should we respond? A host of theorizations of the present provide helpful descriptions and prescriptions, but it's rare to encounter a perspectival critique as intuitive and rigorous as Eva Cherniavsky's *Neocitizenship: Political Culture After Democracy*. At the core of Cherniavsky's account is her proposal that the decoupling of the nation from the state under neoliberalism has changed the relationship between the political subject and the state so drastically that the category of "citizen" may no longer be appropriate. Along with other scholars of neoliberalism, such as David Harvey, Wendy Brown, and Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, Cherniavsky distinguishes the modern bourgeois nation-state, which extended the sovereign power of the state into the reproduction of normative culture and the provision of social goods, from the neoliberal state, whose controlling, administrative functions continue in the absence of culture-building. Until Cherniavsky's study, analyses of neoliberal redefinitions of the state have left largely unconsidered how this reconfiguration affects the citizen's orientation to the state. *Neocitizenship* addresses this lack, considering recent theory, contemporary political culture, and popular texts not only to trace the relationship between neoliberalism and its subjects in the United States, but to also ask how we might think about oppositional politics in a time defined by control rather than normativity. Cherniavsky argues that advanced industrial nations, and the United States in particular, are now defined by practices traditionally associated with "developing" nations, such as "electoral fraud, the buying of political office, routine violations of due process, invasive state surveillance and the suspension of civil rights" (2). At the same time, neoliberal governance seeks to convince people that their well-being is not the business of the state but rather "a fully private, disaggregated good" (3). If the state no longer claims to represent or serve the people — if, as Cherniavsky establishes, we live in a time after democracy — how do we resist the state?

The book patiently traces contradictions within critical accounts of neoliberalism that recognize that ideology is no longer the business of the state and yet continue

to see their work as ideological critique. For example, Cherniavsky's close-reading of Wendy Brown, to which her study hews closely at some points, questions the productiveness of characterizing the neoliberal subject as "desirous of its own subjection and complicit in its subordination." (Brown, qtd. in Cherniavsky 136). Recalling Derrida's claim that "an originary popular sovereign" is a fantasy, Cherniavsky writes, "If we acknowledge that there is no popular sovereign *before it is called forth by the laws and institutions of the state*, then it seems hard to fault the citizens' submissiveness." In other words, while many scholars have tracked the dissolution of popular sovereignty—defined as the state's claim to represent the people, and characterized by the state's interest in reproducing a normative national character—they continue to demand from citizens the kind of mobilization that only works when that sovereignty is intact. Cherniavsky thus identifies an intractability in Left criticism and, through her readings of popular literary and visual texts, models an answer to the question, "How not to judge the neocitizen by the exercise of a political reason whose obsolescence is evidenced by her very existence?" (139).

In chapter 1, Cherniavsky fleshes out the implications of neoliberal governance for criticism, arguing that the critic's method of "defamiliarization," which seeks to show that what seems to be natural or normal is in fact constructed, is no longer relevant in post-normative times. Cherniavsky finds in Foucault's late-1970s Collège de France lectures—usually read for their articulation of the concept of biopolitics—an account of the rise of "governmentality" as state discipline wanes. Foucault claims that "American neoliberalism" is characterized by "an optimization of systems of difference . . . in which minority individuals and practices are tolerated . . . and in which there is an environmental type of intervention instead of the internal subjugation of individuals" (Foucault qtd. in Cherniavsky 22). By changing the conditions of labor and education and controlling access to resources and population movement, as Cherniavsky claims, the neoliberal state "arrays receptive subjects, minutely sensitive to the smallest fluctuations of the market," rather than employing nationalist ideology to fix them in place (22-23). Furthermore, in a compelling reading of Arendt, Cherniavsky establishes commonalities between totalitarianism and neoliberalism. Unlike fascism, totalitarianism is anti-normative, according to Arendt, making propaganda unnecessary. Cherniavsky points to Arendt's characterization of "[t]he ideal subject of totalitarian rule" as "not the convinced Nazi or the convinced Communist, but people for whom the distinction between fact and fiction . . . and the distinction between true and false . . . no longer exist" (Arendt qtd. in Cherniavsky 34).

