

PHILIPPA HOBBS completed her MA in Contemporary Literature and Culture at Birkbeck, University of London, in 2016. She previously studied culture and politics at the University of Bath and Science Po Paris, and has spent a decade working in publishing and research, mostly in the technology, media, and telecoms sector.

Article

# ‘You Willingly Tie Yourself to These Leashes’

Neoliberalism, Neoliberal Rationality, and the Corporate Workplace in Dave Eggers’ *The Circle*

Philippa Hobbs



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‘She knew it was right and inevitable. But for a moment, she thought it natural in a way seeing a plane fall from the sky can seem natural, too. The horror comes later’. Dave Eggers, *The Circle*.

ALMOST A DECADE AFTER THE GLOBAL FINANCIAL CRISIS, BUSINESS IS BOOMING. The World Economic Forum is heralding the advent of a ‘Fourth Industrial Revolution’, a new phase of digital technology integration that promises to transform ‘how we learn, work, live and socialise’.<sup>1</sup> ‘Hypergrowth’ is ‘the new normal’ for both young and established businesses, and corporations from Exxon Mobil to IBM are becoming ‘metanational,’ spreading their assets worldwide to maximise their profits.<sup>2</sup> But beneath this story of growth is a story of precarity. While American firms continue to dominate the global economy, with six of the ten richest corporations in the world headquartered in the United States, the US has among the worst rates of income inequality and relative poverty of the OECD countries.<sup>3</sup> In 2014, the combined wealth of the bottom 40% of American families equalled the wealth of just one: the family who owns Walmart Stores, a corporation whose 2014 revenues exceeded the gross domestic product of all but 27 countries in the world.<sup>4</sup> In his 2016 text *Who Rules the World?*, Noam Chomsky writes:

For a tiny fraction of the plutonomy at the upper extreme, privilege and wealth abound, while for the great majority prospects are often gloomy, and many even face problems of survival in a country with unparalleled advantages.<sup>5</sup>

In today's economic system, even 'the fate of our grandchildren counts as nothing when compared with the imperative of higher profits tomorrow', Chomsky writes.<sup>6</sup> 'The ruthless hunt for profit', Chris Hedges declares in his co-authored 2012 text *Days of Destruction, Days of Revolt*, 'creates a world where everything and everyone is expendable'.<sup>7</sup>

Thinking 'economistically', putting the pursuit of material wealth above all else, is not intrinsically human, the historian Tony Judt suggests in his 2010 text *Ill Fares the Land*, but a behavioural mode which has developed over the last thirty years.<sup>8</sup> It is rooted in the unfettered capitalism or 'market fundamentalism', as the economist Joseph Stiglitz describes it, 'that underlay Thatcherism, Reaganomics, and the so-called "Washington Consensus"'.<sup>9</sup> This market fundamentalism is known by a myriad of names, including free-market capitalism, laissez-faire capitalism, globalisation, and corporatism, but its roots lie in the post-war political economic ideas of 'neoliberalism': 'the most important movement in political and economic thought in the second half of the twentieth century', according to the historian Philip Mirowski.<sup>10</sup> Neoliberal ideas of market freedom, haphazardly applied, have brought about the conditions to which we are subject today: the fallout from economic destruction wrought by powerful corporations, the effects of environmental catastrophes associated with the plundering of natural resources and the rise in the Earth's temperature, and the dehumanising pressure on individuals to perform as market actors. The political scientist Wendy Brown proposes that, more than a set of policies, an ideology, or a relation between state and economy, neoliberalism is 'a normative order of reason developed over three decades into a widely and deeply disseminated governing rationality', which 'transmogrifies every human domain and endeavor, along with humans themselves, according to a specific image of the economic'.<sup>11</sup>

