Reclaiming Democracy: An Interview with Wendy Brown on Occupy, Sovereignty and Secularism

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Krisis: *Let us start with a general question about the current state of democracy. In your contribution to the book Democracy in What State you write: 'Berlusconi and Bush, Derrida and Balibar, Italian communists and Hamas – we are all democrats now'. There seem to be two possible responses to this diagnosis of an exalted discourse of democracy that seems to accompany, and even to be functionally intertwined with, the multiple processes of de-democratization that you also describe in this article that we witness in our society: either we could give up the word democracy because, being hijacked by its enemies, it no longer functions as a critical and emancipatory alternative, (it has become a 'neoliberal fantasy' as Jodi Dean has argued), and to look for other concepts, e.g. communism. So that's one possible reaction. The other reaction would be to fight for the word and to insist on the gap between a radical understanding of democracy and its liberal democratic, low-intensity state-form manifestations, and to emphasize how democracy is intertwined with rupture, opposition, resistance. Could you sketch your position in this debate?*

Brown: Well you can probably guess that I am in favour of trying to rehabilitate the term, give it substance, reawaken its potential, not only for emancipation and equality but also for a notion of popular sovereignty. Whatever popular sovereignty might mean in contemporary national and post-national politics the link between democracy and popular sovereignty is one we just can't give up. There are many reasons that I don't favour the idea of surrendering the term. One of them is that political terms are always re-signifiable and contestable, even as they carry sedimented histories that make some re-signification very difficult. 'Communism' certainly doesn't come with any less difficulty in terms of its histories, its instantiations, its possible formations, than democracy does – it just happens to be a different set of difficulties. Could we get communism to signify democracy today? That's a challenge. It might work this way for serious students of Marx, but apart from that, the Cold War legacy of a discursive opposition between freedom and communism is a powerful one. I'm not simply saying that state communism established the opposition, I'm saying that Cold War discourse did and that we will be recovering from that for a long time. So that's one reason. But the second reason has to do with the contested nature of democracy itself. I don't accept that it has been conquered for a neoliberal fantasy, I think that the question of its meaning is at the centre of left-right politics today in the Euro-Atlantic world. I think that the aspiration for the promises that it holds out is the reason that the Arab Spring took place under the sign of democracy. It wasn't so that they could have more neoliberalism, it was so that they could have a modest say in who governs and how they're governed. It was to gain a modest purchase on what liberal democracy has long promised, namely universal rights, representation, equality before the law, etc. Now if those promises have never been fully realized, the very interval between the promise and the realization holds out the possibility for democratic work. So when I give a summary of characters who all claim to be democrats, and obviously are not all on the same team, my point is really that it has become very easy at this point in history to call democracy anything where even minimal elections combined with the free market appear. That's obviously a terribly hollowed-out and terribly limited meaning, and it has nothing to do with democracy in the most basic etymological and philological sense: demos/cracy, the people rule. Elections and the free market have nothing to do with the people ruling.

But as I said at the beginning, given that political terms always are re-signifiable, that they're always porous, that they're always floating, we can't say that this is a *wrong* use of democracy, we can only say that it's a thin, a limited, and an unemancipatory one. But I do think the term can be reclaimed politically, because I already think it's contested today. I don't think there's been some kind of triumphant conquest of the term. That's precisely what the Greek elections yesterday were about, whether democracy was to be equated with neoliberalism or something else. That's precisely what the Arab Spring was about, and that's what current struggles represented by groups like Occupy are about. In each case, there's an effort to reclaim democracy as something that has to do with more equality than it has been used to signify in recent neoliberal decades, and also more control by the people.

