

## Interview - PJ Brendese

Written by E-International Relations

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P.J. Brendese is Assistant Professor of Political Science and Co-Director of the Racism, Immigration and Citizenship Program at Johns Hopkins University. He is the author of *The Power of Memory in Democratic Politics* (Rochester University Press, 2014). His recent work has appeared in *Theory & Event*, *Contemporary Political Theory*, *Politics, Groups and Identities*, and anthologies. He is currently completing a book entitled *Segregated Time*.

### Where do you see the most exciting debates happening in your field?

There are a number of intriguing lines of inquiry that I think are promising. For the sake of brevity, I'll just touch on a few trends. Recent scholarship in political theory has increasingly endeavored to broaden the field beyond its longstanding Eurocentric focus, its canonical thinkers and their political reference points. Toward that end, I am invigorated by emergent scholarship drawing Afro-diasporic thought, decolonial theory and Indigenous studies into dialogues of mutual illumination and productive contestation. Likewise, there is a growing cohort of comparative political theorists raising the volume on Islamic, Buddhist, Confucian, Hindu and African political thought (among others) in a number of interesting ways.

Generative debates around the limits and capacities of populism versus, say, fascism (aspirational or otherwise) as explanatory categories are important and timely—especially given the fecundity of white nationalisms and the rancid incarnations of racial terror. Relatedly, debates around how to come to terms with borders and flows in the age of the Anthropocene have spurred questions around whether it would be more appropriate to conceive of climate crisis in terms of a Eurocene or Racial Capitalocene given the inequalities across regions, nations and peoples. Given the urgency of the threat, even levels of analysis and scale are in question—not to mention the conceptual tools available to grapple with climate change in the context of a 'post-factual' political landscape of constant disinformation.

A number of these themes emerged in an exploratory graduate seminar I co-taught with William E. Connolly last year, entitled "Postcolonial Ecologies and Planetary Temporalities." The course put pressure on socio-centric theories and their corresponding timescapes by investigating difference and relationality at the level of plural cosmologies—as opposed to, say, remaining at the level of competing assumptions or divergent arguments. The critiques of planetary gradualism, the status of the human, the role of quantum theory, and the dissolution of disciplinary boundaries needed to address such issues, all brought to the fore the different ways that stability itself is up for debate.

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

I consider myself a question-driven scholar in that I draw upon thinkers for purposes of illumination, rather than beginning with the express purpose of writing about a certain author. That said, the genealogical approaches of Nietzsche and Foucault certainly provided crucial expositions of how power shapes what we assume time to be in the first place. The work of James Baldwin, among others, has been key to my explorations of how legacies of white supremacy impact temporality and memory. I am struck by the revived interest in Baldwin today in books, articles and movies—and, importantly, his influence on Black Lives Matter and The Movement For Black Lives. Even his FBI file was recently published! When I began drawing upon his work, which was not all that long ago, it was regarded by some as having "the whiff of anachronism." To me, this dismissiveness bespeaks the degree to which the self-

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congratulation of racial progress and its attendant myopia infiltrated scholarly circles—even among those who claimed to oppose the notion that Obama’s presidency had made the polity post-racial.

Among his many gifts, Baldwin fused a literary and political imagination to the point they became virtually indistinguishable. Always attentive to voice, in *Many Thousands Gone*, for instance, he intuited how the use of the third-person omniscient ‘voice of God’ was raced and gendered and therefore coextensive with what it meant to ‘write white.’ He used that insight to deploy the swagger of white male certitude to maximum effect, with lines like “In our image of the Negro breathes a past we deny...” (Remember, this was long before the internet made everyone searchable.) He leveraged his relative anonymity to challenge readers’ assumptions about the counterfeit neutrality of white masculinity and the power of this fiction with respect to truth claims, epistemology, discourses of legitimacy and so on.

