

"Turning the Social Contract Inside Out: Neoliberal Governance and Human Capital in *Two Days, One Night*"

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## Introduction

In place of the social contractarian promise—that the political aggregate (or an authorized precipitate of it) will secure the individual against life-threatening danger from without and within—individual *homo economicus* may now be legitimately sacrificed to macroeconomic imperatives. Instead of being secured or protected, the responsabilized citizen tolerates insecurity, deprivation, and extreme exposure to maintain the competitive positioning, growth, or credit rating of the nation as firm.

Wendy Brown, *Undoing the Demos*

Film critic and scholar Girish Shambu finds an increased willingness to critique capitalism in mainstream media and culture (2015). Films dealing the 2008 financial and housing crisis like *The Big Short* (2015), *99 Homes* (2015), and *Money Monster* (2016) approach neoliberalism through the lens of headline narratives about money, credit, and houses as they try to bring into focus a large and complex system, particularly in the American context. Approaching the neoliberal economy from a different perspective than these other recent releases, the 2014 film from the Dardenne brothers *Two Days, One Night* (2014) tells an altogether smaller and symptomatic, but no less significant story that focuses on the fate of one woman's job in one particular company over the course of one weekend. Still the film fits the critical trend identified by Shambu, for the movie is about one woman's efforts to save her job in the face of growing competition and impending "downsizing". The film, set in Belgium, works credibly as a characterization of an all-too-common set of workplace and market dynamics that transcend many national borders today.

The Belgian filmmakers Jean-Pierre and Luc Dardenne have long been recognized as part of the tradition of cinematic realism as their films feature a consistent social and political conscience alloyed with a *cinéma vérité* style. One film scholar situates them along with "the Neo-Realist tradition in blending a highly observational mode with a distinctive rhetoric of the image to produce an idealist cinema of moral concerns, one whose core values are positive and hopeful, and one that transcends passive representation of social substrata in perpetual struggle against a vicious circle of oppression and frustration" (Mosley 2013, 13). The Dardennes favor a

style that avoids melodrama and allows for unhurried contemplation of concrete situations. Their films always evince empathy for the daily struggles of those who work for a living, those experienced in negotiating precarity. In a profile of the Dardennes, *New York Times* film critic A.O. Scott suggests each one of the Dardennes' films are part of "a larger narrative: a complex tale of globalization and the expansion of the consumer economy, of the decline of the old left and the rise of neoliberalism. It's a story the Dardennes have been telling, chapter by chapter, for a long time" (Scott 2014). In short, you might say that with the Dardennes, neorealism meets neoliberalism.

*Two Days, One Night* is their most recent chapter, and it concerns the personal and affective struggles of Sandra and sixteen other solar panel factory workers in today's economy. Let me briefly summarize the film. Without her knowledge and while she was away from the job recovering from a depression, Sandra learns she has lost her job after her coworkers at the factory were asked by management to vote on whether to preserve Sandra's job or take a bonus of 1000 Euros each. With the help of a friendly colleague, Sandra presses the boss and wins the chance at a re-vote first thing the following Monday morning. Over the weekend she spends two days and one night (hence the title) scrambling to call and meet each one her coworkers to try to convince them to change their vote and allow her keep her job. That is, Sandra must convince her co-workers to decide to forego their own bonuses of 1000 Euros each so that she may return to her job after a medical absence for mental illness (depression). After some hesitation, she gets to work, phoning some colleagues, but going to see many in person, such that the film unfolds as a series of encounters (or, one might say, confrontations, exchanges, conversations, etc. depending on the particular coworker she is addressing) between Sandra and her coworkers. At the end of the film, after having met eleven colleagues face-to-face<sup>1</sup> and spoken to others on the

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<sup>1</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, famous for his ethical analysis of the face to face encounter and the way that responsibility arises from an encounter with the face of the other, is an acknowledged inspiration for Luc Dardenne in particular, as noted by many film scholars. (See Mai 2010 and Moseley 2013.) Writing in his published diary *On The Back of Our Images* after the death of Levinas, Luc comments on Levinas' influence on *La Promesse*, saying it "owes a lot to the reading of his books. His interpretation of face-to-

phone, Sandra gets her re-vote, but the result is 8 votes for her and 8 votes against. She does not get her job back. Just when all appears to be lost, the boss invites Sandra into his office, where he praises her for having convinced half the staff to give up their bonus and says that in a couple of months he will hire her back rather than renewing a fixed-term contract. Sandra refuses his offer, saying she cannot let someone be laid off for her to come back. She walks out of his office and a smile spreads over her face as she calls her husband.<sup>2</sup>

In the context of praising the Dardennes for their films' social realism and positioning them as inheritors of neorealism, critics and scholars often describe their films as moral fables situated in the economic damage of capitalism. For example, Mosley notes that many critics see "the drama of ethical crisis as central to the Dardennes' major films" (2013, 22).<sup>3</sup> Rather than an ethical problem or moral fable, I suggest we approach *Two Days, One Night* with another kind of philosophical fable in mind. It is helpful to see the film as a variation on social contract theory. As a variation on social contract, what we find in Sandra's case is the reversal of consent – consenting to economic rule rather than political rule, consenting to the legitimation of self-interest rather than public interest, and consenting to exclusion rather than inclusion.

What is a social contract anyway but a collective agreement whereby each one agrees to give up some natural rights, on the condition that all others do as well for the sake of security, protection, and (most often) self-governance. Instead of giving up something toward inclusion and the good of all, the eight who vote against Sandra's job and in favor of their bonus give up nothing and are willing to exclude her as they struggle to maintain a modicum of stability amidst conditions of neoliberal precarity. Does it simply mean the triumph of the individual over the

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face, the face as first discourse. Without these readings, we have imagined [key scenes]? The entire film can be seen as an attempt to reach the face-to-face encounter" (quoted in Cummings 2008).