Krisis: *With regard to the return of communism in leftist discourse, you pointed to a strategic problem – the fact that this discourse also comes with its own set of problems, its own assumptions, historical baggage, etc. Would you also say that it suffers from a certain obliviousness to something that a Foucauldian might want to insist on, namely the social conditions and framings of political practices? Sometimes the return to communism has a somewhat decisionistic and even heroic undertone to it, which insists on the autonomy of the political act, that is strangely oblivious of these power relations and how they frame and limit politics. I was wondering how you would frame this problem with the discourse.*

Brown: Foucault had one way of naming this problem, which was to suggest that communism, Marxism more generally, never developed what he called a political rationality of its own and as a result was terribly available to other political rationalities, anything from absolutism to liberalism. Long before Foucault, others have pointed out that there's a very thin theory of politics in Marx, not only in his critique, but also in the very brief imaginary he gives us of communism, one that's entirely focused on the organization of production and the emancipation that the organization of production, owned and controlled collectively, would offer individuals and the whole. I think you're right that even today when people speak of communism as an alternative they are eliding the fundamental question of who controls, who rules, who governs, what the apparatuses

are and what the compatibility or incompatibility is of communism with direct democracy. And briefly I would say that in very, very small scale it is perfectly possible to imagine the relation of communism to direct democracy as being a very good one, e.g. in workers' cooperatives or other kinds of collectives – but at the level of the nation-state, let alone the world? It's impossible to imagine that. And that's where we have to do our thinking. It's unrealistic, but on the other hand that doesn't mean we want to say, as somebody like Slavoj Žižek does, that yes of course we must have the violent and the brutal arm of the state at the level of the larger political economy, because that's the only solution. I'm giving a crude version of his account, but he would be happy with it, I think. I am not suggesting that we give up on communist ideals, but that we need to do a great deal of work to think about its viability in a globalized twenty-first century and we need to think through the problem of politics.

Krisis: *In your contribution to Democracy in What State, you also point to 'the panoply of social powers and discourses constructing and conducting us' that seem to pose a limit to democratic control; to the fact that 'we and the social world are relentlessly constructed by powers beyond our ken and control', which seems to undermine notions of sovereignty, according to which the addressees of social norms should be their authors, and self-legislation at the heart of the modern idea of democracy, and to make it necessary to rethink democracy more in terms of its being embedded in forms of governance and subjectivation (or citizenization). What would a Foucauldian notion of democracy look like that takes such power relations into account? What are the theoretical resources and the practical possibilities of such a notion of democracy?*

Brown: I don't think it is possible to think democracy from a Foucauldian perspective for several reasons, and I think it's telling that Foucault himself seemed utterly uninterested in the question of democracy. I don't mean he was an anti-democrat. He became interested in the question of counter-conducts, individual efforts at crafting the self, to subvert, interrupt or vivisect forces governing or constructing us, but that's very different from attending to the question of democracy. I want to say one other thing here before I then directly answer your question. I've lately been rereading his lectures on neoliberalism and one thing I'm very struck by is

that there is an absent figure in Foucault's own formulation of modernity, when he offers us the picture of *homo economicus* and *homo juridicus* as the two sides of governance and the human being in modernity. Foucault just says you've got on the one hand the subject of interest, *homo economicus* and on the other hand *homo juridicus*, the derivative from sovereignty, the creature who's limiting sovereignty. But for Foucault there's no *homo politicus*, there's no subject of the demos, there's no democrat, there's only a creature of rights and a creature of interest. It's an extremely individually oriented formulation of what the modern order is. There's the state, there's the economy and then there's the subject oriented to the economy by interests and toward the state by rights. But isn't it striking for a French thinker that there's no democratic subject, no subject oriented, as part of the demos, toward the question of sovereignty by or for the people? Here Foucault may have forgotten to cut off the king's head in political theory! There are just no democratic energies in Foucault.

So one of the reasons one can't think democracy with Foucault has to do with his own inability to think it. The other reason has to do with the extent to which he has given us such a thick theoretical and empirical account of the powers constructing and conducting us – there's no *way* we can democratize all of those powers. So I think there one has to accept that if democracy has a meaning for the left today, it's going to have to do with modest control of the powers that govern us overtly, rather than that of power *tout court*. So it's going to be a combination of the liberal promise and the old Marxist claim about the necessary conditions of democracy. It's going to be at some level a realization of the Marxist critique of the liberal promise. We have to have some control over what and how things are produced, we have to have some control over the question of who we are as a people, what we stand for, what we think should be done, what should not be done, what levels of equality should we have, what liberties matter, and so forth. It will not be able to reach to those Foucauldian depths of the conduct of conduct at every level. The dream of democracy probably has to come to terms with that limitation. If we can, we will be able to stop generating formulations of resistance that have to do with individual conduct and ethics. In other words, I think that the way Foucauldian, Derridean, Levinasian and Deleuzian thinking has de-

railed democratic thinking is that it has pushed it off onto a path of thinking about how I conduct myself, what is my relation to the other, what is my ethos or orientation toward those who are different from me – and all that's fine, but it's not democracy in the sense of power sharing. It's an ethics, and maybe even a democratic ethics. But an ethics is not going to get us to political and economic orders that are more democratic than those we have now. The danger of theory that has too much emphasized the question of the self's relationship to itself, or to micropowers, as useful as it has been for much of our work, is that it has derailed left democratic thinking into a preoccupation with ethics.