For writers, the 'slow violence' of 'delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space', like that of climate change, poses 'formidable representational obstacles', as Rob Nixon suggests in his 2011 text *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*.<sup>12</sup> Depicting a widely disseminated governing rationality, whereby, as Brown describes, 'all conduct is economic conduct; all spheres of existence are framed and measured by economic terms and metrics, even when those spheres are not directly monetized', poses a particular challenge. It means narrating a mode of reason that has, Brown suggests, 'taken deeper root in subjects and in language, in ordinary practices and in consciousness'.<sup>13</sup> Many writers are attempting to rise to this challenge in a variety of ways. Dave Eggers, with his 2013 novel *The Circle*, attempts to do so through the lens of our digitally networked world. Contemporary technoculture – our connected, networked, always-on world, serviced mostly by a handful of powerful technology companies – provides fertile ground for exploring the way in which neoliberal rationality saturates 'the practices of ordinary institutions and discourses of everyday life' and assaults the principles of democracy.<sup>14</sup> Everyday activities, from education to leisure and consumption, have been reconfigured as 'strategic decisions and practices related to enhancing the self's future value', Brown suggests, whether through 'social media 'followers', 'likes', and 'retweets', through rankings and rating for every activity and domain, or through more directly monetized practices'.<sup>15</sup> Eggers explores the willing submission to technology corporations, the prospect of their total control, and

the failure to recognise what is at stake when individuals governed by neoliberal rationality willingly partake, as one character puts it, in 'constant surveillance, commenting on each other, voting and liking and disliking each other, smiling and frowning, and otherwise doing nothing much else'.<sup>16</sup> In an echo of Don DeLillo's 2003 novel *Cosmopolis*, a story of financial excess that foregrounds our pretence 'not to see the horror and death' at the end of the scheme we have built, Eggers takes neoliberal rationality to its logical conclusion: destruction and death.<sup>17</sup>

*The Circle* explores willing submission to digital behemoths and the consequences of doing so through the story of Mae Holland, a new employee at an Internet company called the Circle, as she quickly rises through its ranks. Satire of office culture looms particularly large in works exploring neoliberal rationality: Joshua Ferris's 2007 novel *Then We Came to the End*, for example, portrays the banal, competitive corporate middle ranks in a similar vein to David Foster Wallace's 2004 short story *Mr Squishy* and his posthumously published 2011 work *The Pale King*. But Eggers' satirical depiction of the contemporary workplace in *The Circle* is particularly dark. Set in a recognisable near-future, the novel holds up a mirror to corporate culture in the digital technology sector: 'ruthless, uncorrected capitalism', as Susannah Luthi suggests in her review of the novel in the *LA Review of Books*, which, in posing as collaborative cooperation for the common good, obfuscates the exploitative commercialism at its core.<sup>18</sup> In a 2015 interview with *Contemporary Literature*, Eggers noted that he aimed to highlight the 'temptation' to submit to a system where:

In exchange for having all of your banking, your voting, and your social life in one place, you give up access to some third party, some capitalist company that uses it for means beyond your control and knowledge.<sup>19</sup>

In his portrayal of a fictional firm that has subsumed – and closely resembles – Facebook, Twitter, Google and several other technology companies, with a service that integrates all of an individual's online activity and permits no anonymity, Eggers attempts to convey the 'horror' of 'the conglomeration of power and wealth in very few hands'.<sup>20</sup>

The Circle is run by three 'Wise Men': elusive prodigy Ty Gospodinov, the creator of the tool that has generated the Circle's success; friendly 'Uncle Eamon' Bailey, a modest family man obsessed with preserving and disseminating all knowledge and information; and 'flashy CEO' Tom Stenton, an anachronism at the Circle who, with his unabashed wealth and egotism, creates 'conflicting feelings' for the 'utopian' employees.<sup>21</sup> Alexander Linklater describes their utopian aims in his *Guardian* review of the novel:

An inner circle of bosses [...] fuses technological and human rights idealism into a vision of perfect democracy, transparency and knowledge; one with which they aim to unite private and public spheres and perfect the operations of government.<sup>22</sup>

These grandiose aims are buttressed by slogans such as 'Community First' and 'Humans Work Here', idealistic rhetoric designed to suggest that the company recognises its staff as a community of individuals rather than a pool of resources.<sup>23</sup> Employees, known as 'Circlers', are convinced that espousing such rhetoric makes it true, even as their actions prove otherwise. Mae's 'unshakeably sincere' manager Dan insists early on: 'this is a place where our humanity is respected, where our opinions are dignified, where our voices are

heard—this is as important as any revenue'. Yet, with no trace of irony, he silences her as she speaks, interrupting her in the middle of a sentence to declare: 'You do know that we like to hear from people, right? That Circlers' opinions are valued'.<sup>24</sup> The act of silencing Mae while urging her to participate proves she is a cog in the corporate machine, agentless with the appearance of agency in a sector that depends on community participants for its revenue.