<sup>2</sup> Anti-spoiler alert: I dislike the injunction not to "spoil" narrative works of art not only because it stifles conversation, but also because "spoilers" do not in the least hinder one's enjoyment of texts since the "how" of a text is just as important as the "what."

<sup>3</sup> Levinas' identification with ethics combined with Luc's acknowledgment of Levinas' influence is cited as further support. See Mai 2010 and Moseley 2013

collective and the death of solidarity, as many critics and even the filmmakers themselves suggest? Or does it not involve the very construction of that individual (i.e., the production of neoliberal subjects) and the governmentality such individuals conduct? We can see that Sandra, in asking each one of her colleagues to vote for her to keep her job and give up their own bonuses, symbolically occupies the position of defender of the social contract. She seeks solidarity, inclusion, and protection for herself and all the rest in return for relinquishing of something dear, in this case a much needed bonus rather than natural rights.

The film's unusual premise of workers voting to lay off one of their own exemplifies the "turning inside out of the social contract" that has become characteristic of neoliberalism. The question, though, is what "turning the social contract inside out" means both theoretically and in this instance. Notice that Brown's metaphor of turning inside does not exactly employ a language of destruction, but rather a language of inversion, exposure, and vulnerability. This is no accident. "Neo-liberalism is not merely destructive of rules, institutions and rights. It is also *productive* of certain kinds of social relations, certain ways of living, certain subjectivities" (Dardot and Laval 2014, emphasis original). Therefore, as I read it, neoliberalism's "turning the social contact inside out" signals the rise of two remarkable presences, neoliberal governance and competition of human capitals, rather than merely the loss of solidarity.

## Governance

[N]eoliberal governance is a supreme instance of *omnis et singulatim*, the gathering and separating, amassing and isolating that Foucault identified as the signature of modern governmentality.

Wendy Brown (2015, 130).

The blurring of the distinction between capital and labor at the heart of the film's story, with workers placed in the capitalist position of managing employment decisions, is among the most intriguing and emblematic features of today's neoliberalism. The real possibility hanging over the whole film is that Sandra will not succeed, and the social contract will indeed be turned

inside out—and not just by management, but through the votes of precarious workers situated as human capitals, themselves squeezed by economic needs as well as neoliberal conditions and rationality. Some might view the very premise of the film cynically, and argue that after all the final say over whether Sandra stays or goes rests with the employer rather than the workers, with capital rather than labor, and so what's the point of the vote. It is, one might argue, a false choice, corporate power disguised as collaborative. I disagree. This kind of blurring is a central sign of the influence of neoliberal rationality among human capitals that the film reflects. The series of negotiations depicted in the film between Sandra and her coworkers can feel rather repetitive, even as they are fraught, but that is part of way in which the film represents the normalization and governance of the subject as human capital.

The arrangement whereby Sandra gets the opportunity to negotiate with her coworkers is not merely a clever narrative device. It is indicative of the governance tactics increasingly deployed by companies in neoliberal contexts. For again, in addition to the loss or absence of solidarity, *Two Days, One Night* reveals remarkable neoliberal presences, including practices of governance to go along with the competition of human capitals. The blurring of the boundaries between labor and capital, central to the film's premise, works as an object lesson in neoliberal governance, which "has become neoliberalism's primary administrative form, the political modality through which it creates environments, structures constraints and incentives, and hence conducts subjects" (Brown 2015, 122).

The scenario whereby employees participate in management decisions concerning employment and redundancy illustrates many characteristics of governance, as examined by Wendy Brown. The fact that the company management has seen fit to enlist workers to vote on Sandra's fate is indicative of "governing that is networked, integrated, cooperative, partnered, disseminated" (Brown 2015 123). Some of Sandra's coworkers chafe at being asked to vote on the question, as for instance when one says "voted for my bonus" and says he didn't set up the

choice between her job and their bonus. But nevertheless the colleagues eventually accede to the reality of the governance they are asked to carry out and cast their vote.

Sandra and her colleagues cooperate with each other and with management to collaboratively manage aspects of the enterprise. The consensus-driven approach represented in the vote among employees over employment decisions is emblematic of “governance [that] replaces ‘command and control’ with negotiation and persuasion” (Brown 2015, 127, summarizing Lester Salamon). What commands and controls instead of the bosses/management is neoliberal rationality by which subjects find themselves compelled to accept the reality of competition and precarity. For instance, many of her colleagues ask Sandra how the others are voting, suggesting soft coercion (but also fear and insecurity) as much as cooperation. The last colleague Sandra visits, Alphonse, a black man she finds in the Laundromat, tells her his vote against her was not a vote for the bonus (he’s a contract worker who hasn’t been there long and would only get 150 Euros), but rather a vote to fit in, as he was scared of the other workers who all wanted the bonus. Further, in keeping with the way “governance displaces the lateral solidarities of unions and worker consciousness and the politics of struggle” (Brown 2015, 131), there is no suggestion in the film of any politics beyond the lobbying Sandra does of her colleagues, nothing with respect to the government or even the union. This absence, however, points to a new presence, the prevalence of human capital. Governance signals a shift away from the management of labor and toward the governmentality of human capital.

## Human Capital

What is striking about the neo-liberal theory of human capital, about its redefined figure of *homo oeconomicus*, is that it is predicated upon (and produces) an unlimited expansion of the economic domain, and is, in this way, not a call for a *laissez-faire* space for economic activity, but for an entirely new governmentality that subsumes the political order, the notion of sovereignty itself under a grid of economic analysis and market intelligibility.”

