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## An Invitation to Recover Our Imaginations

Review: Brandon Absher,

*The Rise of Neoliberal Philosophy: Human Capital, Profitable Knowledge, and the Love of Wisdom*  
(Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2021), 196 pages.

### Abstract:

This review explores Brandon Absher's (2021) *The Rise of Neoliberal Philosophy: Human Capital, Profitable Knowledge, and the Love of Wisdom*. *Rise* offers an accessible breakdown of Neoliberalism, its cultivation of the Neoliberal University, an argument for the claim that academic philosophy has contracted neoliberal predilections, and some thoughts about what should be done as a result. The book is, by all accounts, a strong critical deconstruction of institutionalized philosophy and the role academic philosophers often play in perpetuating many of its exclusionary practices. Absher's work is rigorous and often echoes Herbert Marcuse's 1937 claim that the imagination is the rational faculty of freedom.

### Keywords:

social theory, Marcuse, neoliberalism, philosophy, higher education

*The Rise of Neoliberal Philosophy*, by Brandon Absher, is hard to read. This is not to say that it is poorly written, indefensible, or lacking insight. On the contrary, if you engage the book, you will find a careful analysis of philosophical practice in contemporary academia. It contains an accessible breakdown of Neoliberalism, its cultivation of the Neoliberal University, an argument for the claim that academic philosophy has contracted

neoliberal predilections, and some thoughts about what should be done as a result. The book is, by all accounts, a strong critical deconstruction of institutionalized philosophy and the role academic philosophers often play in perpetuating many of its exclusionary practices. Nonetheless, reading *The Rise of Neoliberal Philosophy* – henceforth referred to as *Rise*<sup>1</sup> – will be difficult for many because it delivers an unsettling but important message: academic philosophy’s desire to survive in higher education – to justify its value to the powers at hand – is, paradoxically, strangling it.

To put this into perspective, the reader should consider philosopher and critical theorist Herbert Marcuse’s observations about the imagination and philosophical pursuits: “Without phantasy, all philosophical knowledge remains in the grip of the present or the past and severed from the future, which is the only link between philosophy and the real history of mankind.”<sup>2</sup> As one of the major influences on Absher’s project, Marcuse’s discussion of “phantasy” in this passage from his 1937 essay, “Philosophy and Critical Theory,” foreshadows the idea that a free society must foster “freedom of the imagination” and, in doing so, support people’s free thinking. Eventually, this idea, along with many others, would inspire Marcuse to write (1964) *One-Dimensional Man*. In this text, he articulates several cautionary observations regarding free thought’s antithesis: “one-dimensional thought.” To think one-dimensionally is to reason in ways that, first, take some assumptions about a context (alt., the world) to be unalterable – a given necessity – and then, second, to derive life’s possibilities in a way that maintains those assumptions. That said, if you take what you are socialized to believe as necessary, then you as Marcuse argues, are unfree because you are unable to critique the immediate social apparatus.

This observation about freedom fuels a significant part of Absher’s criticism regarding Neoliberal Philosophy – that it is unfree as a result of adapting its rationality (often out of a felt need to survive in the academy), to neoliberal social demands and pressures. Notably, for Marcuse, today’s advanced society relies on and fosters habitual one-dimensional thinking. We arguably live in a *one-dimensional society*, he thinks, because our collective or individual capacities for negative thinking – our ability to critique the establishment – are whittled down psychologically by the dominant social apparatus. We enjoy the benefits of capitalism and are told/shown that if we do not play the existing social game that we will be disciplined, punished, or lose out on something “good.” As a result, it becomes “rational” to live life according to the dominant social order’s rules. This process, Marcuse argues, makes it easier for the norms of the established order to present themselves as *necessities* to us. “That’s just the way the world is” – so the saying goes.

Given this background, I think we should read *Rise* as an invitation to professional philosophers to recover their imaginations in the Marcusean sense. Mirroring philosopher John McCumber’s methodology from (2016) *The Philosophy Scare: The Politics of Reason in the Early Cold War*, Absher effectively argues in *Rise* that the pressures within the Neoliberal University have reshaped academic philosophy into a one-dimensional assemblage of inequity, oppressive gatekeeping, and complicity with ideals that undermine its life affirming potential. Philosophy’s neoliberal practices, he argues, follow from its inability to imagine a different way of being and, as a result, we philosophers continue to undermine our field’s survival even as we try to preserve it – like a survivalist drinking salt water. Absher’s project would sit confidently on a library shelf next to other works in critical theory, social philosophy, and the philosophy of higher education. Ultimately, however, *Rise* earns its place in the larger discourse regarding the state of higher education by sharply articulating philosophy’s place on that battleground. Not unlike Philosopher Joseph Cunningham’s article (2013) “Praxis Exiled: Herbert Marcuse and the One Dimensional University,” Absher’s work on *Rise* reflects other works critiquing Higher Education such as philosopher Jennifer M. Morton’s (2019) *Moving Up Without Losing Your Way: The*

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1) Referred to hereafter parenthetically as RNP.

2) Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man*, 155.

*Ethical Costs of Upward Mobility* in addition to philosopher Jason Brennan's and economic historian Phillip W. Magness's (2019) *Cracks in the Ivory Tower: The Moral Mess of Higher Education*.

Organized into five thematically distinct but argumentatively connected chapters, Absher contributes to the aforementioned discourse by offering the reader five things: (i) an accessible account of neoliberal concepts and a precise framework for identifying the Neoliberal University (Chapter 1); (ii) an analysis of how the pressures of Neoliberalism in the academy have facilitated a paradigm shift in academic philosophy (Chapter 2); (iii) an argument for understanding this paradigm as one-dimensional (Chapter 3); (iv) a critique of neoliberal philosophy's perpetuation of inequity and how this undermines the basic philosophical project to pursue wisdom (Chapter 4); and (v) a call to develop a new philosophical sensibility founded on "radical love" and in "solidarity with the exploited and oppressed" (Chapter 5).

In "Chapter 1: Philosophy in the Neoliberal University," Absher provides significant evidence supporting the claim that neoliberal thinking pervades higher education. The strongest part is where Absher offers his reader a diagnostic framework for thinking about neoliberalism. Granted, other such frameworks already exist. In fact, *Rise* references geographer David Harvey's, sociologist Steven C. Ward's, political scientist Sanford Schram's, and other's thoughts on this matter. However, it is Absher's synthesis of existing ideas about neoliberalism into a multifaceted account of it that makes this chapter valuable. Under his account, neoliberalism is an ideology and strategy for strengthening elite power structures through the assimilation of economic rationality into all modes by which we relate to ourselves and each other. Often, this presents itself as the reorganization of governance, institutions, and people into forms that support privatization (i.e., ownership and consolidation of power by the elite), while undercutting the availability of public goods and the democratization of power (RNP, 21–22).

The chapter then walks the reader through an analysis of the Neoliberal University with this framework as a trail map from which to think about current trends in U.S. Higher Education. Specifically, *Rise* looks at (1) U.S. Higher Education's defunding and privatization as a consumer good; (2) its cultural transformation as a place of education into a place for job training; (3) its current research prerogatives that prioritize commodifiable forms of knowledge over social critique; and (4) its reworking of shared governance practices to a centralized power regime under a small number of administrative bureaucrats. This paradigm shift in U.S. Higher Ed. for the sake of optimizing the university towards economic "viability" has resulted in, Absher observes, a shifting of "power away from those at the bottom or periphery of social hierarchies towards managerial elites" (RNP, 29).

In "Chapter 2: The Performativity of Neoliberal Philosophy," Absher continues the development of the book's overall thesis by framing his observations about (1) – (4) as pressures acting upon philosophical practice and its practitioners in the U.S. academy. Under the pressure to perform in accordance with an investment standard which demands a "payoff," he observes that philosophers "must market themselves in order to appear worthy of investment" (RNP, 43). The result of this, it is argued, is that we philosophers must become both entrepreneurs selling ourselves as human capital while also thinking of ourselves and our discipline as commodifiable in order to appeal to the logics of optimization and payoff in the Neoliberal University – we must be perceived as "investable." The skill-ification of philosophy as a "critical thinking" training, Absher argues, is one example of this rationality. Citing several artifacts from the American Philosophical Association's Advocacy toolkits, among other things, he concludes that Neoliberal Philosophy has come to perform its role within the pressures of neoliberal institutions (RNP, 57).

In "Chapter 3: The One-Dimensionality of Neoliberal Philosophy," Absher builds on Chapter 1 and 2 to support at least four claims. First, (a), that the logics and policies of the Neoliberal University amount to a kind of harmful repression and self-alienation of one's philosophical passions in the Marcusean sense. Second, (b) that (a) results in the internalization of the demands of the neoliberal environment (i.e., to be marketable, economically competitive, and an optimized investment). Third, (c), that (b) requires a reconciliation between

one's desire for self-actualization/gratification and the harmfully repressive nature operating at the core of (a). And lastly, (d), that the culture in academic philosophy practices a form of, what Marcuse calls, "repressive desublimation" which reinforces its adherence to the current power arrangement in the academy.

