

Learning to Love Again: An Interview with Wendy Brown

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CT: One of the compelling things about your award winning book *States of Injury* is your creative and critical engagement with Foucault's notion of resistance. Foucault's understanding of the relation between freedom and power allows you to examine the ways in which apparently radical or progressive political projects are in fact constituted by and are a reflection of the relations of power that they claim to oppose. This leads you to consider "the problem of how to formulate a discourse of freedom appropriate to contesting contemporary antidemocratic configurations of power."¹ How might the desire to contribute to such a discourse be understood in relation to your broader theoretical trajectory? Can it be interpreted as a unifying thread that ties together various themes in your work to date?

WB: Freedom is probably the most important value coursing through the work I've done over the last twenty-five years. Your question forces me to think about 'why'. The first thing that I want to say is that there is something almost temperamental in one's normative attachments in political theory (regardless of what the real Kantians, the Habermasians and analytic philosophers say). I can give psychoanalytical and biographical accounts of my attachments, or other accounts, but one of the things that threads together almost all of my work is a concern with how to push into the foreground the question of freedom. This means, conversely, articulating power more in terms of domination, subjugation, subjectification, and subject formation, than in terms of inegalitarianism, maldistribution, or even exploitation. It's not that I'm uninterested in these latter terms, but I'm compelled by the question of domination and its inverse, freedom. I don't think, finally, that one can justify such positions. I think it's perfectly respectable to care about equality rather than freedom. It's perfectly respectable to care about libertarian freedom as opposed to my particular interest, which is more in collective projects of freedom—political freedom that involves, among other things, governance of shared economic and social powers. This is the part of Marx that I've always been drawn to. There are people who love Marx because of his critique of the maldistribution of wealth and the egalitarian promise that communism

holds out. That is great but I'm much more interested in the Marxist articulation of capital as a mode of domination, not only the domination of individuals, but domination of whole human worlds. I love the Marx who explains how and why capital controls us rather than us controlling it, and posed the question of what it would mean to have human beings in control of economic life, or at least, to have modest mastery over economic relations.

The same is true of other theorists in the canon of political theory. I've always loved the part of Rousseau that asks how to reconcile collective and individual freedom. This always seemed to me to be the right question for modernity. The Frankfurt School was also formative for me on the problem of freedom, especially Marcuse. What was so important about Marcuse's work was his preoccupation with the question of domination, in both liberalism and in capitalism, in forms of reason, rationality, culture, aesthetics, and even love.

I do think that freedom is the theme of my work, but I can't justify that beyond saying that it is something to which I am very attached and attracted. I think it has been in the background of an enormous amount of what I have taught in the last quarter century. A thematic like 'wounded attachments' came out of the desire to think about what occasions the turning away from even the desire for freedom, the containment or dispersion of the will for freedom.

CT: Can you say a bit more about your interest in collective freedom?

WB: We need to go back to Marx once again. In the early work, Marx insists on the inseparability of individual and collective freedom. You can read much of his quarrel with Hegel through that problematic. Where Hegel has an individual consciousness, making its way through history, making its way toward freedom, Marx spies the impossibility of freedom without a collectivization of not just the modes of production, but all the conditions that produce both inequality and unfreedom for the individual. Thus Marx's appreciation of the *social* as the domain which has to be revolutionized, which has to be transformed to produce something other than libertarian formulations of freedom. Foucault sounds the same theme. It is the powers that circulate through the social—whether they are for Marx 'capital', or for Foucault 'discipline' or other forms of 'biopower'—that have to be transformed in order to produce something other than freedom *from* one another, freedom *from* the state, or freedom from something that makes you miserable. It is Marx's notion of freedom *with others* that is compelling. Of course, Marx gets this from Aristotle, but he does a lot to it, and Rousseau also develops this in quite beautiful, if finally limited, ways. If you were to ask me what God I believed in in political philosophy, it would be the notion that there is no such thing as individual freedom, that human freedom is finally, always a project of making a world with others. This 'truth' expresses, in Marxist terms, our species-nature, in Aristotelian terms our distinct life-form—that is why Aristotle calls the polis 'natural' to man. It is also a Spinozist theme. You can, of course, get a limited form of liberty through liberal formulations of freedom, but because of our interdependence and relationality, not only in labour, but in a whole other set of media, we can't find freedom against one another—it finally will be with. I think this is the altar at which I still intellectually worship.

CC: Would you say that a paradox that flows from that faith is then how to actually achieve that freedom with others while taking into account the force and the power of difference? How to cope with the inevitable drive toward some form of individuation or recognition of the integrity of self through difference? Would you say that this is an ongoing agitation in mapping the project of freedom with others?

WB: Is it a problematic of difference? Absolutely. To return again to Marx, I think he made it too simple, since the whole project of freedom with others was allowed to come to rest in labour, rather than in what we have come to understand as a multiplicity of other activities where difference actually has a more persistent rather than resolvable quality. That is the burr under the saddle of the project. On the other hand, I don't think that difference stymies or overthrows it. Difference complicates it. The project of freedom with others means not only beginning to look to some sort of sharing of power or collective engagement with the powers that condition our lives, but requires reckoning with the unknowable, the enigmatic, the uncomfortable, without then ceding to a radical libertarian 'let us all go off with our differences' as if they were natural and ahistorical. This requires that we deal with differences not simply as social phenomena but as a domain of subjectivity and psyche, a domain much political and social theory has only recently been willing to approach.

JD: How would you say that this relates to the history and horizon of humanism? The theme of freedom is crucial to the theme of humanism, to the humanization of economic relations, the humanization of justice, institutions, etc. Critiques of 'subjectification' often announce themselves as anti-humanistic, if not radically so.