Andrew Dilts (2011, 139)

Among a wealth of concepts that have been developed to grapple with the contours and effects of neoliberal subjectivity, including precarity, immaterial labor, and affective labor, the idea of human capital (situated alongside an evolving neoliberal governmentality) is one of the most promising. With the maturation of neoliberalism, human capital comes to replace labor (or the figure of the free laborer) in terms of how workers are situated within and subjected to competition in the workplace, in the marketplace, and in society (see Feher 2009). Part of the advance of human capital concerns the ways in which economic activity colonizes more and more of our individual lives, demanding more and more from us as subjects—for instance, on the one hand, not just our labor-time and labor-power during the work day, but more of our personality, our affect, and our “affective labor,”<sup>4</sup> and on the other hand, beyond the workday, more of our leisure time and our waking life (see Hardt 1999 and Lazzarato 2006).

The propagation of the neoliberal subject is often theoretically situated within a series of dissolving borders— between the economic and the political, between the entrepreneurial and the social, between the market and the state, between work and play, between labor and capital, and so on. These dissolutions are indicative of the advanced normalization of the idea, indeed the very kernel of neoliberalism, that the market is the measure of all things, perhaps the most familiar gloss on neoliberalism. “The market is presumed to work as an appropriate guide—an

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<sup>4</sup> Paul Myerscough, for example, notes the way the sandwich company Pret a Manger expects and mobilizes affective labor: “Pret will have been disappointed to discover that any of its staff were unhappy enough in their work to have want of a union. Pret workers aren’t supposed to be unhappy. They are recruited precisely for their ‘personality’, in the sense that a talent show host might use the word. Job candidates must show that they have a natural flair for the ‘Pret Behaviours’ (these are listed on the website too). Among the 17 things they ‘Don’t Want to See’ is that someone is ‘moody or bad-tempered’, ‘annoys people’, ‘overcomplicates ideas’ or ‘is just here for the money’” (2013).



ethic—for all human action,” as David Harvey famously claimed in 2005 (165). The advancement of this presumption since Harvey published it in 2005 had been remarkable, extending all the way down, as it were, to subjectivity in the form of human capital. Feher argues that “Human capital does not presuppose a separation of the spheres of production and reproduction. The various things I do, in any existential domain (dietary, erotic, religious, etc.), all contribute to either appreciating or depreciating the human capital that is me, no less than does my diligence as a worker or my ability to trade my professional skills. As investors in their own human capital, the subjects that are presupposed and targeted by neoliberalism can thus be conceived as the managers of a portfolio of conducts pertaining to all the aspects of their lives” (2009, 30). The film gestures at Feher’s point in the way it fleshes out Sandra’s “redundancy.” Sandra is not merely laid off because the factory was found to be just as efficient without her as with her, but laid off by her coworkers, some of whom appear to hold her depression against her, as having depreciated her human capital.

From the perspective of human capital situated amidst these many dissolving borders, we can see that Sandra is fighting not just to regain her job but to re-establish her subjectivity (after depression and competition have threatened it) not only as labor, but as consumer and implicitly as a debtor (via home ownership). Early in the film, before she’s fully begun her quest, her husband says “You’re just giving in instead of taking action.” Sandra responds, “Easy for you to say. No one but Juliet and Robert thought of me. As if I didn’t exist. They’re right. I don’t exist. I’m nothing. I’m nobody”, and then falls to the floor. Such are the stakes involved in subjectivities as human capital—the failure to attract investors is akin to social death, or worse nothingness. To be sure, what gives the scene credibility is Sandra’s the fatalistic melancholy of her depression.<sup>5</sup> Nevertheless, the scene also suggests that her quest to save her job is a quest to prove she exists, to prove her very existence, even as human capital that is not fully depreciated.

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<sup>5</sup> There is more to be written here about the role of medical absence in general and depression in particular in neoliberal society. See also Franco Bifo Berardi “When economic competition is the

The premise of the film, a woman struggling to keep her job by appealing to her coworkers, sets the stage for audiences to encounter the faces of human capital and the governmentality they negotiate. Wendy Brown captures the condition of human capital in a compelling way when she writes, “the subject that is human capital for itself and the state is at persistent risk of redundancy and abandonment. As human capital, the subject is at once in charge of itself, responsible for itself, yet an instrumentalizable and potentially dispensable element of the whole. In this regard, the liberal democratic social contract is turning inside out” (2015, 38). The reality of the persistent risk of redundancy and abandonment, for Sandra and her coworkers, saturates every encounter in this film. As an audience, we can feel the weight of the impossible demand for self-responsibility that Sandra must negotiate. Yet notice that Brown’s description of “human capital” includes but goes beyond the figure of the impossibly self-responsible individual, which is at this point almost a critical truism. Rather, she situates subjects as human capital within something larger, “the whole,” and highlights the “instrumentalizable and potentially dispensable” aspects of our subjection as human capital. Key to the instrumentalizability (if we may put it that way) of human capital is the neoliberal political rationality Brown identifies or what others have identified as neoliberal governmentality. As she loses the vote in the end, it seems most of Sandra’s coworkers, or fellow human capitals, most cannot afford such sympathy. Such is the governmentality that conditions and regulates the competition of human capitals.

*Two Days, One Night* offers us a vivid picture of this new reality. Yet in a movie that is all about the current state of workers in the economy, it is striking to realize that we as an

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dominant imperative of the social consortium, we can be positive conditions for mass depression will be produced. This happening under our eyes” (2009, 100). I hope to address this in future revisions of the paper. For now, note that the role of Sandra’s depression is underplayed in the film. One reason for this might be that highlighting Sandra’s depression runs the risk of confirming the notion that the loss of her job is her own fault. This latter possibility is potentially problematic because neoliberalism threatens workers with redundancy regardless of their actions, their failures, their successes: “A subject construed and constructed as human capital both for itself and for a firm or state is at persistent risk of failure, redundancy and abandonment through no doing of its own, regardless of how savvy and responsible it is” (Brown 2015, 37).

audience see practically no labor at all in the film, and certainly none at the central business in question. We do see some wage work, but that is when we see Sandra's coworkers working second jobs, off the books, to make ends meet, marginal labor as it were that attests to precarity. But in fact we see no actual labor at the factory in question. We see instead a process in which human capitals confront each other competitively, as Sandra finds herself faced with the injunction to be an entrepreneur and attract investors in herself. Again Wendy Brown captures this new socio-economic reality, "When competition becomes the market's root principle, all market sectors are rendered as capitals, rather than as producers, sellers, workers, clients, or consumers. As capitals, every subject is rendered as entrepreneurial, no matter how small, impoverished, or without resources, and every aspect of existence is produced as an entrepreneurial one" (2015, 65).