More broadly, Baldwin recognized race as a historically entrenched political project constantly in the making. On my reading, this acknowledgement requires us to ask sharp questions, such as: What problems, precisely, is race designed to solve—and for whom? What is the symbology attached to racial identity and what are its lived consequences? How does that poisonous mixture impact the political and even spiritual life of a people? The answers could, and do, vary across time and space. Still, we disavow the questions at our own peril—and the “we” needs to extend beyond people of color. Whites especially cannot be free without a painful confrontation with such questions. Against the prevailing notion of whiteness as the absence of race, and therefore outside the influence of power, Baldwin maintained that whites are “the slightly mad victims of their own brainwashing.”

A self-professed “emotional historian,” Baldwin acknowledged the importance of affect long before it was an academic destination. As a theorist of memory politics, he responds to the role of race in questions of mnemonic disavowal and racial terror that are its consequence. Just as Langston Hughes asked what happens to dreams deferred; if they sag or even explode, Baldwin asked what happens to the disavowed memories of whites. Where do they go? His answer, in part, was that those histories are often projected onto racial others and come back to haunt those who did the projecting. For instance, in the white psyche, the gory past of white violence against black women has been projected onto black masculinity. Then, in a dramatic monster-making reversal, the black male returns as a sexual predator in need of eradication. Baldwin saw that the imagined terror wrought by blackness as a demonological trope among whites presages a conflagration of potentially biblical proportions. In the wake of the prolific police shootings of unarmed African American men and boys, racialized mass-incarceration and the rise of Trumpism, it is impossible to read Baldwin’s reflections apart from the horrific condition in which we find ourselves today.

**Your work explores public memory, relationships to memory and their link to democratic possibilities. Why is it important to investigate the modes of remembering and forgetting in democracies?**

I wrote *The Power of Memory in Democratic Politics* with that question in mind, and I remain persuaded that the collective failure to attend to the politics of memory risks whatever possibilities remain for democracy today. So, without reprising the book, let me highlight some points. What I call the politics of memory pertains to what is allowed to be recalled, who is allowed to invoke the past, as well as the occasions and manner through which such recollection and commemoration takes place. This, in turn, is not divorced from who has the right to appear in public and, as we saw in Charlottesville last summer, these issues are not mutually exclusive.

Perhaps one of the quickest ways to appreciate the importance of memory politics to democracy is by looking at how it functions in belligerently undemocratic regimes. As a companion project to wiping out the Jewish people, Hitler sought to control what would remain of their memory. This is what I take to be Jean Beaudrillard’s point when, with reference to genocidal projects, he writes that “forgetting the extermination is part of the extermination itself.” Taken to the extreme, the failure to register people’s pasts becomes coextensive with the erasure of people *as a people*. Case in point, recent scholarship has identified conjunctural points linking the American Indian holocaust to the Nazi genocide with evidence that the former provided inspiration for the latter.

Today the Orwellian provocation that those who control the past control the future, and those who control the present

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control the past, has begun to look less like the stuff of dystopic fiction and more like the Trumpian world of “alternative facts” where “truth is not truth.” Such rhetoric serves to jettison empirical evidence into the proverbial “memory hole,” while creating an atmosphere where everything is opinion and facts are nonexistent. This vertigo, in turn, makes democratic judgment impossible and threatens to erode the capacity for the demos to see itself as part of a coherent political project.

**You show how amnesia lies at the heart of democracy, which is for instance manifest in structures of what you term amnesiac white supremacy. Why are amnesia and amnesty problematic for democratic societies?**

I wouldn't go so far as to say that *all* forms of amnesty are necessarily toxic for democratic societies. For instance, it might be entirely appropriate to employ amnesty as a refusal to punish violations of laws that are belatedly acknowledged as unjust in their form, content or application. On the other hand, amnesty as a blanket immunity that the powerful arrogate to themselves simply by virtue of their position undermines the equality under the law that democracy requires.