WB: I would have answered this question very differently five years ago. I would have gone straight for the critique of humanism. I would answer differently now. What happened for me in thinking about the critiques of humanism that many of us have now been steeped in for a couple of decades is finding ways of defundamentalizing and de-essentializing both every political concept and the 'human being' or the human subject itself, while still permitting ourselves attachments to political projects that require at certain times provisional descriptions of certain things as dominating or more emancipatory. Foucault offers a very interesting model here in his formulation of freedom as a practice rather than an achievement or institutional guarantee. I do think that it is possible to simultaneously be mindful of what is wrong with the history and tradition of humanism, both conceptually and practically, and at the same time, to rescue (rather than recuperate) from the humanist project a concern with affirming possibilities other than the ones that we have today, naming certain things as emancipatory in a very provisional fashion. So the question is, how is one able to remain attached to whatever political aims we might have, while giving those attachments a contingent, partial character, and recognizing that the very human beings at stake in these projects, who are either injured or potentially emancipated by those projects, might be seen differently, might be grasped differently, might be articulated differently. And that's a difficult project, but I think it's the one that we are stuck with.

CC: In your introduction to *States of Injury*, you question where the radicality lies within recent attempts to formulate radical democratic theoretical frameworks, citing as examples theorists such as Chantal Mouffe and Ernesto Laclau.² These theorists have clearly moved away from a notion of radical politics as that of pursuing revolution—a total transformation of society in the Jacobin sense. Rather, they are seeking to generate a politics which prevents a determinate crystallisation of power within democracies, as well as attachments to the sorts of settled emancipatory projects you were just talking about. They claim that the radical dimension lies in the indeterminacy intrinsic to the logic of democracy and the hegemonic project they seem to remain committed to. I am very interested in your scepticism about the radicality of their project. Part of the difficulty is in identifying just what constitutes a radical politics today. Can you give us some indication of what the term ‘radical’ means to you? Do you still think the Left should be aiming at a complete transformation of the political?

WB: This is a really complex question. First, a tiny correction. I was not faulting Laclau and Mouffe for backing away from a revolutionary project. I think it is impossible to remain sanely attached to something called ‘revolution’ in this particular era. We had those attachments in other centuries, and we are headed toward other forms of political change now. Rather, my concern was precisely the one we were talking about at the beginning of this interview, what I take to be the foregrounding of equality and the backgrounding of freedom in their project. But let’s leave this quarrel aside. At the heart of your question is whether the left should be aiming at something like the transformation of the social, and we might specify that more and ask, ‘should the replacement of capitalism be on the agenda?’ And the other question is one that might be a little separate—what do we mean when we use the term ‘radical’ today?

Let me begin with the second question first. As is well known, radical comes from the Latin *radix*, suggesting that a radical theory or politics aims to grasp the root of something—a problem, a suffering, a social order. Of course, we ‘posties’ no longer believe in “roots”... or do we? Today ‘radical’ is used in all kinds of different ways. We talk about the ‘radical right’, by which we mean not that they are getting to the ‘root’, but rather that they are extreme. People talk all the time about ‘radical certainty’, ‘radical indeterminacy’, and so on, which I think is an effort to find a grammar that underlines the noun that ‘radical’ is modifying. But its use in my work has been to distinguish political and intellectual practices that orbit within the liberal political lexicon from those that find a little bit of room at the margins or even slightly outside of that lexicon. Why? While liberalism has its many virtues, one that it doesn’t have is opening its hand about power. One of the deep characteristics of liberalism is to lead us to imagine that, once the social contract is in place, the problem of power has been settled. This is the most basic conceit of the social contract: if, in the beginning, there is nothing but power—the social is the war of all against all, of every power against every other power—once we get the social contract up and going, we’ve settled the problem of power. And so we move on to other political problems: justice, how much equality versus how much freedom, how much religion versus how much tolerance, how much this, how much that, but power is not the problem. But in fact what we know from most—now I’ll use the

word—‘radical’ critics of liberalism, is that there are powers circulating like mad in liberal orders, all kinds of powers, whether you look through the lenses of Deleuze or Foucault, or the Marxist Critical Theory tradition, or left psychoanalytic social thought. What liberalism does is essentially give us a grammar of politics that has very little power in it. Power is not at stake except at the level of the state, and usually at the level of the state’s actions towards other states. So for me the usefulness of the term ‘radical’ has been in part to mark a form of critique that brings out or brings into articulation the very powers that are buried by liberalism. Here, ‘radical’ is distinguished from ‘liberal’ as a theoretical heuristic.

The second function of the term has been more descriptive and functions to differentiate liberal democracy from other kinds of democracy. To the extent that liberalism has monopolized the meaning of democracy (and worse, to the extent that capitalism has monopolized the meaning of democracy), it is important to be able to articulate the virtues of democracy apart from its liberal-democratic form. Radical democracy marks this distinction; it takes democracy back from its hijacking by liberalism and capitalism. Radical democracy doesn’t entail any particular governance form but emphasizes power sharing among the *demos*. It articulates the possibility of a governance that is not achieved purely through representation, through surrendering the power to legislate to representatives. It breaks the equation of democracy with license—individual liberty—and instead makes sharing power fundamental. In this way, it also makes oxymoronic our ‘managed’ democracy or ‘bought’ democracies. These are a few features. So here we return to the notion of radical as extreme at the same time we are still using radical to differentiate from liberal. Radical democracy is extreme democracy, extreme power to the *demos*, as opposed to what we get in liberal democracy.