Each of the 11 face-to-face encounters in the film represents this competition, and together they give the audience multiple opportunities to engage with and compare the situations of different workers, all positioned precariously within the neoliberal economy and charged with self-responsibility. We see that Sandra, in particular, has been positioned by this re-vote to be entrepreneurial, to "attract investors" in herself. Yet because those "investors" are her coworkers calculating her fate from the perspective of their own self-interest they are all equally human capital. Every single one of these workers could use the bonus, of course. The subtlety of the film and the exchanges comes down to how characters frame their decision and their vote in light of economic need and their own circumstances versus empathy and solidarity and Sandra's circumstances. The encounters present a rich picture of the experience of neoliberal subjectivity, what neoliberalism feels like as human capital, and the patterns that emerge among the discussions help illuminate the governing neoliberal rationality characteristic of today's economy, how neoliberalism not only thinks, but thinks us.

*Two Days, One Night* is a striking examination of the neoliberal subject, probing the ways such subjects negotiate insecurity, illness, and the common sense truth of neoliberalism,

often face to face. “Neoliberalism governs as sophisticated common sense, a reality principle remaking institutions and human beings everywhere it settles, nestles, and gains affirmation” (Brown 2015, 35). The film, through its series of encounters between coworkers figured less as laborers than as human capital, allows us to see the operations of this common sense. Homing in on two aspects of Brown’s characterization—the remaking of human beings as human capital and the rise of a governing political rationality, also known as governance—we can see these two features are suffused throughout this film, in the narrative structure as well as the dialogue that manifests characters’ own understanding of how they are positioned. For instance, one of the last coworkers Sandra speaks to says to her “It’ll be a disaster for me if the majority backs you. But for your sake I hope they do.” This man gives paradoxical voice to the shift from solidarity of workers to the competition of human capitals. By recognizing in the film these exemplary characteristics of how neoliberalism operates and is experienced, we can resist tired glosses on neoliberalism as tax reduction, deregulation, relentless self-interest, and so on, and instead begin to develop new popular accounts of the neoliberal moment that foreground the peculiar subject and governmentality that neoliberalism brings about and that sustain it.

To better grasp the force of the Dardennes’ cinematic political intervention, we need to complement the familiar, in fact all-too-familiar, synopses of neoliberalism with an account of neoliberalism’s governing common sense, the (re-)production of neoliberal subjectivity. Maurizio Lazzarato has closely examined the production of subjectivity in today’s neoliberal economy in his recent books *The Making of the Indebted Man* and *Signs and Machines*, emphasizing the way subjectivity traverses work and play, reason and affect. “What is required, and cuts across the economy and modern-day society,” he argues, “is not knowledge but the injunction to become an economic ‘subject (‘human capital,’ entrepreneur of the self”), an injunction that concerns just as much the unemployed as the user of public services, the consumer, the most ‘modest’ of workers, the poorest, or the ‘migrant’” (2012, 50-1). In light of this requirement, persons are figured less as laborers and more as capitals subjected to the

necessity to compete and grow or die in the marketplace. A satisfactory understanding of “what neoliberalism feels like” today requires accounting for the dominant form of subjectivity that is not only solicited by neoliberalism but also central to the governmentality and reproduction of neoliberalism: human capital. As Michel Feher, one of the best theorists of “actually existing neoliberalism” claims, “The rise of human capital as a dominant subjective form is a deciding feature of neoliberalism” (Feher 2009, 24). Seeing Sandra and her coworkers as human capitals in competition with each other helps to undercut the expectation of solidarity.

### Representing Neoliberalism

In his liner notes for the DVD release of *Two Days, One Night*, titled “Economics is Emotion,” Shambu situates the film in the cinematic and socioeconomic context of the brothers’ career-long effort to depict and wrestle with the consequences of “neoliberalism,” which he calls the “virulent model” of capitalism that has arisen over the last thirty-plus years. “However,” writes Shambu, “the Dardennes are concerned not with abstractions of economic theory but with capturing what neoliberalism *feels like* on the ground—its emotional narratives, experiences, and after-effects” (Shambu 2015, emphasis original). This is a potent formulation of the power of the Dardennes’ cinematic style and their telling of this particular story, bringing affect and experience together with economic conditions. The film’s spare, quasi-documentary style (characteristic for the Dardenne brothers) and its unhurried pace do work to convey not just a sense of what job insecurity and precarity feel like but also the various feelings arising through the interpersonal challenges one is subject to as human capital.

While Shambu is right in identifying the Dardennes’ interest in the “emotional narratives, experiences, and after-effects” of neoliberalism, his characterization of the them as unconcerned with the “abstractions of economic theory” undervalues the cultural political significance of this particular film. When viewed in light of recent political theory on neoliberal subjectivity and governmentality, *Two Days, One Night* has much to tell us about what human capital and

neoliberal governance look like and feel like on the ground today, offering us a concrete and compelling view of our neoliberal world, a world where work is insecure, where lives are precarious, where competition is relentless, where people are in debt more than ever, where persons are made impossibly responsible for themselves, where work and leisure are harder and harder to distinguish, where and where people are dispensable. Also harder and harder to distinguish are capital and labor with the dissemination of the concept and practices of human capital. In order to complicate and concretize the familiar glosses on neoliberalism as reducing taxes, deregulation, reducing public spending on social programs, and so forth, it is important to have a better sense of how neoliberal forces are shaping subjectivity. Recent political theory that has worked to map and reckon with the evolution of neoliberal condition of late capitalism, in particular, the production of neoliberal subjectivities and the operations of neoliberal governmentality can help with this.