In Marcuse's work, "repressive desublimation" is like a release valve for a subject's pent-up desire for something or their discontent, which might itself be seen as a pent-up desire for changing the existing social order. A society or organization that represses a subject's desires by restricting behaviors is said to create pressure, psychologically at least, that eventually longs for gratification. In response, especially in cases of harmful or surplus repression, a society will develop social or economic mechanisms for managing that pressure – to diffuse it. On this matter, Absher notes that Neoliberal Philosophy often perpetuates a form of pathological narcissism wherein the academic worker "fetishizes their own commodified performance" and the neoliberal academy creates ways to condone or encourage that behavior so as to discharge or manage any subject's discontent with the academic system for distributing power. Such techniques can include public praise via marketing, titles that communicate powerful positions, increased salaries, false merit-narratives, productivity-based funding that rewards neoliberal optimization, and so on – all of which can be yours if you merely walk the line.

Notably, Absher rightly observes that Neoliberal Philosophy's recent pattern of perpetuating the "employability" narrative as a set of normative behaviors and expectations in the context of the Neoliberal University, reinforces the investability narrative, as I have labeled it. One consequence of this, he argues, is that such a reality psychologically whittles down philosophical discourse to those things that are, themselves, commodified forms of knowledge within the neoliberal performative framework. Absher references things like *The Philosophical Gourmet Report* and other ranking systems based on "job placement," "research productivity," and, "citation numbers" as creating performative pressures that, among other things, support a socialized hierarchy within the field. Such things come to determine who is "investable" and who is not on the academic job market. From this hierarchy and neoliberal social pressure, he concludes that academic philosophy in the U.S. has fallen into one-dimensionality as a result of its growing alignment within this system and its inability to critique that same system. Put otherwise, our philosophical desire for wisdom has been turned against us and towards investability within the neoliberal system because we have heteronomously accepted the neoliberal view of what counts as wisdom in the first place – we inhabit a place where that which is investable is seen as the only thing philosophically worthy of attention.

In "Chapter 4: Diversity and Neoliberal Philosophy" and "Chapter 5: Toward a New Paradigm," Absher returns to his earlier remarks about power within Neoliberal Philosophy. Reflecting patterns of power more generally, he notes that power in Neoliberal Philosophy "works through the marginalization of individuals and subfields" (Absher 2021, 122). In building on this observation throughout the latter part of the text, Absher effectively establishes a conceptual link between one-dimensionality's power to shape cultural rationality and, what Bell Hooks might call, a culture of domination – a place where value is determined by a person's/idea's/thing's capacity to dominate others. Absher argues in chapter 4 that one-dimensionality is inherently exclusionary because it marginalizes methods, theories, and people that sit outside the bounds of neoliberal norms; it oppresses those deemed unworthy of investment because one-dimensional thinking in neo-liberal contexts cannot imagine possibilities for valuing people/ideas/things outside their economic use-value. Echoing philosopher Sara Ahmed's work on diversity efforts in U.S. Higher Education, Absher extends this observation about one-dimensionality to critique Neoliberal Philosophical culture by showing how one-dimensionality pushes Neoliberal Philosophy's diversity work towards box-checking efforts and marketing schemes. By presenting itself as diverse because it has the desire to be seen as diverse rather than pursuing the moral task of being more equitable, inclusive, and diverse, Neoliberal Philosophy becomes, and Absher references Ahmed's work on this point, about "changing perceptions of whiteness rather than changing the whiteness of the organization" (RNP, 123).

From this, Chapter 5 and the conclusion support the claim that we must develop a new sensibility in which we are “maladjusted to and discontent with the status quo of injustice, oppression, and violence” in the world and within philosophical practice. As summarized in his concluding chapter, Absher writes that such a sensibility would “be committed to the democratization and desegregation of philosophy and society more broadly, reconceptualizing knowledge and who has it in order to learn and live freedom more fully” (RNP, p. 158). The strongest part of Chapter 5, and the concluding chapter, is its articulation of philosophical practice as a two-part radical love for unmasking the world and in “solidarity with the exploited and oppressed.” The former part of Absher’s approach to radical love as a philosophical starting point echoes George Yancy’s (2018) “The Practice of Philosophy: Truth-Telling, Vulnerability, and Risk.” Like Absher, Yancy wants us to turn towards and unmask the illusions of the world given that society has become very skilled at crafting costume-like narratives for hiding its capacity for violence, exploitation, and dehumanization because of anti-black racism and other social pathologies. Rather than pursue a kind of positivism or accept the “delusions of realism,” Absher asks us to embrace a kind of methodical pluralism about philosophical practice which, at its core, acknowledges that philosophy has “always been practiced by people who were denied access to the title of philosopher due to their exclusion from the” dominant narrative about what counts as “philosophy” in western academia (RNP, 158).