Now to your first question: Should we, as a left, be aiming at revolutionizing the social and the political by continuing to commit ourselves to the abolition or vanquishing or replacement of capital and capitalism? At this point, I have to say, on the one hand, I don’t think it is possible to really imagine a form of substantive political freedom, self governance and radical democracy without that. On the other hand, we had better get busy doing that imagining, since, in the very near future, we are neither looking at the overthrow of capital, nor at its collapse from within. Capital is a constantly morphing form. It is extraordinarily powerful. It keeps inventing new ways to survive and thrive, to refigure the world in its image, to cannibalize more of life, to dampen down resistance. What do we do with this problem—that few progressive values can be realized within any form of capital but capital is more powerful and obdurate than ever?

CC: You see ‘radical philosophy’ as trying to challenge the dominance of liberalism, hence your critique of Laclau and Mouffe, particularly Mouffe, is obvious. Just how can Mouffe propose a radical politics when she remains so caught up in a form of expansive but liberal-political discourse? Perhaps Habermas and Balibar fall into the same trap?

WB: What is striking for me about Laclau, Mouffe, Balibar, even Habermas, is that these are all thinkers who are in some form of reaction to their former Marxism and—not quite the same thing—to post-communism. They are serious, interesting, left intellectuals. How much

they are responding to what they take to be the fundamentalism of their own Marxism, and how much they are responding still to the failure of state socialism is difficult to sort out. I completely agree with you that Chantal Mouffe has moved, even from *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, more and more to a liberal welfare-statism that is reconciled to both capitalism and liberalism. It is not that liberal welfare democracy isn't better than what covers ninety per cent of the earth, I'm not against it. But if her defence at this point is that welfare statism is the only real, practical thing, I don't think it's anything more real or practical than anything else at this point. Welfare statism is not the model anymore. Historically, it has been eclipsed. So the putative pragmatics of her position are maybe a little overdrawn.

JD: The place of a 'left melancholia' is an exceptional theme of your work. Yet every melancholic confuses the unknowability of the future with the apparent nothingness of the present, a nothing that can be thought otherwise as a 'not-yet', the space of a potentiality. Our mourning, then, is perhaps not first of all the recursive experience of loss, but a symptom of being overwhelmed by a responsibility: for one's own finitude, and for the acknowledgment that finitude is the condition of the aspiration for change. Nothing is stable. A 'left melancholia' can then be thought without negativity, as the natality of a politics to-come.

The challenges to democracy, from within and without, signify what is irreducible to democracy: that, as a politics, it is a shared responsibility, and a responsibility for the possibility of the political itself. It bears upon the decisions we engage in our own time and place. If, today, we can identify the horizon of political meaning to be defined by the word 'globalization', I would argue that a left political agenda should be precisely focussed upon this horizon. It is true—the great exigency of communist and social-democratic thought was always the globalization or internationalization of a revolutionary program. Yet we no longer subscribe to this desire, can no longer disavow its excesses and horrors. How can a 'left', if such a word should at all be retained—think of positioning itself in rapport to globalization? This would demand more than memorializing the errors of history, and a critical vigilance against a 'mourning' that amounts to self-protection. It means, in particular, finding democratic and economic libertarian norms beyond or without the form of the nation-state. If the state is on the way out, if the nation will not endure, then what structures will a progressive politics need to identify—and perhaps create—in order to set a political agenda? And another question as a supplement. What can be said of the mourning—or self-hatred—traced in the aggressivity of the neo-conservative or neo-liberal adventure of globalization?

WB: I think that there are some smart thinkers who are trying to make sense politically of the very question that you are asking in regard to the battle in Seattle, the WTO protests, and other episodes in the struggle against globalized capital and neo-liberalism, or for what Hardt and Negri have felicitously given us the name 'Empire'. What I would say is that the most politically difficult thing for us to do now is to simultaneously work in a national and a post-national way. I don't think that we are through with national politics. There are certain forms of local and national political struggles that are inflected both by the historical and cultural specificity of nations, and also by the political institutions that still remain salient in

the nation. You and I happen to live in national regimes where those struggles are necessary, and we are very conscious of them. At the same time, we cannot only be thinking and working nationally for the very reasons that you just laid out—because of global configurations of economic, social and political power, the waning of the nation-state, the very nature of transnational flows of power. But I don't think that it makes sense to talk about 'working globally'. I don't think that any of us can see from all angles of the globe in a way that would make sense of 'global activism'. I find that an unreliable and suspect term. However I do think that something like working the tension between national and post-national projects is a way of recognizing our being in an interregnum, where we are still in both, where power still traverses both kinds of circuits.

Now that leads to a problem that you mentioned at the beginning of your question that I want to configure a little differently, the question of mourning, melancholia, and aggression. I wonder what's going to happen when there is real reckoning with the decline of the nation-state—talk about a mourning project, and not just for the right, and not just for the nationalists. How many of us are really prepared to surrender national identity? What I'm struck by when I read about people working on European transnationalism is that they are talking about people giving up not just their national political attachments, but their cultural, social and economic ones, and the containers that nation-states offer for ways of life, for forms of identity and identification, for modalities of social and civic relations, and familiarity with political institutions. This entails a tectonic shift in political subjectivity, identity, and orientation for most people. And to arrive at that shift, outside of a melancholic or aggressive frame, mourning is necessary. Aggression is what emerges in the space of unmourned losses. It is probably right to see a good deal of neo-conservatism engaged in that kind of aggression and that effort of recuperation. But the right has no monopoly here. It would be a fabulous left project to develop a productive way of coming to terms with what we are all losing, and with what must be put into play as the affirmative prospects of those losses, or the affirmation that comes from that loss. What is allowed to live when something else dies? What is opened as a possibility when something that has claimed us is finally put to rest? I think that this is a very complex project, one that will involve a conjuncture of smart psychoanalytic talk and smart political theoretical talk translated together into a public idiom.