Still, our appreciation of the film's achievement with respect to the sensuous, affective experience of neoliberalism can be enhanced with a fuller account of some of "the abstractions of economic theory," including political and theoretical diagnoses of neoliberalism. For when Shambu writes of neoliberalism "achieving global domination with the unwavering agenda of reducing taxes on corporations and the rich, massively deregulating industries, slashing public spending on social programs, and 'liberalizing' labor markets (code for giving companies free rein in their hiring and firing decisions)," he reiterates a familiar and somewhat stale picture of neoliberalism (at least in those contexts where neoliberalism is more "advanced"). Thus, while Scott and Shambu, among many other critics, scholars, and movie-goers, recognize that these films tell us something about neoliberalism, it is worth asking—what is the "neoliberalism" depicted and narrated in these films, and this film in particular? And what are the characteristics of the neoliberal subject as seen in such films? There is work still to be done in dialoguing between these films and political theory to better account for the systemic and subjective realities of neoliberalism.

The overly familiar glosses on neoliberalism that inform some film criticism and other popular discourse miss the development of a distinctive neoliberal subject and governmentality that have been an essential part of neoliberalism's success and normalization. In particular, I want to claim that better understanding the peculiar subject that neoliberalism produces and the governmentality of those subjects will allow us to better appreciate the political value of *Two Days, One Night*. Shifting away from the mythical, vaunted, and vilified "free individual" or "free laborer" who is supposedly central to the ruse of neoliberalism, I want to suggest that the language of "human capital" and "self appreciation" are part of newly prominent account of neoliberalism that can aid us in identifying the strengths and weaknesses in the film's depiction of our neoliberal condition. That is to say, understanding the mechanisms and processes through which neoliberalism produces and governs subjects as "human capital" or "entrepreneurs of the self" will allow us to better contextualize the interactions between characters in the film.

### Framing the Film, Framing the Vote

The main question at the heart of the film, sustained over Sandra's eleven face-to-face encounters with her coworkers (or, her fellow human capitals), is which way the vote will go? Additionally, there is the question of what the vote means, not just the result of it, but the very fact of it—the fact of workers being asked to vote on an employment decision about a fellow worker. Over the course of the film, many of Sandra's brief conversations with coworkers involve framing the meaning of the vote as well. The fact of the vote after all is not just the film's premise but its hook, the novel feature that draws us into the story. The question of the vote's significance is key to the cultural politics of the film, for different constructions of the vote's meaning lead to different accounts of neoliberalism and thus different valuations of Sandra's final act of refusal. So a key political question here is—How do we characterize the fundamental features and experiences of today's neoliberalism? The critical (and auteurial) consensus that

sees the film as being about neoliberalism, too often relies on an individual-collective binary to frame both the drama and neoliberalism itself. There is danger, however, in remaining wedded to seeing neoliberalism through the lens of what has been lost. The challenge, however, is to see not just what neoliberalism has eviscerated, destroyed but what it has produced, especially in terms of subjectivity and governmentality.

The dominant way of framing the film's question, its subject centers on collectivity, solidarity, and society. "What *Two Days, One Night* does so beautifully is distil the economic dilemma of our age down to a human scale," writes film critic Steve Rose in *The Guardian*. "Each of Sandra's co-workers must effectively choose between atomised, competitive, neoliberal self-interest and some form of collective power and mutual support. Is there such thing as society or isn't there?" (Rose 2014) Here Rose cleverly frames the film as a meditation on Thatcher's neoliberal cliché, "there's no such thing as society. There are individual men and women and there are families." The problem with this framing, however, is that it reduces a counter-neoliberal left politics to a rejection of atomized self-interest and a defense of "society." There are elements in the film to support such a reading, and in fact, the Dardennes have themselves often presented the film as a question about solidarity—"whither solidarity?" or "withered solidarity," you might say.

In a *New York Times* article, Luc Dardenne was quoted as saying of *Two Days, One Night*, "The subject of the film is solidarity" (Scott 2014). Again, this kind of framing of the film is familiar enough and gestures toward a certain critique of the contemporary economy. But I want to argue that that framing not only undersells the strengths of the film, it actually does a disservice to the cause of bringing the effects of actually existing neoliberalism into view. That is because, as Michel Feher might suggest, Dardenne's comment is premised on the liberal idea of the "free laborer" rather than the neoliberal idea of "human capital," even though the film itself



does not necessarily confine the characters to such a frame (Feher 2009).<sup>6</sup> For “when everything is capital, labor disappears as a category, as does its collective form, class, taking with it the analytic basis for alienation, exploitation, and association among laborers” (Brown 2015, 38). Presenting or framing the experience in this film as an experience of the withered state of solidarity risks overlooking the way the film offers us an account of the lived experience of human capital and neoliberal governmentality in, around, and beyond today’s workplace. Another other way to look at both neoliberalism and the film is to track not just what has been lost, but what has taken its place, what has been produced. The experience of watching Sandra negotiate and compete with her colleagues is difficult and challenging, but also revealing of the conditions people face and the logics they use to make sense of them. Therefore, it is important to recognize that the film also offers a view of the competition of human capitals and the inversion of solidarity into governance, rather than seeing it as simply mourning the disappearance of any logic of solidarity.

