Interview - Wendy Brown

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Wendy Brown is Class of 1936 First Professor of Political Science at the University of California Berkeley, where she is also affiliated with the Program in Critical Theory. She is author of*Manhood and Politics: A Feminist Reading in Political Theory* (Rowman and Littlefield, 1988), *States of Injury: Power and Freedom in Late Modernity* (Princeton, 1995), *Politics Out of History* (Princeton, 2001), *Edgework: Essays on Knowledge and Politics* (Princeton, 2005), *Regulating Aversion: Tolerance in the Age of Empire and Identity* (Princeton, 2006), *Walled States, Waning Sovereignty* (Zone, 2010), *The Power of Tolerance,* with Rainer Forst (Columbia, 2013), and *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism's Stealth Revolution* (Zone, 2015).

Where do you see the most exciting debates happening in the field of political theory?

My own interests are in trying to figure out what kind of novel political powers and formations are taking shape in the contemporary political world. For me some of the most pressing developments involve globalization, financialisation and technocracy, as well as the emergence of populisms and authoritarianisms in Western democracies. These are problems that many of us are concerned about at the moment; a deep engagement with them requires moving across other disciplines, including political theory, but also geography, sociology, political economy and the work of other scholars working in critical theory grounded in the humanities.

How has the way you understand the world changed over time, and what (or who) prompted the most significant shifts in your thinking?

I came of age politically during the end of the Vietnam War, and in the midst of tremendous upheaval generated by political and social movements concerned with emancipation, from the women's movement to the anti-Apartheid movement. My initial formation was very much within a Marxist tradition, but in my study of political theory Marx never was the only referent. Early on, I focused on feminist theory and other kinds of social theory that revolved around questions of identity; and even then I was drawing from Nietzsche, Freud, the Frankfurt School as well as Plato, Aristotle, and a variety of other thinkers. I've never been a one-paradigm theorist.

One of the most important intellectual influences was my graduate school supervisor, Sheldon Wolin. The importance of him to my own thinking was twofold. First, his original take on the problem of democracy is one that has stayed with me. Democracy here is not synonymous with liberalism, nor is it ever understood as an already realized state. It is rather an understanding of democracy as radical possibility, as carrying a potential that can only be ephemerally realized through actual political practices. This conception was formative for my own thinking about de-democratization, about the potentials and challenges to different forms of democracy. Second, he was an extraordinarily subtle and profound reader of historical political theory; his readings of historical texts were always at once alert to context and dedicated to illuminating something about the present. I don't pretend to have his gift for reading political theory, but I have been inspired by that move – turning to the history of political thought, to great thinkers who one does not necessarily align with politically – to illuminate forms and predicaments of power in the present.

In *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism's Stealth Revolution*, you trace the neoliberal logic and show how it

threatens democracy. What exactly are the dangers of neoliberalism?

Neoliberalism is conventionally treated as a set of policies, such as deregulation and privatization, that unleash the force of capital and restrict the rights and demands of labor. All of these things are part of what actually existing neoliberalism has comprised. But from reading Foucault I have also arrived at the thesis that neoliberalism must also be understood as a form of governing rationality, an order of reason that is part of what governs everything everywhere and also constructs a certain kind of 'statism'. Neoliberalism doesn't eliminate the state, but produces the state increasingly as a power that serves the market, and it is an order of reason that governs us throughout society, culture and private life. It doesn't take much imagination to note the extent to which human beings are increasingly construed as *homo oeconomicus* or to see how in every part of their lives they are thinking about preserving or enhancing their capital value.

What I argue in the book is that one of the most important effects of neoliberalization is the de-valuation of democracy, where democracy is understood as the practice of the people ruling themselves. Once market value replaces the political value of democracy, both the meaning and worth of popular sovereignty, political equality and political liberty are challenged. This is why I would argue that today we see an explicitly anti-democratic populism emerging from neoliberalized conditions and populations in so-called democracies, populations that no longer realize why one might want democracy apart from the thin gruel of periodic elections.

We have certainly seen democracy threatened in the U.S., not only with the election of Donald Trump but also with a series of Supreme Court decisions over the past 25 years that have essentially recast democracy as a marketplace and unleashed the power of capital to dominate this marketplace. The famous Supreme Court decision called 'Citizens United' gave corporations an unlimited power to contribute and hence to dominate electoral campaigns, and this decision was based wholly on neoliberal reasoning.