TR: The question of how to transform the left and the mourning of the left in relation to liberal democracy into a positive political project to come is fundamental. What has been lost is not just, to use the analogy, a partner, a loved one who formed part of our identity. It's more like the loss of a life companion who empowered us and gave us a direction into the future. That has been lost. It seems to me that the problem of the left at the moment is like the problem of the person who has lost the one who gave them a future, has lost that sense of future and has to learn how to love again. How does the left learn to love again, to rediscover another future?

WB: That's a really beautiful question. Let's just explore it together for a second. Losing a

loved one is not (or is only very rarely) like losing something that gave your whole life its trajectory, meaning, and above all else, its futurity. One can at least try to persuade someone who has lost a loved one that she still has a subjectivity of her own, that there are relational possibilities elsewhere. Yet for us on the left, to have lost, on the one hand, the very prospect of replacing capitalism with another social and economic form—if we really believe our critiques of capitalism are right, if we really do believe capitalism is fundamentally without the prospect for either equality or freedom for human beings—that is some loss. On the other hand—as I argued in “Neo-Liberalism and the End of Liberal Democracy”³—if we are also losing liberal democracy to neo-liberal political rationality, that’s yet another kind of loss. It may not mean the same kind of devastation for the left. It’s more like the loss of the hated but needed father. Whereas the former is the loss of the beloved one. Together those losses mean we are one disoriented melancholy left. Is your suggestion that ‘we need to learn to love again’ the limit of the problem? What could possibly replace both the object of critique that the left as we have known it over the last several centuries has counted on, and the object of aspiration, the futurity that the left has counted on? We have to begin by saying, if we emerge from it, we are not ‘the left’. That identity is not the self-same left, it is some other thing. This is what some people working in the anti-globalization movement are trying to say. That they are some other thing. What I haven’t spied there yet—and this is not a critique, this is partly a willingness to say that I haven’t seen it, and I might not even recognize it if I do see it—what I haven’t spied there yet is a vision that in any way replaces the alternative that communism or socialism held out. It is in the slogan that ‘another world is possible’, but I don’t know what that other world is, and not I’m sure that people who are uttering the slogan know either. Yes. We have to learn to love again. We also have to recognize that the ‘we’, the ‘I’, who will be doing that loving, if it is still committed, if there is some continuity in the cares that it has for a humanity that is in some way governing itself, as opposed to being run by a power larger than itself, the ‘we’ that loves again will be a different ‘we’ than the one we are.

This is a limit for me. I can continue to do the critical work to try to reveal the powers that I think are giving shape to our world now, but I don’t feel that I have the imagination or the sufficiently non-melancholic left-temperament to be able to envisage another set of possibilities.

TR: Marx said that sometimes the theorist has to stand back and let history unfold a few more steps, so to learn from it. We need to wait a bit.

WB: And it may be that—I say this as I look around the table at you—it may be that a younger generation, not so weaned on those particular objects of critique and objects of desire, is where that can emerge.

Melancholy has quite a grip. My work on melancholy is so left melancholic.... (Laughs) Maybe I’m trying to cure it homeopathically.

TR: I’m wondering how you might draw connections in your analysis between neo-liberal

rationality and post-industrial economics. Hardt and Negri have a political critique which is, in key respects, very similar to your own: neo-liberalism involves the withdrawal of the state from its traditional public sector obligations (welfare, mediation in social conflicts); this is concomitant with the establishment of a new regime of governmentality that fosters the virtues of proactive entrepreneurship and collective innovation across a politically disenfranchised citizenry. Yet Hardt and Negri also emphasise how neo-liberalism has emerged within a complex, reciprocal relation to post-industrial economics. From out of this nexus of political and economic trajectories, they produce the hypothesis of a 'new proletariat'—the 'socialized worker' (or 'post-industrial worker')—and the promise of the democracy of the multitude. Recent events (from Seattle 1999 to the global anti-war protests of February-March 2003) have shown how new technologies enable the citizenry of neo-liberal societies to increasingly bypass the realm of public political representation to comprise immanent, virtual collectives at the global level, and masses on the street level. This seems to represent a major leap in the evolution of global democratic activity; it has already borne some remarkable successes. I'm interested in your point of view on Hardt and Negri's conjunction of neo-liberalism, post-industrialism and the democracy of the multitude. Do you allow that translational constellations constitute viable, alternative sources of democratic expression? How might these developments positively intersect with national political-democratic systems? Is the strategy to reinvigorate the ailing body of liberal democracy, or does the politics of the multitude suggest other options?

WB: Earlier we were talking about engaging both a transnational political movement and political voice, and at the same time, addressing nation-states, and even addressing nation-states in terms of citizens making very particular important demands. A good example of this are the ways in which in the current war on Iraq citizens in the nations of the so-called 'coalition of the willing' have had to address their outrage to their states, and at the same time, have appropriately and effectively engaged in an international protest against the larger forms of neo-liberal political rationality. We have to be working on both fronts. Hardt and Negri seem to me to emphasize more of that transnational aspect in part because of their own conviction, theoretically arrived at, that sovereignty is simply the enemy. Whether that is national sovereignty or the sovereignty they believe is taking the form of Empire. So as I understand Hardt and Negri, for the multitude to regroup in a national or nationalistic form, for popular protest to take a national form, is already to constitute or participate in a problematic of sovereignty that they are against. (However, I bet if you pressed them, the last thing in the world they would say is that they didn't want us addressing our states as citizens of those states, strategically to say 'not in our name'). This is one place where there is a difference in our perspectives.