In his interview with *Contemporary Literature*, Eggers stated that he intended Mae to be an 'everyman' figure, a character without 'too much baggage or skepticism'.<sup>25</sup> She arrives at the Circle as a fairly typical millennial, with large student loans and a yearning for a more satisfying job than her former role at a public utility in her hometown. For Mae, the local utility is an old industry with the kind of nine-to-five working practices that she associates not with hard-won labour rights but with passive subjugation; it wastes people's lives, she thinks, not least of all the life of a 'dreamer of rare and golden dreams' like her.<sup>26</sup> Averse to being 'rescued', she already subscribes to the neoliberal idea that success results from personal initiative – the 'comforting myth', as Barbara Kingsolver puts it in her 2003 essay 'Household Words', that 'anybody who is clever or hardworking can make it in America'.<sup>27</sup> She attributes the success of her college friend Annie, a senior Circler who has engineered Mae's recruitment, to an 'inner will' that would be there 'no matter where she'd come from'.<sup>28</sup> The frustration felt at the prospect of lagging behind in the race for success appears in other works of contemporary fiction, such as Jennifer Egan's 2012 novel *A Visit from the Goon Squad*. In this novel, an exploration of the disorientation caused by the rapid social and technological change of the late 20th and early 21st centuries, Egan registers the bewilderment of those who fail where others succeed, allowing room for the consideration that external factors, not personal shortcomings, may be to blame. But in *The Circle*, Mae's frustration has the opposite effect, deepening her neoliberal belief in self-made success and considering individual will to be more important than outside factors, even as she uses her connections to get ahead. Having accepted the Circle's utopian rhetoric, she subscribes to the notion that an ideal world can and naturally would be created through the model of the market:

The best people had made the best systems and the best systems had reaped funds, unlimited funds, that made possible this, the best place to work. And it was natural that it was so, Mae thought. Who else but utopians could make utopia?<sup>29</sup>

Unlike the 'gulag' of Mae's old workplace, a place she considers to be 'holding back the turning of the globe', the Circle's utopia gives her 'freedom' and a sense of doing greater good: '[w]e were working at the center of the world and trying mightily to improve it'.<sup>30</sup>

Far from improving the world from its centre, Mae's work is answering customer queries in the Circle's Customer Experience team, for which she is given constant ratings out of 100. Her participation in the Circle community – its online community (the 'InnerCircle') as well as its ostensibly optional real-world social events, recorded online through 'zings', (the Circle's version of tweets), photos, and so on – is also ranked. Human resources assures her that 'it's not all about ratings and approvals and such', but this is a false assurance, as she is admonished for her low 'Participation Rank', known informally as the 'Popularity Rank' or more ominously as the 'PartiRank'.<sup>31</sup> Mae feels self-disgust for 'skating through' a 'gift' of a job which, through its family health insurance plan, has relieved her parents of her father's large medical bills.<sup>32</sup> She works late into the night to make her PartiRank as impressive as her high Customer

Experience rating, sleeping in the fully appointed campus dormitories when she feels exhausted, and feeling a 'profound sense of accomplishment' as well as 'competence and confidence' when she breaks into the top 2,000, an 'elite' group known as the T2K.<sup>33</sup>

Brown suggests that 'neoliberalization' in the Euro-Atlantic world is enacted through 'soft power', drawing on consensus and 'buy-in' rather than the 'hard power' of violence and autocracy, through 'specific techniques of governance, through best practices and legal tweaks'.<sup>34</sup> At the Circle, consistently low ratings precipitate a reminder of 'best practices', and Circlers are politely encouraged to conform: 'He's such a fiercely committed Circler. Just like you, right? Thank you for being so cooperative. You were great'.<sup>35</sup> Admonishment for non-participation in the InnerCircle is framed as concern, as the human resources staff ask Mae: 'are you reluctant to express yourself because you fear your opinions aren't valid?'.<sup>36</sup> As Brown suggests, the value-neutral status of techniques like best practices makes them difficult to contest: as 'practices', not missions or purposes, they foreclose arguments about norms and ends.<sup>37</sup> Having 'bought in' to the Circle's utopian rhetoric, Mae 'buys in' to the company's norms, seeing its way of working as 'logical' ('the Circle hewed to a logical model, a rhythm'). She eventually contributes her own rhetoric, 'Sharing is Caring', the supposed 'logic' of which is publicly affirmed as 'undeniable' by 'Wise Man' Eamon.<sup>38</sup>