In practice, amnesty is frequently the product of power brokerages that mark a turn toward a new political dispensation. The turn toward the new is where the benefits of amnesty are most salient, and also where the seductions of amnesiac amnesty are most risky. The relationship between amnesia and amnesty has deep roots in antiquity. The ancient Greek amnesty of 403 BCE that sealed the turn toward the flagship democracy of ancient Athens required a prohibition against recalling the prior rule of the Thirty Tyrants. That prohibition against memory was combined with a requirement that citizens swear an oath, publicly promising that they would not recall the prior regime.

Of course, the first irony is that making someone promise not to remember something is itself an occasion of memory. For the Athenians, it surely convened a remembrance of things past. Yet another important irony was that it was also a reminder that citizens' speech was policed under the banner of democracy, underscoring their subordinate position in a broader power relationship compelling their silence. Suffice it to say, the amnesia at the historical-etymological route of the original amnesty was not the same as the amnesia brought on by dementia, trauma or senility. Fast-forward to the twentieth century and it was such mnemonic policing that South Africa and other nations sought to exorcise through the *anamnesis* of truth and reconciliation commissions.

There are a number of ways amnesiac relationships to the past can be problematic for democracy, but one of the central paradoxes of democracy is that it alternately demands a negotiation across differences as well as a subversion of those very differences as a precondition of engagement. It is said that memory is a guardian of difference. This raises questions about the extent to which certain histories have to be checked at the door of discursive spaces as the price of admission. And we know recollections can be mobilized to perpetuate violent divisions. But how can we move from ostensibly insurmountable differences if we disavow the histories that make those differences meaningful? With this in mind, I argue that radical democracy exists in a tension between the imperatives to remember to forget (in the Nietzschean sense) and need to remember that which others cannot reasonably be expected to forget.

**Citizens have different relationships to time, and you show how some of these remain segregated. What are the effects of what you call ‘segregated memory’ on democracies?**

First, I think it is important to be clear that time and memory are often mutually implicated, but they are not the same. Time is a carrier of memory, which is to say that memories happen in and through time, but each is not reducible to the other. Memory and expectation condition our experiences of time, our sense of duration and time's limits and its capacities; it helps shape what philosophers refer to as temporality.

Generally speaking, our relationships to memory exert a strong influence on our sense of *possibility*. I take this to be the root of the Freudian notion that many of the worst things we can imagine happening have already happened. It is also why Nietzsche's counsel of active forgetting is instructive, not because it promises absolute mnemonic erasure

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(it doesn't) but because it calls us to be mindful of how particular relationships to the past can become disciplinary and insidiously preemptive of our pluro-potentiality in the present as well as our future becoming. Left unexamined, corrosive practices of memory can smother the radically emergent in its pre-conceptual cradle. Not incidentally, it is at this intersection where path-dependent social science often splashes up against its inability to predict the future.

Segregated memory refers to how modes of relating to the past diverge across populations. Power is implicated in mnemonic practices such that marginalizing people's memories serves as a means of marginalizing people politically. Diminishing the legacies of colonial dispossession, slavery and Jim Crow, for example, allows contemporary inequalities to remain encrypted in pernicious ways. Racial inequalities can be passed off as simply collective failures to work hard or make good choices. We hear this line of argumentation from political entrepreneurs who speak in the vernacular of cultural racism.

To the extent that democracy requires a receptive polity capable of addressing grievances, segregated memory threatens to render illegitimate the experiences of injustice expressed by stigmatized populations. If one takes the view that democratic solidarity requires shared reflection on, and aspiration toward, a common good, then segregated memory impairs such solidarity. It obscures stories of struggle and survival that could catalyze productive alliances across lines of difference. After that long answer(!), the *short* answer to your question is that segregated memory is directly implicated in a segregated polity.