In the second chapter, Cherniavsky persuasively argues that the liberal, disciplinary state has yielded to an administrative state whose power flows, in part, from the complex of public-private nonprofits and NGOs comprising "civil society." While from a liberal-capitalist perspective, civil society is the space in which citizens negotiate

their relationship to a representative state, Cherniavsky shows that civil society is defined by state and private foundations whose primary concern is their own continued functioning and the dominance of the U.S. state. Through a case study of American studies programs in Eastern Europe and related nonprofits supported, in part, by the U.S. government, Cherniavsky discerns a neoliberal educational apparatus that no longer purports to “free” the citizen through the inculcation of nationalist norms, but rather prepares her to be a good administrator. This question guides Cherniavsky to a reading of Paul Beatty’s *The White Boy Shuffle* in chapter 3 that finds in the novel a rejection of civic engagement in favor of the state of being “ready to die.” Reviewing Paul Gilroy and Hortense Spillers’s work and close-reading Achille Mbembe’s theory of necropower, Cherniavsky agrees that the exploitation and destruction of human life is intrinsic, rather than exceptional to modernity, but also argues that such necropolitics is on the rise as emancipatory sovereignty wanes. In contrast to civil action, like voting or protest, the “unfitness to live” that Cherniavsky traces through *The White Boy Shuffle* constitutes a direct challenge to modern self-possession. The most suggestive section of her reading establishes the novel’s resistance to the (patriarchal) pathologization of the black family through the protagonist’s memories of violent abuse at the hands of his father, who is “an extension of the necropolitical state” (93). Cherniavsky also brings the sexual politics of the novel to bear on its turn away from citizenship, using Spillers and Leo Bersani to illuminate the protagonist’s inclination toward anal play as an affirmation of the value of “receptivity” and “the humiliated self” (100-101).

Through her reading in chapter 4 of *Battlestar Galactica*, the American TV series which ran from 2005 to 2009, Cherniavsky traces the contours of a new form of domination that controls without disciplining. Because the series portrays a mixed society, composed of both humans and humanoid cyclons, it offers a unique opportunity to apprehend both the “residual,” normative political order, to which *Battlestar*’s human characters appeal, and the emergent “simulacral politics” of neoliberalism, embodied by the cyclons (107). The cyclons’ culture is not normative, Cherniavsky argues, but rather structured around difference that is valued insofar as it contributes to efficiency. Furthermore, with the power to create their own personal realities—perceiving a forest in a bare hallway, for example—cyclons “renounc[e] the investment in a collectively verified world” and move through a series of simulations whose value is linked to aesthetics and feelings rather than to a shared reality (117). Citing Edelman’s work on the centrality of futurity to politics, Cherniavsky argues that a popular text like *Battlestar* discerns what theory has been slow to say, namely that power no longer seeks to secure a stable reality for its citizens. In other words, where domination was once enacted through appeals to a collective future, it now happens through efficiency, risk-management, and flexibility.

For this reason, Cherniavsky argues, against Wendy Brown, that neoliberalism is not a normative project, but rather one that seeks to *normalize* “the fragmentation and multiplication of social and political (un)realities” (156). In chapter 5, Cherniavsky points out that because neoliberal values, such as efficiency, accountability, and excellence, “have *no normative social referent*,” neoliberalism encourages us “to *construct the environment* in which we reckon our gains and losses” (156). This, of course, is what finance capital does, and Cherniavsky draws upon Doug Henwood’s characterization of the current phase of capitalism to reveal the way that market logic and political logic coalesce in the “derealization of political life.”

Throughout the book, Cherniavsky moves elegantly from literature and television to recent and contemporary political culture, approaching the Bush era, the 2012 presidential election, and, in the final chapter, Occupy Wall Street not as context but as texts, in a way that strengthens her argument about the salient features of our current (un)reality. Trump’s rise to power since Cherniavsky wrote this book only reinforces her claims, which might reorient us toward a different kind of resistance. The sense, in theories of neoliberalism, that the walls are closing in can make for gloomy reading, but though Cherniavsky has no illusions about the difficulty of resisting such flexible forms of domination, her generosity towards the public makes this a heartening and humane book. Her insight, for example, that it doesn’t make sense to bemoan civic disengagement when the state no longer represents the people opens much-needed space for thinking about resistance. What’s more, Cherniavsky’s insistence on the partial, unfinished nature of contemporary political culture orients her study toward spacious close-readings, whether of fiction, official documents, or anonymous online texts. The sustained attention she grants her texts allows the shifting relation of the political subject to the state to come into view. Our job, as cultural critics, is to turn our heads slightly, and to pay better attention.

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