Krisis: *In your recent book Walled States; Waning Sovereignty, you argue that the walls that are increasingly being built all over the Euro-Atlantic world to keep migrants out are irrational: walls are the symbols of sovereignty at the time of its definitive waning, while not being effective in reestablishing sovereignty in practice. If we look at it from a governmentality perspective, walls do have a certain practical effectivity in connection to other bordering practices such as detention and deportation. In the European Union, for instance, there is definitely no Fortress Europe, but there is population regulation. There is both empirical regulation, and also regulation of what we consider desirable future citizens and selves: formal citizenship makes way for the selection of persons on the basis of ethnicity, religion, poverty, education. What is your view of those developments?*

Brown: There is a difference between border control and walls. What happens at immigration, at the airport, is extremely effective in determining who gets in and who gets out. You don't get in without a passport. But walls are much less effective at this. So the reason I was specifically dealing with walls and not border controls is to understand why walls have arisen at a time when those kinds of security and immigration technologies, checkpoints, border controls, are so available and effective. My question was, why pour billions of dollars into these particular edifices that are crude, that are surmountable, that can be tunneled under, that can be circumvented in many ways?

And yet, my claim is not that walls are 'merely' symbolic and have no effects. That's already an impoverished understanding of the symbolic. Walls in many cases are shoring up an image of nation-state sovereignty that is weakening as sovereignty, that is detaching from states themselves. I'm not saying that state sovereignty is finished, I'm not saying that there's no such thing as states, I'm not making the claim that all we have are trans-national powers now. I also accept the formulation that one of the things we have in nation-states are new forms of governmentality producing who the 'we' is: who's in, who's out, who's needed, who's not needed, identities that are racialized, ethnicized, and 'religionized,' sometimes in incoherent yet consequential ways. For example, in US post-911 discourse, there is a constant interchangeability between the dark, the Islamic, the Arab and the Middle Eastern that scrambles who people actually are. So yes, there are these new forms of governmentality and securitization, and there is an intersection between what happens at the borders and what happens within. There are forms of policing, securitizing, categorizing and identity-making that saturate the internal lives of nations engaged in them, and that do not just happen at their borders. All this is very important.

But I was writing a different book. It was focused on just one question: country after country today is building walls-- concrete, iron, barbed-wire, brick, plexiglass walls. Literal, obdurate objects. For the most part, they are not very effective as part of this governmentality that you have described. In many cases, they actually make the process more difficult, because they make it more difficult to see, to monitor, to check, and to classify and categorize what's on the other side or trying to get in. They are also producing more and more criminality at the borders that they limn. They intensify organized crime to smuggle in people, goods, drugs and weapons. So my question was this: during a period in which we have a governmentality of securitization that also intersects with neoliberal regulation of labour, why these walls?

The other question in the book is: what does it mean to say that nation-state sovereignty is waning? Where are we? What is the post-Westphalian political formation that both refers to and beyond the nation state? We have nascent and struggling post-national constellations, e.g. the EU. We have important trans-national institutions, the IMF, World Bank, World Court, and so forth. But we are still nation-state centric, even as state sovereignty is being weakened by globalization itself, by the flow of ideas, religions, labour, capital, political movements, across borders. Neoliberal rationality is also weakening state sovereignty. Now can this help us understand why these walls are being built? Walls which are not fundamentally abetting the governmentality you describe – they're hugely expensive and often produce more and worse versions of the problem that they would purportedly address as they intensify violence and crime, and make more expensive the immigration and smuggling they aim to interdict. Are these walls resurrecting an *imago* of the nation and the sovereignty of the state even as both recede materially? And does this in turn generate a certain political imaginary with which we (theorists and activists) need to reckon today?