Mae's adjustment to the Circle's workings illustrates the way in which, as Brown suggests, neoliberalisation is more 'termitelike' than 'lionlike', with its mode of reason – that all market actors are pieces of competing human capital intent on increasing their value – 'boring capillary fashion' into workplaces and subjects.<sup>39</sup> The myriad of statistics that validate Mae's value (work ratings, queries handled, messages sent, Circle friend requests, zing followers, unread zings, news alerts, profile views, heart rate, step count, and so on) give her 'a sense of great calm and control'.<sup>40</sup> She enthusiastically welcomes more data on the 'sales conversion rates' and sales values of her product recommendations on the InnerCircle: 'she loved the notion of actually being able to track the effect of her tastes and endorsements'.<sup>41</sup> As Brown says:

Human capital's constant and ubiquitous aim, whether studying, interning, working, planning retirement, or reinventing itself in a new life, is to entrepreneurialize its endeavors, appreciate its value, and increase its rating or ranking.<sup>42</sup>

Mae is figuratively reborn (she works in a part of the company called 'Renaissance') as a piece of human capital aiming solely to enhance her own value. Her motivations, as Ellen Ullman highlights in her *New York Times* review of the novel, are 'getting the highest ratings, moving into the center of the Circle', and 'being popular'.<sup>43</sup> In her own mind, though, such motivations benefit the greater good. The Circle is 'a place where everyone endeavored, constantly and passionately, to improve themselves, each other, share their knowledge, disseminate it to the world', she considers, and more knowledge and more data tracking, far from serving just her own needs, serve humanity's needs too: 'if she could eliminate this kind of uncertainty', she thinks, 'you would eliminate most of the stressors in the world'.<sup>44</sup>

With six screens to monitor and a team of new employees to train, Mae feels 'more needed, more valued', and 'more intellectually stimulated than she ever thought possible'.<sup>45</sup> Her increased sense of value enhances her sense of power to do greater good: 'with the tools the Circle made available, Mae felt able to influence global events, to save lives even, halfway across the world'.<sup>46</sup>

But as Brown highlights, individuals remade as human capital enhance their value neither for themselves nor for the common good, but for firms or states concerned with their own competitive positioning.<sup>47</sup> Whenever she responds to clients, recommends products, tracks data, or sends a 'smile' to support a cause or a 'frown' to protest a human rights abuse, Mae enhances the Circle's competitive position, not her own. As her ex-boyfriend Mercer points out:

You sit at a desk 12 hours a day and you have nothing to show for it except some numbers that won't exist or be remembered in a week [...] The weird paradox is that you think you're at the center of things, and that makes your opinions more valuable, but you yourself are becoming less vibrant.<sup>48</sup>

The periodic sense of 'despair' that Mae feels, hearing a sound like a 'black rip [...] a loud tear, within her' and 'the screams of millions of invisible souls', provides a rather heavy-handed indication that beneath her confidence she detects the truth in such statements.<sup>49</sup>

Mae represents one of the 'good idealistic, bright people', who, in companies like the Circle, 'struggle with the things they need to be questioning', as Eggers suggested in his *Contemporary Literature* interview.<sup>50</sup> They are 'inclined to discount any hints that something is awry', because, as in Mae's case, they come from a relative point of disadvantage and are grateful for benefits such as good health insurance.<sup>51</sup> In addition, they exist in an environment where 'everything is filtered through or being decided on by one central organization', which precludes the possibility for alternative viewpoints.<sup>52</sup> Eggers proposes that Mae's feeling that 'no matter how bad it gets, it's never worse than where she came from', creates 'something of a perfect storm for turning or radicalizing someone'.<sup>53</sup> In her review of the novel, Margaret Atwood highlights that Mae's main 'terror' is being cast out of the Circle: 'she'll do almost anything to stay inside, and worries constantly about what sort of impression she's making'.<sup>54</sup> This terror is arguably borne out of the neoliberal reality that, as Brown suggests, when we take on the identity of 'human capital for firms or states, we have no guarantee of security, protection, or even survival' (emphasis in original).<sup>55</sup> Mae's precarity is explicit: her family security depends entirely on her employment at the Circle and its health insurance plan.<sup>56</sup> But she chooses to attribute her anxiety instead to 'the antiquated burden of uncertainty', which adds further fuel to her desire for more ratings and more data tracking.<sup>57</sup>

