CAIP.
CENTRO DE ANÁLISIS E INVESTIGACIÓN POLÍTICA.

# Revista Pléyade

NÚMERO 12 | JULIO - DICIEMBRE 2013 | ISSN: 0718-655X

REVISTA PLÉYADE 12/ ISSN: 0718-655X / JULIO - DICIEMBRE 2013/ PP. 233-240

# On Critical Thought Today. An Interview with Wendy Brown*

Laura Gioscia**
Universidad de la República

Gabriel Delacoste***
Universidad de la República

## A B S T R A C T

This interview revolves around critical thinking and its contradictions and aporias. Professor Brown starts by discussing critical thinking as an infinite but specific intellectual effort that cannot and shouldn't be melded into a single project. The same goes for the left, because of the complexities and diversities involved in issues like sovereignty, Human Rights, the Third World and feminism.

**Keywords:** Critical thinking, left politics, sovereignty, neoliberalism, feminism.

## Sobre el pensamiento crítico hoy. Una entrevista con Wendy Brown

Esta entrevista gira alrededor del tema del pensamiento crítico, y de sus

* Prof. Wendy Brown is one of the leading political theorists of our times. She has made major contributions regarding power, citizenship rights, neoliberalism and sovereignty, among many other issues. She is Class of 1936 First Professor of Political Science at the University of California at Berkeley, where she is also affiliated with the Designated Emphasis in Critical Theory, the Designated Emphasis in Gender and Women's Studies and the Department of Rhetoric. She also lectures around the world, her work has been translated into more than two dozen languages and she is also well known for her activism, most recently in support of public higher education. Brown's 2010 book, Walled States, Waning Sovereignty, interrogates the relationship between the decline of nation-state sovereignty and the construction new nation-state walls; she situates both in the context of global capital and other transnational forces.

The authors acknowledge to thank William Callison for participating in the editing of this interview.

** Laura Gioscia is Professor of Political Theory in the Political Science Department of the Social Sciences Faculty at the University of the Republic in Montevideo, Uruguay. She also coordinates the Program: "Citizenship, Political Theory and History of the Ideas" and she is editor of the international digital journal *Critica Contemporánea. Revista de Teoría Política.* E-Mail: lgioscia@gmail.com

*** Gabriel Delacoste is an assistant researcher in the Political Science Department, University of the Republic in Montevideo, Uruguay. E-Mail: gigantebueno@gmail.com

contradicciones y aporías. La profesora Brown discute en primer lugar, el pensamiento crítico como un emprendimiento intelectual infinito pero específico, que no puede ni debe fundirse en un proyecto único. Lo mismo sucede con una izquierda enfrentada a las complejidades y diversidades involucradas en temas como la soberanía, los Derechos Humanos, el Tercer Mundo y el femnismo.

**Palabras clave:** Pensamiento crítico, política de izquierda, soberanía, neoliberalismo, feminismo.

Wendy Brown's book, *Regulating Aversion: Tolerance in the Age of Identity and Empire* (2006), in which she reflects on tolerance as a discourse and practice of power from the late twentieth century to the present, was an inspiration for our research project, called "Beyond Tolerance, citizenship and diversity in contemporary Uruguay". The final product of this project is a book, due to be released by the end of 2013 (Editorial Trilce, Montevideo, Uruguay), including an article of Brown's authorship. Because of this project, we were able to make some exchanges, which included this interview which took place in July, 2012.

**Laura Gioscia y Gabriel Delacoste (L.G/G.D):** How do you conceive critical thinking today?

**Wendy Brown (W.B):** Critical thinking can mean anything. But for me the term always promises intellectual effort devoted to understanding current formations and effects of power and to developing discerning judgments about them. Critical thinking also promises a critique of common sense and a critique of the governing reality principle (these may be two different things). It promises to illuminate the premises and orders of reason that secure existing configurations of power, and to undo the givenness of the present.

Critical thinking can never do all of this at once and can never do it for all features of the political, social, economic and cultural landscape. This is not just a matter of giving up conceits of a global perspective or universal truths; it is also about giving up comprehensive accounts. It is not possible to think deeply and critically, for example, about the sexual order secured by a resurgent secular Eurocentrism, the turns neoliberal reason has taken since the 2008 finance capital meltdown, and the relation of the rise of global slums to the phenomenon of waning state sovereignty. Each is important but they cannot be melded into one giant project of critique of critical theory. Critical thinking has a literally infinite number of objects and corridors of analysis.