Krisis: *One interpretation could be that your understanding of walls would help us explain why phenomena such as deportation and detention are taking place.*

Brown: Part of what I'm suggesting is that what walls do is help to establish the 'us' and the 'them,' the threat of the outside to the supposed purity and integrity of the inside. Certainly this facilitates detention, deporting, and very harsh forms of governmental regulation. Yet again I was trying to isolate something about walling that was different from the whole panoply of border control on the one hand, and governmentality and managing multiculturalism on the other. Maybe it's less acute here in Europe precisely because most of this is happening in the absence of actual walls. Here you have the imago of 'fortress Europe', and the arguments about 'fortress Europe,' without the actual fortress. Whereas what we're looking at in the United States is now 650 miles of wall (out of a planned 2,000). The concrete portions are not quite as tall as the separation barrier in Israel, but they are mammoth. It costs $21 million per mile to build and will cost another estimated $7 billion to operate and maintain over the next 20 years. Do you grasp these numbers? And the Border Protection Agency had to repair more than 4,000 breaches in the wall in 2010 alone. The wall is not stopping a thing, but it is having a tremendous effect on the American political imaginary.

Krisis: *What do you think of interpretations like those of William Walters, who stresses that there is also some resistant agency within the walling, for example by the organisations that fill water tanks on the U.S.-Mexican border? Counter-conduct takes place throughout different levels of society, by squatters, but also by lower-level governments, churches, border personnel, NGOs, medical personnel, and, not to forget, irregularized migrants themselves. Given what you were saying before regarding the individualist perspective on resistance, how do you see their contribution to the formation of complexly layered identities from 'within', particularly in contrast to the highly securitized, reactionary ones that you highlight in your book?*

Brown: Yes, but that said, let me be clear, I think these more individual or smaller efforts of resistance matter, both because sometimes you're literally saving a life, and also to the extent that they can be part of a broader politics of resistance. We, like you, are having a big struggle over the question of who *we* are and what the place of so-called 'new' immigrants is in the 'we'. This is a huge struggle, and a complicated one in the US about belonging, about healthcare, about education, about the price of labour. It touches everything. Okay, so here's how it plays out in the desert borderlands. There are self-designated 'Angels' who leave bottled water and maps out in the desert where the immigrants cross, trying just to help them stay alive during their crossing that the wall has made more difficult. On the other side, there are organized groups who go and pick up those bottles of water, or replace them with foul bottles of water, to actually poison and kill the migrants, or pick up the maps that the 'Angels' leave and replace them with maps that lead nowhere, that is, to their death. There's a very concrete political struggle going on there *between* non-state agents. To the extent that this struggle is known, to the extent that it's publicized, to the extent that it gains a political face, it's not nothing. So, on the one hand, there's a moral side to the story, trying to save a life. On the other hand, there is a political battle going on between two citizen groups, with big symbolic things at stake. And to the extent that it gets into the larger political discourse, it's doing a lot of work.

Krisis: *The bad thing is that we can't say resistance is just on the side of the NGOs providing the water.*

Brown: No. The 'Minutemen' who I talk about are the ones who are galloping through the desert and picking up the clean water and replacing it with foul water, and picking up the maps and replacing them and so forth. So they are engaged in resistance, right? Even if it's resistance to the failure of the state to persecute illegal entrants.

Krisis: *We would be interested to know more about the struggle over the 'we,' and how it's linked to recent protests, resistance movements. One thing that was much debated within and around the Occupy Wall Street movement, and that you also have been emphasizing in your comments on it, is that one of the successes seems to be in showing the possibility of a new sense of collectivity. Some people think that this is already a huge achievement, because this mode of 'we' as a progressive collectivity didn't seem possible. Could you say a bit more about this collectivity, and, more concretely, about where from today you see the possibilities and limitations of the Occupy movement and how it frames this kind of collectivity or political action?*