The more general move to eliminate public goods – especially by de-funding and divesting from public and higher education – can be understood as resulting from a de-valuation of human beings as citizens who are now rendered instead as individual bits of self-enhancing human capital. Education then ceases to be about culturing an educated democracy and democracy ceases to be educated. Again, welcome to our world of proudly ignorant right-wing populisms.

At the same time, there have been many left retorts to these same processes. We've seen a number of popular resistance movements, from Occupy to the Indignados to Syriza, and many smaller movements as well. These movements generally aim to reclaim both popular political power and the idea of public goods and pubic values – that is, conceptions of power and value opposed to reducing all the world to an unregulated market place.

How can we renew our understanding of democracy in light of these developments?

The big challenge for people who care about democracy today is to reckon with the many forces that are challenging it, not just neoliberalism but also globalization and financialisation. First, a big question for democratic thinkers and activists is: Where could and should democracy be taking place? Does the nation-state continue to be its primary site, or are post-national constellations, such as the EU, more appropriate? What about sub-national venues? With the nation-state losing its exclusivity on the sovereignty question, we are entering an interregnum. What comes after the nation-state for democracy? Sovereignty is not finished, and I don't agree with those who regard it as the enemy of democracy or emancipation. Who the "we" is in "we the people rule ourselves" is a foundational question for any kind of democratic practice. It is foundational to how a people rules themselves, to what the domain of that rule is, and to how the people themselves are signified. Hence my theoretical quarrel with those who think that sovereignty is in itself some kind of bad or wrong that needs to be done away with. What is the jurisdiction, the domain or the venue for democracy at this time in history? That question is a crucial one for democratic theory and practice today. A second question has to do with democratic forms: liberal democracy or bourgeois democracy was always a limited form of democracy, always imbricated with forms of class power and other orders of domination. Moreover, it is not a very robust form of democracy; liberal democracy has deep strains of citizen privatism in it that mitigate against

substantive rule by the people. The question therefore is: Might it be possible today to generate new ways of thinking about and practicing popular rule that exceed that form, to find new democratic venues, places and jurisdictions that are appropriate to this age?

Rather than thinking about renewing democracy, then, the question is: What novel kinds of practices and spaces of democracy are appropriate to an age that is itself new? This is the question Tocqueville asked in the early 19th century and it needs to be asked and answered again in the 21st century.

One more thing. There are a lot of very interesting experiments with democracy emerging all over the world today, but they are not necessarily translatable across different histories and cultures. An important lesson from the history of colonialism and imperialism in the past two centuries, and from the history of democracy and communism in the 20th century, is that specific histories, cultures and trajectories generate their own specific possibilities and forms for popular rule, for emancipation, and for equality. They are not generic. And this is exactly what is wrong with the analytic or so-called normative tradition of democratic theory, in that it imagines that there is some ahistorical, a-cultural way of thinking about democratic principles, where you can just move the pieces around to get the exact titration of those principles that you want. It imagines that you can do so without being responsive to the specificities of peoples' histories, attachments, cultures, regions, configurations, cast, class, gender, ethnicities… – but that is absurd. That's why political theory – that is, any approach to thinking about democratic possibilities or other possible forms of power, rule and their absence, such as anarchism – must integrate these concerns with an alertness, and responsiveness to complex histories, cultures, political-economies, and so forth. Normative democratic theory is an academic version of all that is wrong with "regime change."

In *Walled States, Waning Sovereignty*, you argue that the nation-state's monopoly over sovereignty is compromised by transnational flows of capital and God-sanctioned political violence. Can you elaborate on this?

Political sovereignty is always aspirational rather than complete. By definition, sovereignty is a power above which there is no other power. As Carl Schmitt reminds us, it comes from the notion of God as sovereign, and there is nothing above God, otherwise God wouldn't be God. This original formulation has been secularized and applied to states since the Westphalian period, where absolute sovereignty is always partial and unrealized, which does not mean that it's not significant.

In the book I argue that sovereignty at the site of the nation-state is being challenged by transnational flows of all kinds of things: people, goods, capital, but also ideas, religions, and so on. I also argue that sovereignty is challenged and to some degree displaced as the site of international relations by forms of political violence, like what we call terrorism, but also the mobilization of civilizational violence from both the West and the non-West. Again we find ourselves in an interregnum where sovereignty is still the dominant term for understanding and organizing international relations, diplomacy, war, and so on. But there are also a number of factors and powers that are corroding and challenging sovereignty – from the massive immigration of human beings (there are 60 million refugees in the world today, and many more who are not officially counted as refugees) to the tremendous coercive power of financial and other forms of capital.