Mae is, as Eggers states in his interview, wilfully blind.<sup>58</sup> She ignores the risks posed by the Circle's corporate dominance, and with total belief in the neoliberal idea of market freedom, she considers it baffling that the company would face an antitrust lawsuit: '[i]t seemed insane to punish the company for its efficiency, for its attention to detail. For succeeding'.<sup>59</sup> She also ignores the criminal behaviour of the Circle's leaders, dismissing the idea that they illegally ruin the reputations of the company's challengers.<sup>60</sup> Instead of questioning the Circle's ethics, Mae resolves to commit more deeply to the company, 'to redouble her focus, to stay busy, to give more'.<sup>61</sup> This exemplifies Lauren Berlant's 'cruel optimism', a condition wherein a subject is attached to something that is actually an obstacle to their flourishing, particularly for Berlant the sense that 'liberal-capitalist society' will reliably provide opportunities for individuals, despite evidence to the contrary.<sup>62</sup> The object of Mae's desire – success and status at the Circle – is in fact the obstacle to her truly 'flourishing'.<sup>63</sup> The more she 'gives' the Circle, boosting her popularity and status exponentially after she agrees to 'go transparent' and film her daily life,

the more, as Luthi suggests, 'she loses herself'.<sup>64</sup> Ullman rightly states that she is a 'tail-wagging puppy waiting for the next reward: a better rating, millions of viewers'.<sup>65</sup> Having 'absorbed the ethics of her company', as Luthi suggests, she is 'brainwashed' by the Circle, but believes herself to be free: 'she found it freeing', she thinks, 'she was liberated from bad behavior. She was liberated from doing things she didn't want to be doing, like eating and drinking things that did her no good'.<sup>66</sup> Eggers stops short of the dystopia of Gary Shteyngart's America in his 2010 novel *Super Sad True Love Story*, where life is defined by publicly broadcast credit ratings and social rankings, but the trajectory towards this world is strongly implied: Mae's 'freedom' comes from adjusting her behaviours – rejecting certain consumables in favour of others – to improve her public perception, boost the company's bottom line, and ensure her continued employment and her family's survival.

Berlant proposes that the cruelty of cruel optimism – of a problematic attachment to an object – may be more easily perceived by an analyst – an outsider – who can observe the cost of that attachment.<sup>67</sup> In *The Circle*, it is Mercer who detects that Mae's optimistic attachment to the company is in fact limiting her freedom. He tells her: 'There are no oppressors. No one's forcing you to do this. You willingly tie yourself to these leashes'.<sup>68</sup> Mercer is not persuaded by what Brown describes as 'the soft power of governance, the focus on problem solving through team-based and consensus-based efforts', which, as Mercer highlights, is enacted by the Circle on consumers, in its marketing language, as well as on its employees: 'You know how they framed it for me? It's the usual utopian vision. This time they were saying it'll reduce waste.'<sup>69</sup> He warns her of the reality behind the utopian rhetoric: 'like everything else you guys are pushing, it sounds perfect, it sounds progressive, but it carries with it more control, more central tracking of everything we do.'<sup>70</sup> He also challenges what has become, through collective 'buy in' by consumers, an accepted economic model, as he declares, 'surveillance shouldn't be the tradeoff for every goddamn service we get'.<sup>71</sup> It is Mercer's voice that provides what Dennis Berman, in his *Wall Street Journal* review, describes as the novel's 'vivid, roaring dissent to the companies that have coaxed us to disgorge every thought and action onto the Web'.<sup>72</sup> Mercer's death, in a demonstration of the Circle's person-tracking capabilities, comes swiftly after Mae's suggestion of how to 'perfect democracy': with mandatory voting through the Circle.<sup>73</sup> The death of the novel's strongest voice of dissent signals the impossibility of escaping the company's power, as soft and non-violent as it may appear: the only options are to submit or to die. But even death is incorporated by the system: 'Mercer would have been saveable – would have been saved – if he'd made his mind known', Mae thinks, 'now, there will be no more not-knowing'.<sup>74</sup>