**L.G/G.D:** For some years now, some collective books such as Contingency, Hegemony, Universality: Contemporary Dialogues On The Left, Democracy in what state? and The Idea of Communism have featured thinkers such as Ernesto Laclau, Slavoj Zizek, Judith Butler, Giorgio Agamben, Jacques Ranciére, Antonio Negri and yourself among others. Do you think this collaborations signal the birth or consolidation of a leftist intellectual environment? If so, what do you make of it? Do you feel part of that?

**W.B:** I don't think there's a birth or consolidation here. But I do think working in a post-Marxist vein, being shaped by yet loosened from Marxism, has facilitated an openness and range in left thought in recent decades; it has permitted us to operate with some individual creativity and collective synergy rather than through sectarian battles or adherence to schools. It's good to be done with the schools and also to be able to draw on diverse intellectual resources, from Aristotle to Hegel, Spinoza to Fanon, Machiavelli to Lacan. That said, there's always a tendency on the part of intellectuals, even left intellectuals, to refer too much to one another and fabricate a faux universe together. This was the folly of European Marxist theorizing in the 1960s and 70s, and we should be careful not to repeat it in a post-Marxist orbit. The value of one's critical thought is not measured by the extent to which it is taken up by other left intellectuals but by the extent to which it is useful in illuminating the world.

**L.G/G.D:** What do you think should be (or could be) the political project of the left today, if such a thing is possible?

**W.B:** There cannot be one left project in a world with such a wide and diverse range of political and cultural forms and conflicts. Globalization has not and will never produce political uniformity or simultaneity even as it generates some linked problems of immigration (and accompanying xenophobia) economic dispossession, de-democratization and so forth. The Israeli left, whatever else it does, must continuously wrestle with the violent colonial origins of Israel and challenge the occupation of Palestine. The South African left works in the aftermath of apartheid to challenge corruption in a ruling ANC government while seeking to work with it to bring about racial, gender, sexual and economic justice. The European left struggles with the neoliberalization that dominated the EU project from the beginning and which contours the "austerity politics" besieging that continent. The American left must challenge the racialized rancor accompanying economic decline, the dismantling of public goods including but not limited to education, the normalization of neoliberal governance. The Chinese left faces the complex project of challenging authoritarianism

while reviving socialist critique. The Egyptian feminist left, working in the aftermath of the Arab spring but also in and through a long history of secularism, has a very different task before it from the Saudi Arabian feminist left, where the context is neither secular nor postrevolutionary. These are just a few samples of differences, not exhaustive.

This said, of course we can establish coalitions, solidarities and common cause in challenging the continued madness of unregulated finance capital and the neoliberalization of everyday life. And of course everywhere the left must include in its analysis and work the phenomenon of near-term ecological collapse. And certainly we can think together and across differences about alternatives to the current order of things. But left political projects that abjure their own immediate context are doomed to irrelevance.

**L.G/G.D:** Usually, in Latin America, projects in left politics think of themselves as attempts to recompose national sovereignty; what do you think are the problems of these kinds of political projects?

**W.B:** Nothing I say would surprise you here. The goal of national sovereignty is at once essential and impossible for left work today, especially under postcolonial conditions. And the aim is not just national sovereignty vis-à-vis colonialism, neo-colonialism and globalization, but popular sovereignty. This means that every left movement remains tied in some way to the struggle for and around the state, and this long after we have waged or adopted thoroughgoing critiques of state-centric analytics of power. So we have to be constantly attuned to all that is wrong with or limited in national sovereignty projects: the fetish of the national, the state, the global, and at the same time persist in the struggle for substantive popular sovereignty—real democracy—at the national level. Such paradoxes attend upon every political aim but they are particularly acute when we are reaching for a popular sovereignty that is a necessary and troubling fiction, not to mention an anachronism.

**L.G/G.D:** Human Rights are the other big way in which the Latin American left frame its political struggles. What do you make of this approach?