### **How can we reimagine a form of citizenship which encompasses diverse temporalities and memories?**

Foremost, we are ill-served by the prevailing consumerist model where citizenship is reduced to one's status as a taxpayer. This is not to say that people are wrong to expect public services in return for their taxes, but the obligations and benefits of citizenship are not exhausted by that economy or its present-centered time signature. Consider how different the measures of citizenship are when, instead of using one's private consumption or taxation as a metric, what it means to be a citizen is figured in terms of public participation, or the capacity to ask after what "we need" as opposed to just what "I want." For sure, such an ethos demands that publics investigate the existing plurality making up any collective 'we,' and do so with a critical receptivity toward emergent pluralization in the form of new kinds of differences always in the making. By my lights, practices of multi-temporal citizenship call for cultivating a trans-generational solidarity with democrats past—particularly those who themselves utilized past memories in the service of democratic resistance and possibility; those who convey what I call memories of radical remembrance. It follows that the corresponding imperative is to be mindful of the ghosts we bequeath to future generations and the memories (and hopefully the planet!) we leave behind. Among other things, such transgenerational thinking demands a confrontation with our own mortality in the context of a culture that seeks every possible doorway to death denial.

From a different angle, because citizenship is frequently figured in opposition to the foreigner, so-called 'progressive' arguments in debates over migration need to be far more self-critical about prioritizing the value of immigrant labor when making their case. Think of arguments on the left that immigrants should be welcome because they do the work that citizens cannot, or will not, do. With respect to the intersection of race and citizenship, such a position can partake of a logic implying that citizens (as those who are fully human) should not have to spend their time doing the work that those who are 'behind the times' (often tacitly implying those racially less evolved) can waste their time doing instead. What jobs are these? We know that non-citizens are often consigned to jobs that are dangerous, exploitative and which expose workers to death—either by acute injury or by way of slow, long-term wasting. The upshot is a biopolitical logic where citizenship eligibility hinges upon human disposability. Reflecting on this point, I am haunted by the image of President G.W. Bush conferring upon dead U.S. soldiers the distinction of "posthumous citizenship."

More penetrating still, we need to move away from the notion that citizenship is tantamount to status in general and coextensive with 'the human' in particular. As if only those afforded the status of citizenship are eligible to be fully human and treated accordingly. With respect to time and temporality, 'eligible' usually follows a logic that says "Someday we *might* consider treating you migrants as coeval citizens/human beings, provided we can make your difference useful, or better still, convert it into sameness. *Just not yet.*" This politics of temporizing by way of the "yes, but not yet" has long been a key strategy of liberal white paternalism. This strategic temporalizing universalism may

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be liberal, but it is not democratic. I am struck by just how frequently Martin Luther King Jr.'s writings and speeches return to the theme of time by arguing "Why we can't wait," "Negroes are not moving too fast," and so on. The prevailing forces of racial and gender chauvinism today are marshalled against the very notion of women, queer/trans folk and people of color are moving "too fast." At any rate, I focus on these issues at greater length in my forthcoming book, *Segregated Time*.

**The history of slavery and racial segregation in the US is central to your work. How does the removal of confederate statues as we have seen recently destabilize received notions of public memory?**

Most obviously, the debate over the monuments destabilizes public memory by challenging the notion of the past as past. The United States is a country that lauds its ability to shed the past as a mark of its exceptionalism. In effect, those who contest the monuments are challenging the triumphalism over history that is central to a particular vision of American identity—a vision where race is not innocent. In a settler-colonial nation built on indigenous dispossession and chattel slavery, moving the monuments indicates a threat to the racialized power relations that have long shaped what is available to be remembered. It also amplifies questions of precisely whose interests are served by lionizing those who fought against the United States and who were, by definition, traitors. The present instability of public memory reflects a broader instability about who is included in 'the public' that claims the authority to remember today.

It bears mention that many, if not all, of the monuments were explicitly constructed as twentieth century icons deliberately placed to fortify white supremacy against the perils of an emboldened mixed-race public that whites viewed as a threat during Reconstruction and countered with Jim Crow. The perceived threat of black advancement increased during the Civil Rights movement and, before that, as African American veterans returned from overseas wars proudly decorated in military uniforms that they refused to take off—a refusal which, in some cases, ended in their lynching. The statues partake of that bloody history as well as a broader refusal of the country to acknowledge its debts to black veterans and the contributions of African Americans more generally. Roughly 180,000 black soldiers fought for the Union in the Civil War. How many statues have you seen of them?