How to theoretically make sense of what you call 'nation-state walling'?

Nation-state walling saw a resurgence in the post 1989-period, which is significant because or the international celebration of the fall of the Berlin Wall. Nation-state walling needs to be understood as a symptom of eroding sovereignty, rather than an expression of its robustness. Walls often operate theatrically yet as theater, are important state responses to popular despair, resentment, or anxiety about this eroding sovereignty. Which does not necessarily mean that they are effective means to 'keep out' perceived threats. Many walls are built to interdict drugs, weaponry, terrorists or streams of immigrants; generally speaking, however, walls are ineffective at this kind of interdiction. The strongest example is the current wall at the US-Mexican border. All this wall has done is push immigrants into more dangerous routes for crossing; it has created a huge industry for smuggling migrants, and a huge world of gangs and criminalization related to drug smuggling. It has intensified underground industries and

produced higher death rates, but it has not contained the actual stream of drugs and migrants.

Everyone knows that, for example, the motto and chant that brought Trump to power ("Build A Wall! Make Mexico Pay For It!") was just that: a motto and a chant. The wall he proposes is preposterously expensive, estimated to cost somewhere between 30-40 million dollars per mile over a 20 year period for a 2000 mile border. Moreover, if it were built, it would in fact just intensify once again the difficulty and criminality involved in bringing goods that the US demands – cheap labor and drugs. The US demands both and, until that demand is addressed, the supply will not go away. So, walls for the most part have operated as a response to a population that is increasingly unhappy, anxious and raging about the state, whose power has been reduced by the decline of sovereignty and by neoliberalization.

I recently wrote a new preface to this book that addresses the walling phenomenon at the southeastern border of the EU, in countries such as Hungary and Serbia. There it is important to see how walls act as diversions rather than blockades, producing new ways to push immigrants in one direction or another, but not to wholly keep them out of Europe. Thus these walls become negotiating tools within the EU, serving as important bargaining chips for so-called 'countries of first landing' and, more generally, for dealing with the twin crisis Europe is now facing: the 'refugee crisis' and 'the finance crisis'.

What effects do walls have on the renegotiation of contemporary political agency?

Walls produce entire discourses and imaginaries of insiders and outsiders, of danger, criminality and foreignness on the outside, and of a false or fictional homogeneity, tranquility, sanctity and belonging on the inside. So they don't simply respond to the xenophobia but actually generate and intensify it. Walling demonizes (mostly brown) outsiders and sanctifies (white) insiders. One of the ways theorists and citizens concerned with these processes can respond to this involves generating counter claims about refugees and immigrants rather than accepting the xenophobic rendition of them.

But also important for theorists and activists to disrupt is the narrative and the image that walling produces on the inside: fictional and nostalgic images of a uniform culture, of whiteness, of a 'time when life was good' but that is now threatened by the vicious or hungry hoards from without. That image whitewashes our own hungers, needs and violence but also eliminates our own histories in places like the United States. We, a nation of immigrants, destroyed our own native population. It is more than a little ironic for us to take up the flag of nativism now.

Finally, it is really important for academics and activists to address those anxieties, fears, and sentiments that produce xenophobia and that are generating the demand for walling. It is really important that we don't simply condemn that reactionary sentiment but try to understand, address, and transform it.

How precisely can this be done?

I think that, if the left continues to engage in slogans focused merely on the "correct" views, it will not succeed. If those of us who object to xenophobia, resurgent masculinism, and attacks on immigrants just retort with our own views or slogans, we're not going to get anywhere. We really need to try to understand and work with these fears, anxieties, attachments and losses that have generated such dark sentiments today**.** We need to get at such extreme fears about one's own life, predicament, village, and existence that have generated and have themselves been mobilized by opportunistic right-wing politicians.

I think the way to get out of the "political correctness" charge is to stop being politically correct and instead to engage in serious analysis. The world is at the edge of disaster; this we already know. We know this not just because of recent elections, but also because of climate change, because of the rising phenomenon of terrorism in all kinds of places and spaces; these are not simply related to Islam but to the unleashing of dark impulses and energies by individuals, groups and a range of other forces. We're really at risk of something like apocalypse. If we simply keep on repeating what we have done, we're not going to get anywhere. We must address the forces, analytically and organizationally, that are bringing us to this edge.