**W.B:** Another paradox, another case of what Gayatri Spivak referred to as "that which we cannot not want". Human rights are the moral currency of our age, which is exactly what's wrong with them and also why we cannot afford to ignore or eschew them. They are a profoundly insufficient frame for capturing the conflicts and cruelties they are often mobilized to redress or protect against. They carry no analysis, they offer no historical narrative,

they have no political economy, bear no complexity. They invariably depoliticize, individualize and juridicize what has been produced politically and needs to be redressed politically. They are simplistic and simplifying. And yet, they enshrine the principle that every human being matters, regardless of how lowly or marginal. They mark a concern with freedom from political suffering and with provision for minimal needs—things not enjoyed by hundreds of millions of the earth's inhabitants. Human rights cannot procure these things but they call attention to their absence in great swathes of the world.

One of the biggest concrete problems with human rights in their contemporary instantiation is their imbrication with humanitarianism and, in turn, humanitarianism's imbrication with imperial military intervention. Another significant concrete problem is human rights' displacement of a more far-reaching political analysis and political project. Human rights consecrate liberalism and its juridical apparatuses; they bracket capitalism, colonialism, neoliberal governance. They focus on human injury, need or dignity while abstracting from the powers that condition these things or their absence. They reify the effects of power as victims and keep those who are bewitched by human rights from grasping and addressing power's deep logics, currents and residences.

**L.G/G.D:** How can Political Theory speak with, to or about the "Orient" and the "Third World" without falling into paternalistic, condescending or colonialistic discourses, and while maintaining its critical nature?

**W.B:** This is a great question and there is really only one answer, which is that there has to be more theory *from* these places rather than only about them. More theory from the global south and not only about it. More theory from outside the West and not only critiques of Eurocentricism and Western civilizational discourse. And more translations from south to north, and from east to west, rather than always the other way. It is not that those in the metropole cannot theorize about other places or people or that we all must only speak about or represent ourselves. Rather, the problem is that as long the Occident or the West are the theorists and those outside are the objects of theory, an order is consecrated, intentionally or not, in which "we" theorize for and about "them" because they are not theorists. "They" are cast as having stories, experiences, politics, culture and subjectivity…but not theory. Even with the best of intentions, this remakes a world of Attica vs. the Barbarians, the imperial conceit with which the West was founded.

**L.G/G.D:** What do you think should be the priorities of contemporary feminisms?

**W.B:** This is another one of those context-specific things. There is no universal feminist agenda, and I cringe every time I see one promulgated. Priorities differ for women differently situated, and when this is ignored by feminist theory or practice, it always means some women are being excluded from the category of "woman". Over the past few years, I have been most interested in the Euroatlantic attack on Muslim women, and related, in the attack on Islam in the name of emancipating Muslim women. This particular contemporary instantiation of Western civilizational discourse, in which women are designated as the bearers of culture, is a prism through which to grasp a suite of Western self-delusions pertaining to secularism, progress, liberalism, and gender equality. From this we can learn (again) that one thing crucial for all feminisms to recognize is that we are incapable of fully grasping our own cultural situatedness and (hence!) no women ought to be telling other women what will emancipate them or what constitutes their freedom.

Another way of putting this: "what does woman want" (as Freud put it) is a question that cannot be answered. It is local, contextual, even personal. Even for women of the same place, time, race and class, there will be huge differences in priorities. In the domain of reproductive freedom, for example, some women most urgently need or want the capacity to simply and easily limit or terminate pregnancies; others need to be able to raise their children without stigmatization or limitation by sexual preference or miscegenation; others need to be relieved of grinding poverty so that their children might thrive; still others may need to be emancipated from association with their biological capacity for reproduction, to perform their gender without this governing feature. So, while we can establish reproductive freedom as indispensable for women everywhere, the contents and meaning of that freedom ranges widely and cannot be solidified under one agenda.

I am not, however, suggesting that there is such a cacophony of desire and needs among women that there can be no feminist work. Paralysis should not be the entailment of affirming the non-universality of any feminist claim or effort. Everywhere in the world, women suffer under historically male supremacist arrangements of work, law, family, economy, religion, culture, the social and the symbolic. So everywhere in the world there is a huge amount of feminist work to be done. What I am trying to underscore is the importance of doing this work while remaining aware that all feminist projects, from the most local housing, anti-violence or workplace equity initiatives to the most global proclamations of human rights, issue from very particular inflections of feminist desire and hence will always only address the needs and wishes of some women.