### Normalization and Neoliberal Governmentality

We can gain some insight into what neoliberal logics and practices have produced by considering the contrasts between the film and the source material that inspired its screenplay. These contrasts reveal the extent to which human capital and the neoliberal governmentality that goes with it have become normalized as the economic reality that must be reckoned with. The Dardennes have been candid about their real-life, off-screen inspiration for core of this story. As Shambu notes, “The Dardennes have said in interviews that the idea for the film occurred to them after they came across a book of case studies edited by sociologist Pierre Bourdieu called *The Weight of the World: Social Suffering in Contemporary Society*. One of the

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<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, Feher critiques the “humanist protest” against neoliberalism which, he says, “amounts to the expression of a longing for the free laborer of yore” (2009, 30), and continues, “from the perspective of the commodification critique, resisting neoliberalism means refusing the expansion of the market and insisting that a genuine subject cannot be reduced to a mere consumer, that the free laborer has aspirations that cannot be reduced to calculations of interest (a longing for solidarity, justice, or sharing).” (Feher 2009, 31)

studies dealt with a worker edged out by management with the consent of all the other workers” (Shambu 2015).

The particular account in the Bourdieu volume that the Dardennes draw on was written by Michel Pialoux and titled “The Shop Steward’s World in Disarray.” It concerns a then-novel situation that occurred at a Peugeot plant in France in 1990. In the story as recounted to Pialoux by the shop steward Hamid, the workers saw one fellow as a slacker, a “shirker,” someone on whom the others feel they cannot rely. They felt that his low productivity was keeping them from getting their bonuses, and so they wanted to get him out. It is Hamid, however, who in telling the story to Pialoux, is astonished at the lack of solidarity laid bare by this dismissal. Referring to the petition the others drew up, Hamid says “Not just to kick him out of the section, to kick him out of Peugeot! And these were workers! And good workers too because during the strike [of ‘89] a good number of them went on strike” (1999, 326). The Dardennes don’t exactly mirror Hamid’s outrage at the idea of workers voting out one of their own, for their narrative style is measured and not overly dramatic. Nevertheless listening and watching, one hears echoes of Hamid’s bewilderment in their characterizations of the film and the film itself. Still, their screenplay sets up the scenario of Sandra being voted out in favor of bonuses in a very matter-of-fact manner and proceeds instead to examine the repercussions and negotiations that ensue over two days and one night. That is, the film focuses on the competition of human capitals under conditions of neoliberal governance.

There are some telling differences between the shop steward’s story and the story in *Two Days, One Night*, differences which point away from the problematic of solidarity and toward the new reality of human capital. The story in the book happened in 1990, while the film is set contemporaneously with its 2014 release date. The tone and affective vectors of the two stories register differences in the normalization of competitive self-appreciation that marks our subjection as human capital. Whereas Hamid is shocked and surprised workers would turn on one of their own, Sandra and the others are not really outraged at the situation of having to vote

on the future of her job and their bonus.<sup>7</sup> In fact, at the start of the film when Sandra's husband is trying to get her to go and fight for her job, she is reluctant and resigned, using the language of "normal" to describe her coworkers' perspective: "It's normal. They want their bonus." Her husband replies it's not normal. Her quest the rest of the film, then, is a fight not just for her job but against the normalization of neoliberal governmentality. Still, many of her colleagues effectively accept the "reality" of the situation they have been put in by the boss and work within it, showing that they both are governed and govern themselves according to the neoliberal common sense reality principle (Brown 2015, 35).

It is not just that solidarity has vanished or been vanquished, but that neoliberal governmentality has produced subjects who can hardly comprehend the logic or even possibility of solidarity because of the extent to which neoliberal subjectivity (and the logic of human capital) has been normalized. Such is one way to read the reaction of Timur, the colleague whom Sandra tracks down at the soccer pitch. Upon Sandra asking him if he would be willing to change his vote, he breaks down, sobbing with regret at having voted for his bonus and forgotten the help Sandra had given him early in his tenure at the company (taking the blame for a mistake of his). His reaction seems excessive, as the tears of regret and the pleas of forgiveness are not only of an unusual intensity for a relationship between workplace colleagues but also seem out of proportion, of an order of magnitude greater than any other reactions up to that point in the film. Still, the intensity of his affect might be read as an index of the shock he feels upon confronting the normalized absence of solidarity, and even empathy, from his earlier thoughts and his first vote. The object and vector of astonishment expressed by Timur is rather different than that expressed by the shop steward Hamid. Whereas Timur is confounded by his own self-regard and others, Hamid is dumbfounded by the lack of solidarity among workers.

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<sup>7</sup> It is important to note the ethnic and gender differences in the protagonists of these two stories (as well as the many coworkers Sandra meets). These differing identities position these subjects somewhat differently and thus contribute to particular experiences of neoliberalism as human capital. In future revisions of this paper, I hope to attend more to the effects of these differences as well as the role of the family on the experience as human capital. For now, I address only the general form of neoliberal subjectivity as well as the general dynamics of human capital and neoliberal governance.

*Two Days, One Night* tells a story that allows us to see up close the “reality” of this self-interested conduct as personal investment through a striking depiction of how the characters make and justify their decisions, illustrating some of the key techniques, practices, and ways of knowing characteristic of neoliberal governance. When we view the film’s characters not just against the neoliberal ideal of the mythic, self-interested individual, but rather as human capital, then we can see the encounters in the film not just as a question of individualism versus solidarity, but also as examples of how characters negotiate with “reality” and how neoliberal governmentality operates in practice. Political theorist Andrew Dilts has written very insightfully about Foucault’s account of the neoliberal subject and neoliberal governmentality, and especially about “the links between truth, freedom, and reality” which he says “are all visibly present in the account of human capital [originated by Becker and examined by Foucault]” (2011, 145). Extending Thatcher’s rhetoric that “there is no society” for theoretical effect, Dilts argues that “From the point of view of this governmentality, there are no firms, producers, households, consumers, fathers, mothers, criminals, immigrants, natives, adults, children, or even citizens, but only entrepreneurs of the self, engaged in self-interested conduct as personal investment” (Dilts 2011, 139).