An enduring mnemonic fiction at the heart of the controversy is the pernicious notion that slavery was not the cause of the Civil War. Recently, White House Chief of Staff Gen. John Kelly even remarked that the cause of the Civil War was a failure to compromise. Of course, we know that the Civil War was preceded by many failed compromises over slavery and the status of African Americans, so the statement isn't even half true—or, more precisely—it isn't even three-fifths, true. Not only is it alarming that such falsehoods are given a platform in the halls of power today, but scholars who politely correct the record have had their lives threatened. At the bare minimum, this should make it painfully clear that the politics of memory is not a matter of esoteric, antiquarian concern that is explicitly, or even primarily, about the past.

**What is the relationship between forgetting and ignorance? Are there some forms of ignorance that do not involve forgetting?**

The question points to a need for what, in the book, I call a dimensional approach to memory and forgetting. That entails a need to make distinctions between the kind of forgetting that happens by way of a poor memory that can consign the past to oblivion, and forgetting as a willful disavowal of what we know, at least on some level, but nevertheless choose not to acknowledge. The language of disavowal requires us to consider how we can both know and not know something at the same time.

For instance, many people know that slavery and indigenous genocide happened but refuse to countenance the possibility that the present condition of inequality partakes of what lives on from that happening. That is, the possibility that the time of slavery is not ontologically confined to the past and that colonial dispossession is not merely a historical stage in economic development—but that both are ongoing, innovative logics of power strangely contiguous with the contemporary moment. We can speak of ignorance to the extent that the present remains encrypted by our collective failure to grapple with what is widely known to be historically fundamental to our institutions.

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The root of the word ignorance is “to ignore,” which is obviously distinct from simply being unaware. We are all unaware of, or lacking knowledge in, a great many things. While it might be correct to say that, in matters of astrophysics, my neighbor is ignorant, that is quite different from calling him an *ignorant person*. The latter slur is generally reserved for someone who exists amidst an abundance of knowledge and information but who nevertheless refuses to internalize it. At the level of epistemology, this points to a key problem effected by racial forms of unknowing and its relation to compulsive disavowal. In terms of the street level politics where white supremacy is lived and experienced, it means that corrective information and better history classes alone are no panacea.

It is here where the discourse of affect becomes especially important insofar as our histories are not merely the stuff of narrative memory. As Franz Fanon put it, the past is *epidermalized*. That is, in addition to narrative memory, we possess infra-sensory memories that course through our tacit presumptions, our habituated practices of aversion and attraction and even the tones of voice we employ when addressing different people. From the insights of Fanon and others, it follows that the work of desegregating memory also entails overcoming embodied habits of ignoring and avoiding spaces and occasions where we might cultivate practices of relationality by pressing the flesh with those different than ourselves. The ongoing segregation of space and time points to what Fanon theorized as the psycho-affective attachments of colonialism.

### **What is the most important advice you could give to young scholars of political theory and international politics?**

It goes without saying that this is a difficult time to be a young scholar. Amidst such uncertainty, it is understandable that those crafting a thesis prospectus feel pressured to engage whatever the hot topic is at the moment. What can easily go missing is the reality that what is in fashion now might not be all the rage when you're on the job market or shopping a manuscript to a publisher. In addition to the pressure of gambling on oracular prescience, there is the exorbitant amount of effort and time one has to spend (much of it in isolation) working on a project that will seem ever more impossible if your motivation is not organic. Better to identify topics that capture your intellectual curiosity and imagination and from there develop questions where both the political and theoretical stakes are abundantly clear. Having a strong sense of why the work matters is not only key to completing it, it is fundamental to the capacity to convey its relevance across subfield/disciplinary boundaries and to participate in—and even convene—broader intellectual communities. In that spirit, I want to close by thanking you for the opportunity to sharpen and expand upon key issues and themes in my work.