On all accounts, Absher’s work is both comprehensive and rigorous. If *Rise* is to be read as an invitation for philosophers to recover their imaginations, it does so by echoing Marcuse’s 1937 claim that the imagination is the rational faculty of freedom and observing that one-dimensionality in Neoliberal Philosophy amounts to its being unfree and perpetuating oppression. That said, if the problem with Neoliberal Philosophy is its one-dimensionality and solving it requires pursuing Absher’s articulation of philosophical practice as radical love, *Rise* seemingly provides a better view of the problem and the destination awaiting us after its resolution than it does a clear pathway for overcoming that problem. This observation does not lessen the book’s excellence, given its goals, but it does mean that one might need to compliment *Rise* with other texts like *Critique & Praxis* by Bernard E. Harcourt or *Roots for Radicals: Organizing for Power, Action, and Justice* by Edward T Chambers in order to get Absher’s revolution off the ground.

Put otherwise, I had a similar feeling after reading *Rise* that I often have after reading one of Marcuse’s works – I am left with a desire for some more philosophical guidance about synthesizing critique and praxis in my life and the lives of others. I am left searching for some strategies to coordinate the transformative experiences my colleagues and administrators need to help them see possibilities of value beyond the investable benchmark. Notably, reading *Rise* could qualify as such an experience for some. Yet, for both Marcuse and Absher, it seems that it may be harder to organize the revolution on the basis of their texts alone because social change is a coordinated collective action; it is an act of communion and radical healing. Absher’s ideas are great rallying cries and social platforms from which to spark philosophy’s revolution, but we will have to look to other places for ideas about how to organize it. Additionally, *Rise* often overlooks the fact that participating in the philosophical revolution would cost more to some than it would to others. While this is implied in places, who organizes and staffs the picket line for the revolution will matter as much for the justice it seeks as the fact that it is needed. The labors, emotional or otherwise, associated with this kind of revolution are disproportionately shouldered by black and brown subjects in U.S. Higher Education – as *Presumed Incompetent* and *Presumed Incompetent II* – among other texts, point out. It would have been good had Absher discussed this more, if only to take observations about the whiteness of power in philosophical culture from Chapter 4 and put it into discussion with matters pertaining to who bears responsibility for the emotional and revolutionary labors called for in Chapter 5 and its conclusion. Again, Absher definitely implies in *Rise* that those with power are obligated to do the work to open up philosophy, otherwise the powerless would need to take that power from the powerful. However, this could have been more explicit.

I make this point because part of the reason neoliberalism has been so successful in its reshaping of our social world is that its rationality has manipulated the conditions of our lives in order to motivate our instrumental pursuit of leisure and happiness, to motivate an unaware happy consciousness. In the same way that philosopher Sara Ahmed critiques our desire for happiness in (2010) *The Promise of Happiness*, Absher and Marcuse both understand that our desires, even our philosophical desires, can be redirected in favor of things that sustain a culture of domination in the established social order. In this way, Neoliberal Philosophy arose because neoliberalism created conditions that subtly coerce us, often unknowingly, to perform in accordance with its demands. As such, those with privilege and power clearly bear the immediate responsibility to address these issues, if only to level the playing field. That said, what Absher calls for is not unlike Marcuse's call for a reorganization of the social apparatus into forms that are life affirming and liberating rather than exploitative and dominating. In this way, *Rise* should be praised because Absher articulates a well-argued emancipatory goal for academic philosophy.

Ultimately, *Rise* is a call to establish space for two-dimensional philosophy – for both philosophy with “givens” and for philosophy about “givens.” Absher calls on us to open philosophy up to the messiness of life. Yes, knowledge economies exist, but philosophy offers more than marketable concepts and skills for creating “content” or “optimization.” Philosophy is about humanizing our understanding of knowledge, reality, and ethics. Often, it can be about resisting optimization because we are not optimal beings in our lives, our knowings, or as part of our world. To settle on the view that philosophy is a consumer good is to alienate ourselves from philosophy as a transformative labor of love. When we forget that, as Absher points out, we lose ourselves and our very passion for philosophy, for thinking, becomes alienated from us – turned against us. If we should take away anything from this book it is that the rise of neoliberal philosophy amounts to the loss of ourselves, but *The Rise of Neoliberal Philosophy* is an invitation to ignite our imagination and recover our humanity as philosophers.

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