Brown: The Occupy movement was exciting when it erupted in the US. I'm going to speak from the perspective of the US, because it is everywhere, but the one I know best is there. It was exciting for the reasons you just described, the re-emergence of the *demos*. What was telling was that it emerged not as a set of labour unions, students, consumers, etc. but as a kind of mass that I want to suggest is the effect, in part, of the neoliberal destruction of solidarities, the destruction of unions, the destruction of separate groups or forces within the *demos*. (Those destructions have been very literal at the level of law in the US over the past ten years) So one thing that was interesting about the emergence of the 99% was that it was an emergence as a mass of individuals coming together, not as various kinds of groups making an alliance. This is partly the effect of the neoliberal breakdown of the *demos* into individuals rather than group solidarities, and Occupy is the first major left expression of this reconfiguration. The second thing I'd note is that Occupy has been successful, in the US, in changing the conversation about equality and inequality. No matter whether Occupy re-emerges in a massive way and becomes the future of left social organizing or not, it has still succeeded in an extraordinary and unanticipated way in making it possible, in a way that wasn't the case just

two years ago, to criticize the deeply inegalitarian effects of the neoliberal order. It has also reintroduced into mainstream liberal discourse the idea of the value of public goods. You can see Obama make the shift. You can see the Regents of the University of California make the shift in the wake of Occupy. They don't credit it expressly, but you can see the shift in the discourse. Those are two things – legitimate extreme inequality and the destruction of public goods – that I thought neoliberalism was just going to produce so successfully that we would not be able to recover, we wouldn't be able to *get them back* into our conversations. I think there have been tremendous effects of Occupy in this regard.

The beauty of Occupy and the difficulty for Occupy was its attachment to horizontalism. As we were saying in the beginning of this interview, it is one thing to have the commitment to direct democracy, and absolute participation in every decision, in a group of twelve, or even fifty. It's another thing to do that across thousands and still another to do that across millions, and in an ongoing way. It's not possible. So what do we do with that? I think many people in Occupy are asking this question. It raises a whole other set of issues, about the difference between leaders and rulers, the difference between participation and voice on the one hand and absolute shared decision-making on the other. It raises questions that radical democratic theory has asked for a long time, but hasn't had to answer immediately. So it's time to do that work and I think many people involved with Occupy want to do that work. I think even the die-hards got worn out by the ten-hour general assembly that produced one decision about tomorrow's action. And you will not get ordinary people to do that work. So that's one big issue facing Occupy.

The other thing I want to talk about is the problem of Oedipalization in politics, and what it means to get your target right. What is beautiful about Occupy is the focus on the destruction of public goods, the production of a debt and derivatives economy that drives most people down while consolidating wealth for the few, and the importance of recovering decision-making and democratic rule for the people – those are all wonderful things to affirm. But the difficulty is that many times attachments to tents or skirmishes with the police derail that larger agenda. The police, the state, the one-on-one collisions with what was taken to be the face of

power, became distracting to the point of absorption, which I want to call a certain Oedipalization, and a personification of power in the father, the state, the cops, or the chancellor of a university. Once you do that, you've *lost* the big picture and lost the big agenda. So some of the occupations I've seen or been a part of have run aground here. When the focus becomes 'Will we be able to keep our tents here? What are the police going to do next? Why didn't the mayor or the chancellor protect our occupation?,' then you're just having an ordinary kind of scrap over property rights, police power and hierarchy. At that point, the big and splendid agenda of Occupy gets lost. This problem is especially acute in student politics.

Krisis: *One challenge seems to be institutionalization without reproducing the problems of formal forms of political parties, political organizations, etc; another problem is what you've described as Oedipalization, sometimes a militant infantilism that one can't confront state power directly. Yet another problem seems to be with the effectivity of largely symbolic protest. I can't help going back to Marcuse's idea of repressive tolerance in terms of how the state reacts to protests. It's always a double strategy, it seems. Accept nice forms of protests that are easily controllable, that might still be radical in some sense, but do not really pose a challenge, even celebrate them. For instance, in Germany, every major politician seemed to be in favour of Occupy. The chancellor, Merkel, the opposition, everyone. 'It's great that those young people bring up these important questions. Even in this unorthodox way, that's really nice. That's what our democracy is about.' So on a symbolic level, the protest was immediately sanitized, introduced into the political cycle, etc. And of course, this one strategy of answering goes hand in hand with the criminalization of forms of protest that do not as easily lend themselves to this first kind of response. This is a problem that all kinds of civil disobedience or protests in that tradition seem to face. You can't go down the militant road, because that ends up with a fetishized idea of attacking the state on the street, but on the other hand symbolic protests also seem to run into real problems concerning their effectivity.*