We are at this very interesting world-historical juncture where transnational movements also need to be attuned to the importance of dealing with state power. Conversely, national movements need to be attuned to ways to connect themselves with a transnationalism, and with transnational flows of capital, labour, migration and wars. Our challenge today is not to replace one with the other, and not abolish one in favour of the other, but to make each

attuned to the importance of the other. I'm not entirely against trying to make claims on liberal democracy that call it to heel, that invoke, for example, rights for detainees, asylum-seekers, and for other kinds of marginalized citizens and non-citizens. I do think that there are ways of shaming liberal democracy with liberal democratic principles, demands, and claims. What I think we should avoid—what is a kind of dead-end—is the assumption that if only we could recover the proper juridicism of a true liberal democracy we will be back on the path of justice: that is to ignore that that juridicism was always only a part of the story. More importantly, it is to ignore the extent to which that juridicism was so intimately bound up with the state, with capitalism, and by a variety of things that tacticalize liberal-democratic juridicism. It seems to me that this is one of the brilliant offerings of Foucault's formulation of governmentality: that the law can be tacticalized by other forms of power. When you are upholding the law or addressing the law, you are actually enmeshed in a form of power that has been instrumentalized and tacticalized by something else, by capital, by biopower, or disciplinary power. We need to be non-naive about that as we attempt to bring liberal-democracy to the bar of its own principles.

CC: Throughout much of your work, particularly in *Politics out of History*, you set about debunking the fiction of the liberal sovereign subject.⁴ This critique, combined with that in your paper "Neo-liberalism and the End of Liberal Democracy"⁵ of the economic calculations reducing all elements of human life to rational transactions, provide timely and incredibly useful tools for thinking through what is problematic about a new direction in Australian Aboriginal welfare 'reform'—Shared Responsibility Agreements (SRA's). I'll briefly give you some background.

'Practical reconciliation' is being hailed by the Federal Government as a new era in Indigenous affairs. 'Shared Responsibility Agreements' are just one product resulting from this new direction in policy and welfare reform. Rather than relying solely on uniform national welfare policies for Indigenous peoples, the idea is that, in return for certain levels of cooperation, the state will provide specific services required by communities on a case by case basis. The media recently had a field day with one such 'agreement' struck with the remote Western Australian community of Mulan, which tied the state provision of a petrol bowser to—among other things, the cleaning of children's faces twice a day. The aim is to reduce the extremely high incidence of fly-spread eye-diseases such as trachoma. Other agreements have tied the use of the community swimming pools to school attendance.⁶

These agreements have been sold to the Australian public and Indigenous communities in terms of handing back to indigenous people control over their own affairs, appropriating the discourse of Indigenous self-determination.⁷ Concerns about the claims of 'shared responsibility' and the contractual nature of these agreements have been raised by some Indigenous communities, and within the health, legal and social policy literature.⁸ Among these concerns is the underlying assumption that Indigenous communities have equal bargaining power with the Government and that they can make these economic calculations about what they stand to gain from SRA's. As a policy debate paper in the *Medical Journal of Australia* recently pointed out, it is insulting to tie conditions to the provision of services

which all other Australians take for granted as basic fundamental rights.

Your critique of the sovereign subject obviously comes into its own here, however it also got me thinking about the anxieties this critique might create, particularly for those who have historically been denied sovereignty, or for whom sovereignty has never been fully recognized or exercised. For example, such a project would seem to sit in direct opposition to important gains Indigenous groups have made in lobbying for self-determination; not in the sense of a separatist government, but in terms of personal and political autonomy. Also, recognizing the constructedness of the notion of the fully accountable sovereign subject and the constraints around individual agency, could potentially play into the hands of those invested in the stereotype of Indigenous people as incapable of managing their own affairs because of their Aboriginality. The discourse of Indigenous self-determination has played a central role in resisting such claims in Australia. Is it possible to reconcile, at least recognize the spirit of this notion of self-determination with the myth of the sovereign subject? How can Indigenous Australians ever hope to leave behind their ‘wounded attachments’ that you discuss in *States of Injury*, given this threat to the strategy of self-determination and the potential for autonomy?

WB: Just to get this right—I want to know what you are doing with ‘wounded attachments’ here. If you are suggesting that Indigenous Australians are, among other things, dealing with the wound of being violently excluded and subordinated by white settlers, by continued maltreatment and racism, and at the same time are subjected to neo-liberal economic and social management, what you’ve nicely put together are two things I’ve not put together in my own work. That is the intersection between neo-liberal social management of subordinated populations, and wounded attachments as a form of identity production. When I wrote “Wounded Attachments” (in *States of Injury*) I did not have my eye on neo-liberalism. I still had my eye on disciplinary power. I was still thinking entirely through the framework of the convergence of subordination and exclusion that comes out of histories of racism, sexism, homophobia, etc, and the contemporary disciplinary production of those identities. You have updated that work by looking at the ways in which the production and reproduction of identities that take the form of a wounded attachment is reinscribed by neo-liberal management. It’s a devastating formulation.

CC: Upon hearing about these SRAs I immediately found your critique of the sovereign subject so powerful, and upon reading “Wounded Attachments,” I was also immediately struck and seduced by the critique of the disciplinary, governmental force, the paralysing effect of these wounded attachments. But I found that I couldn’t hold onto both critiques when wanting to pull apart these SRAs.