Sandra’s encounters with her coworkers, among whom are men, women, fathers, wives, immigrants, natives, and more, reflect Dilts’ characterization.<sup>8</sup> To the extent that these different identities and social positions appear in the film necessarily linked to the economic calculations each must make—whether it’s Willy the father who salvages floor tiles to make money for his daughter’s school fees or Hicham the immigrant who works weekends at a bodega “on the the black”<sup>9</sup> and who says he can’t lose his bonus because “it’s a whole year’s worth of gas and electric bills”—we may say that the film reflects as well the reality of human capital’s normalization. A film of only 95 minutes can only gesture at the backstory of each of the workers Sandra meets.

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<sup>8</sup> The role and challenges of the family under conditions of neoliberalism is very intriguing generally and as represented in this film. I hope to address this in future revisions of this paper.

<sup>9</sup> “On the black” seems to be the way Belgians say “off the books” or “under the table,” i.e. cash only.

Regardless of the origin or intention of this aspect of the film, it nevertheless has the effect of illustrating Dilts' point—such that the main characterization of every single one is as entrepreneurs of the self. To the extent that they are characterized in specific ways as mothers, husbands, immigrants, etc., these identities are subordinate, not to say irrelevant, to the encounter with Sandra over their vote. The film figures the primary reality with which they must negotiate as the reality of human capitals in competition.

Still, this reality is one that is difficult to accede to, difficult for the filmmakers to the extent that they present the film as a question of the fate of solidarity and difficult as well for some of the film's characters to the extent that Sandra finds a lot of empathy, if not enough votes. Characters for the most part seem get where she's coming from, almost as if they realize it could just as easily have been them in her position. But as often as not this understanding inspires an acceptance of the emergent reality of the necessity of competing as human capital rather than a defense of solidarity. This how we see the way neoliberal conditions govern the mentality these characters bring to the film's central decision. One line from the next to last coworker Sandra calls on stands out for the way it captures the contradiction between the waning world of solidarity and the emerging world of competitive human capital. Standing in the doorway of his home, the man says "It would be a disaster for me if you got your job back. But I hope for your sake that you do."

Most of the characters when confronted with the choice of their bonus or Sandra's job do not react with anger, but with resigned calculation. Some try to resist the vote, and then most every one of them tries to convey to Sandra the meaning of their vote, as for instance when Willy says "I didn't vote against you. I voted for the bonus." Sandra also struggles to clarify the need for the vote and its meaning, as for instance when on her first call to Kader she says "Refusing voting wouldn't be enough. I need you to agree to give up the bonus." The truth of their own economic needs most often wins out. "This is the pivot," writes Dilts of governmentality's conduct of conducts. "Now, all that matters for questions of who one is, for the, 'truth' of a

subject, are the activities of that subject, the behaviors, the conducts, and the accumulation of skills and qualities that allow for the self to arrive at a self-understanding of those activities as producing some benefit. All that matters, in the end, is identifying the truth of this reality" (Dilts 2011, 139). In the film all the workers confront and negotiate the truth of this reality, and those who vote against Sandra accede to it, while those for her resist it.

Turning to another contrast between Hamid's story and Sandra's, it is worth noting that where the labor union structures the expectation of solidarity that Hamid (and the Dardennes apparently) finds violated, the labor union at the factory in film does not figure all that prominently. Instead, in the film it is more a matter of individual decisions and conversations, and that is consistent with the waning power of collective labor. The story of the shop steward's distress is indicative of an earlier moment in the rise of neoliberal practices such that the force of that story is the way this particular firing dynamic disturbed the "normal" order. Pialoux effectively identifies the creeping neoliberal individualism, the rise of human capital, even if Hamid cannot: "The continual appeal to individual interest radically modifies the conditions of the work and the life they share and threatens what he [Hamid] sees as the 'normal' relationship between workers and shop stewards." (Pialoux 1999, 336) The shock and outrage at the notion of fellow workers turning on one of their own is absent from the film. In the film, the situation is not played up for outrage. Rather it's played to be able to set up consideration of the individual negotiations and decisions. Outrage is absent because union does not have a strong presence.

Today, however, the weakening of unions amidst the advance of precarity together with the proliferation of governance constitute the new "normal." Pialoux also captures the novelty of Hamid's experience of what will evolve into neoliberal governance: "what Hamid is discovering, without altogether wanting to admit it, is that it's the people on his side, his buddies, the 'strikers' as he says, who have voluntarily bought into the logic of hierarchy, of the boss, a logic that is set up against all the rules of old-style working class solidarity-since the petitioners had come to the point of asking for the dismissal of a 'veteran striker.'" (1999, 336). What we can see

from the vantage point of today as compared to 1990-93 when the story happened and was written up is that yes, workers have been inducted into a new logic, a new rationality, and yes, effectively it is the boss's logic. But it is not exactly a logic of the boss, or of capital in general. It is the logic of human capital and the practice of governance. The film's action, a series of encounters between the protagonist and her co-workers, models governance, or neoliberal governmentality – giving insight into the normalization of a certain grid of economic intelligibility. That is, in the “no” votes that the protagonist encounters, she runs up against the unassailability of the economic logic of human capital. For their jobs are more than just jobs, they represent the integration of these subjects into neoliberal rationality, whereby they come to rely on an income stream. Whether they are fully aware of it or not, the Dardennes' film examines the reality of the neoliberal subject as human capital, compelled to participate in governance.

### Solidarity or Sacrifice?

In place of the liberal promise to secure the politically autonomous sovereign subject, the neoliberal subject is granted no guarantee of life (on the contrary, in markets, some must die for others to live), and is so tethered to economic ends as to be potentially sacrificable to them.