Brown: These dangers though don't cancel the importance of protests. The Civil Rights Movement, for example, faced both of those dangers, as

did other groups that followed in the civil rights frame, and still I think we can say there was success. But of course: those are social reform movements. With Occupy, we're talking about the *fundamental* restructuring of the economy. And here, the double dilemma that Marcuse outlined and that you just reprised so well is very apt. That said, I don't think there are many alternatives. The thing about dilemmas in politics, and about paradoxes in politics, is that you often just have to navigate them. You can't just say 'Oh well, there must be some purer form'. Politics is such an impure field, and you have to have a stomach for that impurity, as Weber reminds us in 'Politics as a Vocation.' Politics is fundamentally impure and paradoxical, which is why so many people make the turn to ethics. It feels like it will be cleaner, and you'll be able to execute a complete and coherent sentence in ethics. You'll be able to say, 'this is what my ethical conduct should be, this is what it will be, and this is what it is.' Politics does not operate like that. It features unpredictable gaps between intentions, actions and effects. It features a medium in which 'principle' can backfire or simply be irrelevant.

I do think you're right about the response in most of the Euro-Atlantic world to Occupy, being 'This is good, and in fact we'll even make a space for this as long as it doesn't take a very militant form.' Unfortunately, I think this leads some activists to think that militancy must be the next step. That means violence, or tangling with the police, or occupying a building they will not let us occupy. We're then 'in the game', as Foucault would put it, that the administrators have organized, where this is okay and that's not okay and therefore you go for what's not okay. But where is the agenda, where's the political point? An example of this containment happened at the University of California. It was very funny. The president of the university combined with the dean of the law school and someone from public relations to have a forum called 'How should we handle the next Occupy?' And it was all about developing 'best practices,' for pre-event planning, and for civilian watch, and for monitoring; best practices should certain things erupt. It was all about fitting this whole thing into a neoliberal governance language that *everybody* was supposed to participate in: all the 'stakeholders'. So the cops, and the students and the staff and the faculty and the administrators were supposed to show up as stakeholders and plan the next Occupy together, to establish what would

and would not be best practices for participants, police, etc. It was almost a comedy version of neoliberal 'buy-in' and consensus, except the Administration was very serious about it.

Krisis: *How do you consider your own role, and that of leftist intellectuals, in thinking about Occupy and other movements and changes at the moment? What can the political theorist do when on the one hand, we seem to have become teachers in a kind of factory-like educational environment, and on the other hand, the classical role of the public intellectual is no longer unproblematically there. On the one hand, the changing media environment has seemed to dislocate the classical figure of the public intellectual, on the other hand, it seems to also have been bound up with a set of pretty problematic, epistemological, social understandings, quasi-paternalistic authoritarian in some respects. There are obviously many differences between public cultures which frame the public intellectual in very different ways, and which plays a very different historical role in the US, in France, in Germany, in the Netherlands, etc. But we were wondering what you thought about the self-understanding of critical theorists today.*

Brown: I find the fetishism of 'the' public intellectual particularly annoying today, so let me instead say something about what critical theory can offer, or how it articulates, with these political movements. On the one hand, I continue to think that the most important way that academics can contribute to what I'm going to call roughly a 'left agenda' (reconceiving democracy in a more substantive and serious way, addressing the organization of life by capital, re-establishing the value of public goods). The most important thing that we can do is be good teachers. By that, I don't mean teaching those issues; I mean teach students to think well. Whatever we are teaching, whether it's Plato or Marx, economic theory or social theory, Nietzsche or Adorno, we need to be teaching them how to read carefully, think hard, ask deep questions, make good arguments. And the reason this is so important is that the most substantive casualties of neoliberalism today are deep, independent thought, the making of citizens, and liberal arts education as opposed to vocational and technical training. We faculty still have our classrooms as places to do what we think is valuable in those classrooms, which for me is not about preaching

a political line, but teaching students that thinking is fundamental to being human and is increasingly devalued except as a technical practice. This is an old claim, from the Frankfurt School, but it's on steroids now. So I believe our most important work as academics is teaching students to think deeply and well. Our books come and go.