The left has abandoned the very task it understood itself to have for centuries, which is educating and organizing the people for emancipation. Instead it has increasingly centered on slightly closed academic, journalistic and activist circles where we repeat to one another what we believe in, and condemn those we oppose. That's faux left activism and is not left organizing. We need to find a way to organize! We need to be thinking about how to reach people and how to reach power.

What is the status of critical theory today and what can it offer in light of the previously discussed issues?

Critical theory for me, properly understood, involves an effort at apprehending this world. Such efforts can come from a lot of different traditions and sources. I would not confine critical theory to one school or lineage. Critical theory needs to be understood as something that subjects to critique both the approaches and norms of mainstream disciplines and the powers and norms that organize our lives. By critique, I don't mean rejection, of course, but an attempt to critically understand the premises and the powers that are circulating in existing knowledge and human practices.

Critical theory is, in its richest and broadest sense, oriented to apprehending the world rather than generating new little bits of academic knowledge for the sake of other academics. Critical theory must always be reflexive, critical of itself, and willing to rethink the premises and approaches it uses to make sense of the world.

Recently, post-structuralism has been charged with having significantly contributed to the post-truth world and enabling the rise of figures like Donald Trump. How can critical theory be made attractive to people who reject the premises of post-structuralism?

It is very funny to imagine that post-structuralism was so powerful and influential that it produced Donald Trump's orientation towards truth. I wish it were true that post-structuralism had that much power, as we actually could have produced a better world and it would have nothing to do with a post-truth world. What's really being said here? Those people who never liked or fully understood these challenges to foundational truths –– have now found a correspondence between the unsettling of truth's foundation at the philosophical level and the lack of interest in facticity among a certain current of politicians and journalists. Correspondence is not a very interesting claim unless you can figure out why that correspondence might be there.

I'm still enough of a Marxist to understand post-structuralism as having emerged when the foundations of polities, economies, societies and their truths were beginning to shake. The gold standard was floating (as currencies were no longer tied to anything secure); authenticity was coming into question in popular and mainstream culture; religion had been rendered not as absolute truth but as a private, relatively arbitrary choice; and the economy as a whole was becoming increasingly detached from products and production. Post-structuralism emerged within an order in which truth is already unmoored in all kinds of spaces and places. Poststructuralism articulates this at a philosophical level. However, to me one of the most important political implications that come out of post-structuralism is this: the truths that organize human societies are determined by human beings. Their foundation cannot be sought in God, nature, or tradition, or history. And if they are going to be democratic truths, then they must come from human deliberation. Poststructuralist insight into the humanly fashioned character of governing truths does not mean it's impossible to settle how we ought to live together. It simply means that a crucial part of democracy is determining this together, deliberately and intentionally.

This leaves one matter untouched, which is the question of factual truth. Is climate change real or is it bogus? What about scientific facticity? Post-structuralist thought never argued against facticity; rather, it argues that facts are always discursively organized and interpreted. Post-structuralists (such as Derrida, Foucault and others) never claimed that everything was simply invented. Their claim is a more important and interesting one: human beings cannot simply name truth without doing so through language, and language is not just descriptive or nominative, but always interpretive. We describe climate change or narrate an experience in a particular way; we include and omit, we frame and we emphasize; we metaphorize and compare. All of this makes post-structuralist accounts of truth extremely important to our moment. Because what post-structuralism helps us to do is to show how certain truths

come to govern and how others are dispatched; how truth is generated and produced, and how facts are interpreted. Nothing could be more important right now.

What is the most important advice you could give to young scholars of political theory?

It is crucial to hang on to the questions, the concerns, and the interests that brought you into the field and to resist being claimed by the professional norms and requirements. For these will pull you away from the driving intellectual and political concerns that brought you to do political theory in the first place.

The greatest danger for scholars today lies in how academia, like every other business, is increasingly contoured by concerns with competitive positioning and value according to a series of metrics that have nothing to do with thinking. Hence increasing numbers of academics, especially young academics, find themselves engaged in work and in entrepreneurial intellectual activity, in networking and in positioning that has little to do with serious intellectual and political questions, and especially with questions about our world. If you're going to be caught up in this kind of thing, you might as well go into investment banking or something lucrative. You're never really going to get that much out of the competitive positioning and recognition in academia, and you're never going to get off the hamster wheel of trying. The gratification is in the thinking, teaching, writing, ideas, and the genuinely meaningful – as opposed to "high asset value" – connections with others.

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This interview was conducted by Alvina Hoffmann. Alvina is an Associate Features Editor for E-IR.