WB: If you allow both critiques to operate as one, you see the extent to which on the one hand, the demand in these SRAs is for a recognizable sovereign subjectivity, but on the other, the demand in these agreements is for a completely malleable, submissive subject who is willing to remake itself in and through the practices required by the state. These practices are very

clearly within a certain model of the human: a white Australian subject, associated family practices, health practices, kinship relations and all of the rest of it. We have a version of this in the US, both in the treatment of native Americans, but also more generally in our welfare operations: if you're clean, if you don't have sex, if you appear to somehow simultaneously hold a full time job and be a full time mother and a bunch of other impossible things, only then do you get some minimum income benefit and some minimum support from the state for housing and child-care.

It seems to me that what you have illuminated quite brilliantly is the importance of recognising that the critique of the sovereign subject is something we need to undertake because that sovereign subject never really is sovereign. The sovereign subject is a production of, in a case like this, a very harsh form of governmentality, where there is no pretence of the subject being sovereign. There is instead the practice of making a subject whose sovereignty is granted on the condition that it is given up, not practiced; that there isn't the angry, indignant refusal that says 'to hell with you and your money and your deals, I will go on being the person or member of the community that I want to be, I will not be manipulated or bought or governed in that way'. It is actually the site of a kind of sovereign subject that this practice of governmentality means to mow down, to erase.

This reminds us that there is no such thing as 'the sovereign subject'. There is always a particular configuration of it, and governmentality is the place where that configuration is articulated in very specific ways, along lines of race, gender, sexuality, class, subculture, and nationality, and religion, and so forth. That's how I think the critiques come together, in the recognition that the so-called production of the sovereign subject is actually the production of a very specified subject whose sovereignty is only recognized when it gratifies or responds to those specifications. 'Sovereignty' is then internally deconstructed.

CT: Throughout much of your work, you interpret the relationship between intellectual and political life as one of 'productive tension'.⁹ You might say that the purpose of theory is to allow us to critically apprehend the difficulties and the limits of political life in the present, and to open up possibilities for transformation. The task of politics, on the other hand, is to make a bid for hegemony that by its very nature seeks to fix the terms of political discourse. I was wondering whether you might comment on some of the productive elements in the interface between theory and politics. I am also interested in how this productive tension is undercut when intellectual life becomes subject to political and economic considerations and what the implication are.

WB: I want to credit Stuart Hall here. He really is the person who has made clear for so many of us that while it would be foolish ever to say that theory can be or is unpolitical, or that there is ever an untheoretical form of politics, it is useful to have a grammar that offers us some kind of interval between theory and politics. If all one does by thinking theoretically is articulate a political demand, a good deal of the exciting, important, and productive work that theory can do simply does not get done. That is to say, the work of theory to open things up, to ask questions, to problematize, to do that with uncertainty, with a stutter, with lack

of a clear trajectory, is sacrificed to the political demand, to the presumption that we know exactly where theory is going, what it's going to do for us. Equally as problematic are political practices that try to honour everything we've learned in a theory class. The left can particularly get caught up in this. Especially for those of us who have learned so much and found so much that is fecund in post-foundationalist and post-structuralist deconstructive work or theory, or psychoanalytic work, to try to get all that into a political bid for power...the bid for power is a good deal of what political work is. That doesn't make the theory irrelevant. It only means that one shifts into a different modality with a different set of foci, and with a different set of expectations. This doesn't mean that one absolutely stops thinking or being theoretical in political life. I'm sure all of us have marched in demonstrations, torn down barricades, made protests, written petitions, signed petitions, where our heads are swimming with theoretical questions, where we are in deep discussion with one another about the kinds of significations that we make, about how something we are doing is read, slogans we might cringe at, formulations we might want to rework. Theory is enormously important in producing and inventing exciting and new modalities in left politics, but I do think what has been useful in my own political work as well as theoretical work is to recognize the importance of the 'interval'. And I'll just call it an interval. I do not want to call it an opposition, I don't want to formulate it as a dichotomy, I don't want to formulate it as a dialectic. I just want it to be an interval. All that means is that one allow for a little space and a little difference. That is as important in the classroom as it is in one's research, as it is on the street. Looking for the possibility, leaving the space for that interval, literally makes life itself for both theory and politics.

CT: I would be interested in hearing you reflect upon some of your political work as well.

WB: For a longtime I was involved in reproductive freedom and reproductive rights politics. I feel what feminist theory and theory more generally helped reveal was that in the clamour for the right to abortion as the fulcrum of women's rights we were missing out on the extent to which reproductive freedom takes different forms for different populations. The constraints on reproductive freedom are different for different classes, castes, races, geographical locations and sexualities. The right to be able have children, to bear children, to keep one's custody of children, to raise children that are not one's own, to have children with gay or lesbian partners, to not have forced sterilization—you can ask 'what's theoretical about that, these are all empirical problems'. But in fact, what needed to shift for feminist reproductive politics in the 70s and 80s was a focus on a certain class and experience of constraint. This meant expanding and troubling the category of women, of reproduction, of reproductive labour. It meant questioning whether reproduction was only an issue of heterosexual intercourse or whether it had other possible determinants, whether reproduction was entirely about pregnancy and gestation or whether it referred to a whole range of activities bearing on having and raising children. This meant changing our understanding of kinship and 'nature', of the relationship between reproduction and the state, the economy, the first and the third worlds, racialization, colonialization, heteronormativity, and more. This required a tonne

of theory, you couldn't have gotten there empirically.