On the issues of the day, the blogosphere and its relatives actually have a pretty big impact. So when critical theorists do speak intelligently about something current, and that speaking is captured and disseminated through social media, it can be significant. So maybe we differ a little on the question of what the media has done to the public intellectual. If the pontificating public intellectual in *Le Monde* is on the wane, I do think she or he is on the rise in these other places. Maybe I'm encouraged in this area because in the US we've always had a dearth of intellectual life in most of our media until now. When we talk about public intellectuals, we're talking about a tiny group who read the *New Yorker* or *The Nation*, which is about .0001 percent of our population. By contrast, the new media has made it possible for serious analysis to circulate in all kinds of ways. Critical theory should take advantage of this. It affords a relation between politics and the academy not just through books or classroom lectures but through episodic interventions.

Krisis: *You have recently written critically about secularism. In France and elsewhere, we have seen that critical reflection on secularism has been taken up – and stimulated and politicized –by right-wing, conservative and/or anti-emancipatory organizations. Apparently one has to be very careful when being critical about secularism. Perhaps it's important to stress that there are different versions of secularism and that we need to think critically about these various versions. Or if one criticizes secularism more or less generically, it seems important to formulate the aspects we do want to save, in terms of basic rights, for instance. What's your view on that?*

Brown: In a way, we're back to the democracy question. Do we hang on to the term, secularism, and try to give it some new shape, or abandon it? I say we hang onto it. But you're also posing the problem of right-wing appropriations of left-critiques. There is always a danger that one's internal critiques of left or liberal discourse will be appropriated by the right. That's the peril of doing those kinds of critiques, whether it's a critique of identity politics or certain aspects of feminism, or Oedipalization in protest politics. Now the contemporary American right, of course, has its own independent source of anti-secularism. They accuse liberals and leftists of 'secular-humanist nihilism,' which means we've emptied out the world of meaning. That said, the right also backed two wars that took place under the sign of 'they're fundamentalists, we're secular,' 'we're tolerant, they're intolerant.' So things are all mixed up here.

Now, to your question: what is to be saved? I don't think we can answer it generically, because I think there are distinct formations of secularism, varieties of secularism, so we have to ask it in the context of the secular discourse in each society that secularism governs. What I am committed to trying to save in the US context is the important distinction between church and state, a distinction that aims to secure a religion-free public realm and personal religious freedom. It doesn't do either completely, of course, but one then has to figure out how to extend secularism beyond its Christian-Protestant roots, so that it can make good on its promises. One also has to give up the idea that there is some neutral, secular space. So it's a question of making these problematic conceits part of our lived work on secularism.

If we leave the terrain of secularism for a moment, this might become clearer. We used to have these debates about whether universalism's absurd or useless, whether there's always a constitutive outside. Well of course, there's always a constitutive outside, nothing is truly universal, but that the same time one doesn't want to give up on the notion of universal inclusion of all humanity into the Kantian idea of the dignity of humans, or the idea that everyone is entitled to survival as well as thriving beyond survival. But one has to know at the same time that there will always be a constitutive outside, that the universal will never truly be universal. There will always be some humans who are 'not human enough' to be included. Just as with secularism, it will never achieve the neutrality it pretends to have. We must always be pushing it toward a greater neutrality, knowing that it won't achieve it, that it will always be operating from a standpoint, and it will always be a religious standpoint. Similarly,

knowing that secularism doesn't simply address religion but defines it, we can become attentive to *what* it's defining. *What* is it saying religion is? What *counts* as religion, and what does it cast as good religion and bad religion? These become things for us to work on, politically, in the culture but also in law. This is how we might save something like secularism. Instead of saying 'Don't attack it, it's all we've got to prevent the opposite' where the opposite is imagined as theocracy or fundamentalism, I think secularism becomes strengthened by becoming more self-critical and available to revision. I think it's an emancipatory and inclusive modality for all political cultures, but it unfolds in different ways in India, Turkey, Egypt, Germany. And it will also be weaponized in different ways in each place. So we 'save' it precisely by working on its false conceits, and attempting to remake secular law and secular debates; rather than by burying these conceits, or simply defending secularism as better than the alternatives.

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