The 'horror and death' at the end of the Circle's scheme for perfect democracy – and of neoliberalism's remaking of humans as willing pieces of human capital – is represented in a highly symbolic scene at the company's aquarium. A new breed of shark brought back from a deep-sea expedition by 'Wise Man' Stenton, 'omnivorous and blind', symbolising the Circle's power, violently devours an octopus, a seahorse, and six tuna in a feeding experiment watched by millions.<sup>75</sup> As the shark is lowered into the tank, Mae considers: 'She knew it was right and inevitable. But for a moment, she thought it natural in a way seeing a plane fall from the sky can seem natural, too. The horror comes later'.<sup>76</sup> The shark's descent towards an act of violence, like a falling aeroplane, seems natural, just as the submission to corporate soft power and its descent into total control seems natural. The horror that comes later, like

creatures being devoured, or passengers killed, is the destruction of privacy, freedom and democracy. The neoliberal logic that a society based on the model of the market will ultimately self-correct, and everything will turn out all right in the end – the kind satirised in contemporary works such as Jonathan Franzen's 2002 novel *The Corrections*, as Rachel Greenwald Smith highlights, and his 2010 novel *Freedom* – is explicitly disproved in Eggers' narrative of gradual destruction and death.<sup>77</sup> Eggers states that he intended the novel to be 'a slower burn, where you slowly get to participate in the descent'; *The Circle* depicts a process of slowly unfolding violence that is arguably comparable to the slow destruction wrought by climate change and the long-term consequences of economic crises caused by the actions of wealthy corporations.<sup>78</sup> Eggers permits no optimistic outlook: at the novel's chilling end, with the Circle's detractors either dead or neutralised, and Mae ominously considering the public's right to know her friend Annie's unconscious thoughts and the Circle's ability to uncover them, the horror that 'comes later' is already visible on the horizon.

Ullman states that Mae must be 'more than a cartoon' if Eggers wishes to suggest that 'evil in the future will look more like the trivial Mae than the hovering dark eye of Big Brother'.<sup>79</sup> Arguably, her transition from 'bland to blander to brainwashed' as she absorbs the ethics of the Circle inspires little sympathy, and this may be because, as many critics suggest, she lacks complexity.<sup>80</sup> Her lack of substance is much like her online presence, which she describes as an 'incomplete, distorted' reflection.<sup>81</sup> Mae's 'transparency' makes her even less substantial, as, knowing she is watched, she lives an 'ideal' life, 'always and everywhere'.<sup>82</sup> She is quite literally the 'benign face' – unsubstantial, one-dimensional human capital – of the Circle, a company whose simple plot is to make the world 'perfect' and fend off 'fringe characters'; she is the flattened, neoliberal antihero of *The Circle*, a narrative whose simple, satirical plot is to warn of corporate technoculture's stealth threat to freedom.<sup>83</sup> Lamenting the novel's simplistic characters, Luthi remains unconvinced by its warning, suggesting that while the lack of realistic depth in the characters of *The Circle* makes its plot possible, 'in the real world we are too violent, sad, and volatile. We're not capable of these dire utopias'.<sup>84</sup> Perhaps, though, in reflecting our own neoliberal rationality, *The Circle* shows that we are already living in a dire utopia: that of neoliberalism.

Birkbeck, University of London

## Notes

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- 8 Tony Judt, *Ill Fares the Land* (New York: Penguin, 2010), p. 39.
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- 24 *Ibid.*, pp. 46, 47, 178.
- 25 Bex et al., *Contemporary Literature*, p. 552.
- 26 Eggers, *The Circle*, p. 10–11.
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- 29 *Ibid.*, p. 30.
- 30 *Ibid.*, p. 117.
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- 33 *Ibid.*, pp. 191–192.
- 34 Brown, *Undoing the Demos*, p. 35.
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