**L.G/G.D:** According to polls, "insecurity" (meaning crime) is the most important problem facing Latin America, often, there are overwhelming popular demands for tougher state repression and surveillance. How do you see this phenomenon in the context of your account of state sovereignty?

**W.B:** Globalization has unquestionably had a double effect on nation-state sovereignty: On the one hand, sovereignty is eroded by transnational flows of people, capital, ideas, goods, production, religion, and political identities; it is also eroded by the steady proliferation and growing strength of a variety of transnational institutions from the IMF to the World Court to progressive NGOs. On the other hand, as these very flows and emergences erode nation-state sovereignty, appeals to the state to generate law, order and economic stability have intensified. The more state sovereignty is weakened by globalization, the more quotidian insecurity is generated (whether by gang violence or terrorism or job displacement from outsourcing), the louder the call for just the forms of sovereign power you mention—surveillance, repression, in general the militarization of society. But it's important to remember that the insecurity itself is a sign of eroded sovereignty, or more precisely, the separation of sovereignty from the state form that has housed it in modernity. It is also the case that many of the increased security measures are futile, or are more show than substance, even as they address the desire for containment, stability and security that globalization threatens. Elaborate forms of walling at borders are but one example of this.

I am not suggesting that securitization is wholly impossible but that the goal of secure and stable societies is pushed out of reach by the effects of neoliberal globalization and that the very project of securitization is an index of waning state sovereignty. Moreover, with each intensification of securitization, actual security recedes into the horizon; the violence it aims to contain is pressed out like air in one end of a balloon, which can only go into another. And, again, the very phenomenon of heightened policing, militarizing, walling and surveillance is itself a sign of weakened state sovereignty: modern state sovereignty is supposed to operate through and as nomos—law that generates order—not through the barrel of a gun, not through drones, blockades and policing. In short, state sovereignty is less and less capable of securing the nation or the citizen because it is weakened by rival transnational forces, because globalization generates so many displaced and deracinated peoples (those *in* but not *of* nations), and because neoliberalism itself radically undercuts the authority of law, replacing it with it with the ethos of entrepreneurialism and supervenient goal of economic growth.

**L.G/G.D:** What can be saved of citizenship after its neoliberal dismantlement?

**W.B:** It is a revealing fact about contemporary democracy that the building and cultivating of citizenship is so rarely featured as one of its elements. Democratic citizenship today really amounts to little more than membership in the nation, accompanied by certain rights. Neoliberalism contours the citizen as an entrepreneurial subject whose sole project is self-care, not participation in ruling or even deliberating about the common—matters of public good, justice, and so forth. And of course "the common" itself is one of the objects of neoliberal assault. As Foucault reminds in his 1978-79 College lectures, neoliberalism fundamentally inverts the relationship of the political and the economic in liberalism: the political (and the state in particular) is in service to the economy rather than the other way around. This has a powerful effect on the meaning of citizenship and extinguishes the last trace of republicanism from liberalism.

So what is democracy without substantive citizenship? Democracy has many meanings but etymologically it identifies rule by the people: in Greek, the *demos* are the people; *cracy* means rule. In what sense do the people rule when citizenship is reduced to voting in money-soaked elections and a fistful of rights in an order dominated by the imperatives and whims of capital? I am hardly alone in suggesting that this is no democracy at all. The question, then, is not what can be "saved" of citizenship, but whether publics and citizenship can reassert themselves to reject their own evisceration, a metaphysically tricky proposition. (How does an eviscerated figure assert itself?). Yet we have seen glimpses of exactly this in the last year: from the Chilean student movement, the Arab Spring, the anti-austerity protests in Europe, the Occupy movement, the Quebecois and California struggles for public education. Each has featured surging, energized and vocal publics (often in privately owned spaces), and each has carried an insistence on remaking political-economic orders for the people. Each has broken through the enforced quietism. They are not all the same, of course, nor can they all be understood to be responding to or fighting for the same thing. But each is an expression of citizenship.

Of course each is also in a reactive mode. The real challenge for the twenty first century lies in envisioning, and then struggling to achieve, orders in which democratic citizenship participates in creating the common good and not only protesting the common bad.