You cannot be stuffing everything about the destabilization of gender and reproduction into every political struggle at every moment, but theory does inform how you frame issues. An example here is the link between rights to queer parenting and the increasing pressure on recipients of welfare in the US to be in proper and recognized marriages, where there is pressure particularly on women to stay in unhappy marriages, even abusive ones, in order to continue to have access to welfare benefits. Being able to link those kinds of struggles, for me at least, has required understanding theoretically what the norms and regulatory stakes are not in simply managing reproduction but gender, sexuality, race and class. This in turn allows us to figure out how to make political coalitions among groups that otherwise would not instantly fit together—like African-American 'welfare mothers' and middle class 'gay-boys' in San Francisco who want to adopt a couple of kids. Those coalitions are not always easy to make, but for those of us who care about challenging the heteronormativity and the misogyny and the regulation of race and class that is at stake in American reproductive politics, it is the theoretical work that has been done to feed those alliances that allows us to even think of such coalitions.

JD: From what space do we address something called 'the political'? When we, as academics, philosophers, critical intellectuals, etc, address the political, we take as our object the place of 'society' or the state as a whole, the concept of the nation, internationalism, the structures of economy and political rationality, etc. We address the exigencies of democracy and justice as the exceptional themes from which any particular politics may be derived. We situate limits, conditions of possibility, points of dissension. We call for new ways of thinking, and new 'practices' that respond to the break-up of metaphysical and traditional comforts. Yet the burden of our political insight remains decidedly ex-centric, bearing upon a world 'out there'. The frustration of intellectuals and activists becomes all the more acute when our political sensitivity passes without recognition. The singular starting point for a 'new politics' would be the very space that most critical thinkers occupy—the university. Derrida's thinking of sovereignty and academic autonomy is one of the rare moments where this question emerges in its own right. In Australian universities today, we witness the stupefying development of management culture, the rhetoric of the 'performance review', all in the name of 'accountability'. Demanded by a conservative Government employing various regimes of industrial blackmail (threats to funding, etc), this development is almost universally held in contempt. And academic culture (particularly in regard to 'continental philosophy') is also uninspiring—for the most part, it appears content to be a culture of import and exposition.

What kinds of changes can and need take place in the university? Given so much critical work on the formation of the human sciences, what can be said about an 'ethics of the humanities' that explicitly engages with its institutionality? Where is the analysis of the academy—its hierarchies, insiders and outsiders, etc, the routine exploitation of graduates, the disdain for teaching, the division between the 'academic' and the 'administrative' (and the forms of subjectification and desubjectification that take place across this boundary)? Why

do we not analyse our own 'practices' and 'strategies' when calling for a new politics? Why is there a 'Birth of the Clinic' and not a 'Birth of the Department'? As Nietzsche noted, and as you repeat in *Politics Out of History*, "We are unknown to ourselves, we men of knowledge... we have not sought ourselves."¹⁰

WB: The increasing privatization and the investment of corporate money in universities is taking very dramatic shape in the US. My department of Political Science was just literally bought. We renamed ourselves. We are now the Colonel John and Louise Travers Department of Political Science. And all for a mere twelve million bucks, which is quite a bit of money for a single department. But it could have been the Exxon Department of Political Science. What if it had been the John Ashcroft Department of Political Science? Worryingly, this has been happening in the sciences for a long time, where whole departments of biochemistry turn out to be heavily funded by pharmaceuticals. I'm sure that you have similar controversies here. The second issue you've raised concerns political schemes to put universities under more severe forms of management, regulation and monitoring to calculate our every product, the counting of productivity quotas and so forth. These two things combine, in my view, with an odd moment in academic life—which is not altogether separate from these two—which is an extraordinary complacency about the professional culture of academia on the part of many of my colleagues. There is always a left that is critical of the norms of the discipline, but most of my colleagues don't have much of an objection either to the way the university is run or even to the way their disciplines are run, what the norms and the products of their disciplines are. And then there is the other thing that you mentioned, which is the stratification of labour—not just the exploitation of graduate students but also something that happens more and more in the United States, which is the use of itinerant (casual) labour for faculty. So, more and more exploitation all the way down. And, over the last twenty years, there have been big rounds of union busting for clerical and other service workers in the university, people who used to be relatively protected, or at least modestly buffered.

So I guess there is a set of questions here. There is a question of the effectiveness of political organizing in universities that would resist these forces. There is also a question about whether for many of us this feels appropriate—should we be politically organizing in the university or should we be organizing somewhere else that is perhaps more important? Is the university politically important? Yes. At the same time, we don't want to become so concerned with university conditions, the conditions of our own work and the nature of our own environment, that these come to stand for the political world. Universities are both coterminous with the rest of the political economy and distinct. So I guess the one caution I would register is that even though there is a tremendous amount that should and ought to be addressed politically in universities, we ought to be careful about engaging in a left version of Ivory Towerism.

Finally, it seems to me that universities and colleges over the last thousand years have always been awful and wonderful places. Academic conditions through most of pre- and early modernity were hardly fecund for either creative thinking or politically uncensored work. Nor have universities ever been egalitarian. So it is probably important to remember that,

while there are many aspects of the current configurations of power and political economy constructing universities worthy of our intellectual analysis and political opposition, on the other hand it is also possible to do creative and exciting intellectual work even in a relatively dreadful setting.

The history of the university has never been one of radical freedom or egalitarianism, non-exploitation, non-hierarchy, or anything like that. *Au contraire*. Remembering this might allow us to seize the possibilities we do have, as teachers who still can say pretty much what we want in the classroom, teach pretty much the texts that we think ought to be taught, write pretty much the books that we think ought to be written. It's worth remembering this at the same time as we do critical political work on the deadening, politically exploitative, and increasingly managerial characteristics of the university.

JD: We would like to end on the theme of this issue, 'democratic futures'. Calls for democracy today come from various quarters—national, subnational and supranational. Yet, as the current attempt to impose democracy at gunpoint in the Middle East bears out, a functional democracy requires more than just the formal presence of institutions. It requires a liberated citizenry inspired by the dream of democratic futures.