Wendy Brown, *Undoing the Demos* (2015, 110-11)

In the end, the Dardennes' focus on solidarity finally wins out and undercuts the severity of the film's analysis of neoliberal governance and subjectivity. Let us remember the film's ending. Moments after losing the vote (8-8), the boss invites Sandra into his office. First he explains flatly the redundancy that necessitated the process of governance that has just concluded, saying he “saw the work could be done by 16 instead of 17.” Yet he goes on to praise Sandra for having convinced half the staff to give up their bonus. He proceeds to offer to hire her back in a couple of months saying “I won't renew a fixed-term contract and you can come back.” The thing to note here is that both we the audience and Sandra herself know exactly to whom he

is referring, Alphonse the last colleague she spoke to the night before. Thus, she and we are acutely aware that the trade-off the boss is proposing in a nameless, faceless way is not in fact nameless or faceless. Sandra refuses his offer, saying "I can't let someone be laid off so I can come back." The boss quickly responds, "He won't be laid off. His contract just won't be renewed." Then, Sandra says "It's the same thing," and he says flatly "No, it isn't." After a brief pause, Sandra picks up her bag and says goodbye. We then see her walk out of his office and into the bright sunshine, and a smile spreads over her face as she calls her husband.

How do we read Sandra's final action, her refusal of the boss's offer, her self-sacrifice—through a traditional socialistic lens as an expression of solidarity? Or do we read it through neoliberal lenses (through the neoliberal intelligibility of behavior) as showing the inescapability of the logic of competition? Also, despite being out of a job at the end of the film, having lost the vote and refused take Alphonse's job herself, Sandra has a smile on her face. What accounts for this positivity, this sense of hope? The Dardennes have often been praised for avoiding melodrama, and again here they deserve credit for steering clear of a melodramatic ending, such as suicide (which they acknowledge in the DVD extras they considered). And their social realism of the Dardennes' oeuvre is not unfamiliar with some measures of hope: "The brothers eschew conventional narrative closure and do not flinch from closing in visually and figuratively on their beleaguered characters. Yet they allow the possibility of some kind of redemption, reconciliation, or implicit resolution, even as this possibility is not realised within the diegesis of the film" (Mosley 2013, 14).

Again this comes down to a question of what the film and the vote mean and how they are framed. Luc Dardenne has been quoted as saying that Sandra "wants out of the competition... what she does, and the manner in which she does it, manages to defuse the competition and replace it with a form of solidarity" (Rose 2014). If so, it is a lonely solidarity. Viewed through the lens of governance, Sandra's refusal is the only false note in the film. Throughout the film as she pleads with her coworkers, Sandra is enacting and participating in



governance, but it is this same practice of governance that she refuses in the end when she says “It’s the same thing.” She’s refusing to help the boss diffuse responsibility for the letting go of the contract worker. Her refusal does not undo the prevalence of neoliberal governance and makes not a dent against the competition of human capitals. In fact, we can read the film against Luc as precisely reinforcing the governmentality of human capital.

Even though Sandra’s final refusal appears hopeful and she says she’s happy, we can read the boss’s offer only as a sign that she has again made herself a capable economic subject, a sign that reaffirms the logic of self-appreciation informing the competition of human capitals. In other words, we can read her refusal as a form of neoliberal self-sacrifice. Consider Sandra’s achievement in light of the importance of self-appreciation as human capital, and note the double resonance, both economic and psychological, of the notion of self-appreciation. Sandra seems to have come to appreciate herself (again?) in a psychological sense to the extent that she has reasserted herself following a depression that seemed to hollow her out in some ways. Think of the change in her character from the beginning of the film when she was dour, hesitant, and fatalistic to the final frames where she appears if not exactly triumphant, then definitely self-satisfied. That is, her smile reads a sign of psychological recovery. Perhaps it also sets the stage for her to resume self-appreciation in the economic sense as well.

In working so hard to convince her coworkers to keep her, though not quite enough of them, she has succeeded in showing that she can still “manage her portfolio,” that she is still worth investing in. The boss’s offer to hire her back on once another worker’s short term contract expires serves as evidence that in the boss’s eyes Sandra is valuable, that she has begun to appreciate again. That is to say, even in her failure, the reality of human capital competition persists and subjects her. For as Michel Feher concludes, “insofar as our condition is that of human capital in a neoliberal environment, our main purpose is not so much to profit from our accumulated potential as to constantly value or appreciate ourselves—or at least prevent our own depreciation” (Feher 2009, 27). Sandra’s smile and her positive affect after leaving the boss’

office read as a sign of her having recovered a sense of self, a sense of empowerment through the process of struggling to keep her job. Sandra has achieved if not immediately the economic appreciation of herself (though certainly a psychological self-appreciation), then at least the prevention of her depreciation to the extent that she has asserted herself and proven herself once again to be employable, a fact confirmed by the boss' offer. Whether they know it or not, the Dardennes have succeeded in telling a story about the normalization of human capital and neoliberal governmentality.

Sandra, the film's protagonist who is in every scene in the film, faces again and again the fate of redundancy, abandonment, and depreciation that constantly shadows her (and our) subjection and as human capital. *Two Days, One Night* is a work of popular art that helps to illuminate the contours of this subjective form not merely by tracking the journey of the protagonist on her quest to save her job but also through a series of encounters between coworkers as human capital. As such, the film is a variation on the social contract that encapsulates not merely the withering of solidarity but also the growth of neoliberal governance and the co-optation of democratic features of equality and freedom. Her ultimate failure and attempted refusal speak simultaneously to the decline of solidarity and social responsibility and the rise of competition and self-responsibility so characteristic of the precarity many subjects must negotiate in neoliberal times.

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