If the call for democracy is traversed by dynamics of hope and becoming, how well are these served by our current political and economic institutions? What might be the spark that reignites the passion for the event of democracy? In particular, the question of the temporal dimension of the democratic promise is so provocative. It is not that this promise is addressed to a future; it is also a temporalization: in calling for such a future, one is already participating in it. This would be to ask of the time of the political, an issue which you have addressed. But here in that text you decry a politics trapped by responding to events. The risk here lies in one's capture by the givenness of the present, the need, that is, to locate the proper angle of encounter. It is the aim of this journal (*Contretemps*) to think precisely out of events in order to promote critical thinking on what happens rather than a reliance on commentary, the circulation of texts, a culture of exposition. Thought responds to the event with another event, with something new. To respond to the time of politics is as much to engage a politics of time, which would mean to think the sharing of time, of what we can say and how we can say it, and that inspires a critical response. Derrida offers several modulations of this where he says: "What there is to give, uniquely, would be called time."¹² It's always our time that we give. What do we need to give now so that there may be democratic futures, which is a different question from asking how do I achieve a democratic future, which is a question of goal and desire, an economy of means and ends, the demand for recognition, the demand that the future sustain the shape that an I or we has already decided upon?

WB: I want to go back to this question: what do we need to give now in order that there may be democratic futures? It seems to me that in some ways our whole conversation has had as a leitmotif the question of not only what we need to give but what we need to give up. We've been talking about a recognition that the left has been invested in one kind of democratic future and is disoriented by the loss of the possibility of that future—communism, socialism...

It has also been invested to some degree in the idea of the autonomy of the political, the possibility of sovereignty. These are the handholds that we may have to let go of in order to think what the composition of a democratic future would or might be, and to read signals of this in the present. We talked about this earlier today: what components of democratic futures might there already be in certain kinds of responses to globalization and strong states? So that there might be democratic futures, we might have to give up the attachment to one set of meanings or one set of definitions of democratic futures and become open to others. That probably means being willing to suffer an even more radical disorientation than many of us already suffer, an even more radical vertigo than some of us are suffering now. We need to fuse certain kinds of projects that hitherto we have been invested in keeping apart or pure of one another. What I have in mind here, for example, is a willingness to link what many of us have learned from recent projects of decolonialization and postcolonial justice projects with projects in other settings that we wouldn't call postcolonial. Or to link those projects that we think of as distinctly identity bound—queer or feminist or anti-racist projects—with democracy projects that imagine themselves to be post-identity or even anti-identity. That means linking projects that hew still to a certain kind of universalism or even humanism—allowing those to enter into a kind of productive fusion with those that deeply reject such things. And I'm not talking about simply bringing together intellectual and political enemies on the left. Rather, what 'we might need to give now' would be something like a giving up of certain investments, not only in what we imagine the left must be for, but also what we imagine we must keep separate or oppositional.

What I'm talking about is recovering a certain openness that I actually associate with the foundations of radicalism or leftism. This openness often collapses soon after the left or a radical justice project attaches itself to a certain vision, to a certain end or to a certain practice. What we might need to give now, or what we might need to inhabit now, is that founding openness to possibility, to seeing the world differently, to seeing power differently, to seeing the future differently. This involves a brave and humble intellectual and political openness. It also means refusing the dichotomy between the local and the global, the national and the transnational, the intellectual and the practical... I actually think that it's the only way through or out of the melancholy that has to do with the lost objects and attachments of the left and the despair for the possibility of change. I think that the only way out of that kind of melancholy and that kind of despair is not by darting towards yet another answer but by opening up to a different reading of the present, a different reading of our attachments and possibilities.

Here is where Foucault's notion of genealogy is so important. It is a way of refiguring the present through a past, telling the present's story differently. This democratic future that we're after is actually a future that we will only be able to make by opening the present differently. I think that many of us experience the present as terribly closed—not just closed because certain options have been foreclosed, but also closed because of certain stoppages in progressive history. I think the opening that we have to cultivate is a kind of affective and intellectual opening to political possibility that would help us read the present differently.

Notes

1. Wendy Brown, *States of Injury* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1995) 7.
2. Brown, *States of Injury* 57.
3. Wendy Brown, "Neo-liberalism and the End of Liberal Democracy," *Theory and Event* 7:1, (2003).
4. Wendy Brown, *Politics out of History* (Princeton, Princeton UP: 2001).
5. Brown, "Neo-liberalism and the End of Liberal Democracy."
6. Mark Coultan and Mark Metherell, "A new deal for indigenous Australia," *Sydney Morning Herald*, 11 December (2004).
7. For detailed information regarding Shared Responsibility Agreements, see the *Office of Indigenous Policy Coordination* <<http://www.indigenous.gov.au/sra.html>> (Accessed: 8/6/05).
8. Kim S. Collard, Heather A. D'Antoine, Dennis G. Eggington, Barbara R. Henry, Carol A. Martin and Gavin H. Mooney, "'Mutual' obligation in Indigenous health: can shared responsibility agreements be truly mutual?" *Medical Journal of Australia*, Vol. 182:10, 16th May (2005).
9. Brown, *Politics out of History* 41.
10. Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, trans. Walter Kaufmann and R.J. Hollingdale (New York: Vintage, 1969) 15. Cited in Brown, *Politics out of History* 127.
11. Wendy Brown, "The Time of the Political," *Theory and Event* 1:1 (1997).
12. Jacques Derrida, *Given Time: 1 Counterfeit Money*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (Chicago and London: U of Chicago P, 1992) 29.

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