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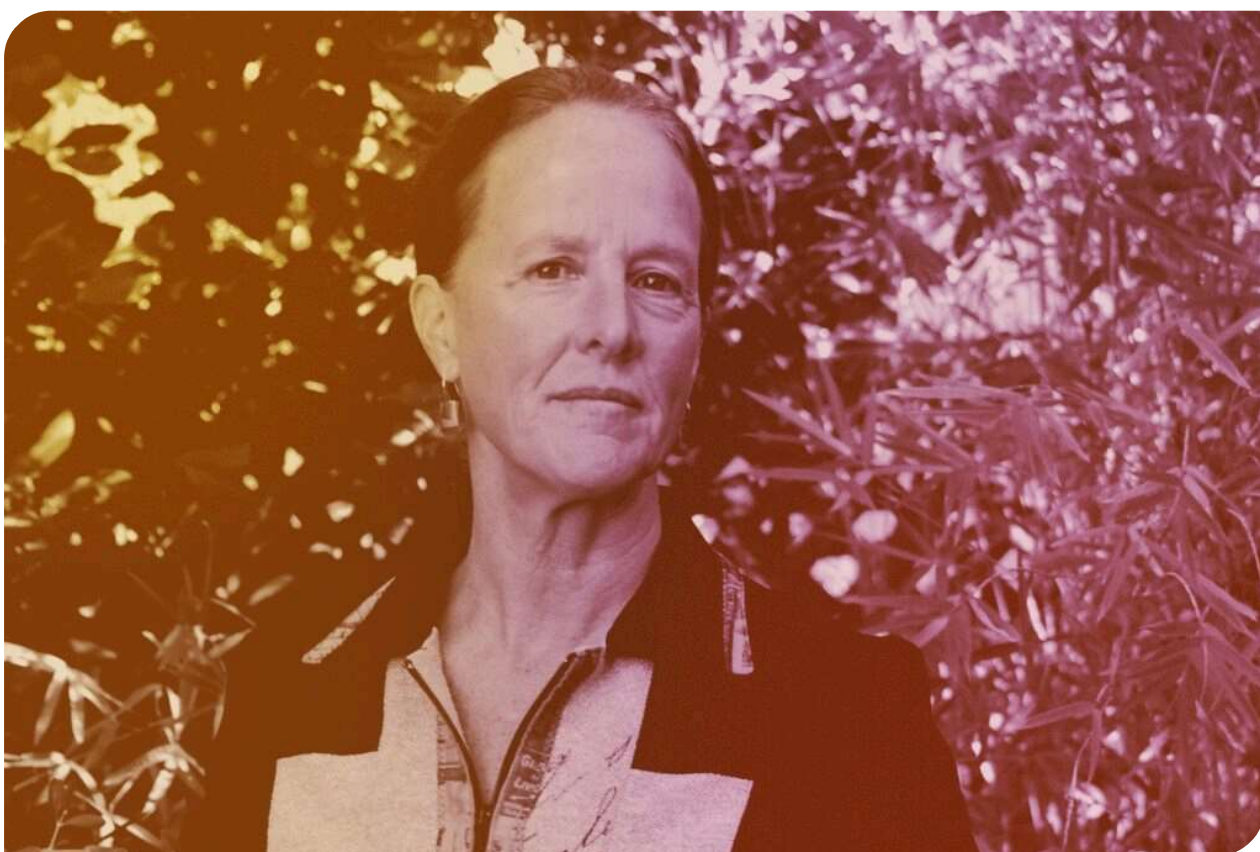


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PHILOSOPHY, POLITICS

The Violent Exhaustion of Liberal Democracy

A conversation with Wendy Brown on the U.S. presidential election, the exclusions liberal democracy is built on, and why we must aim at more than restoring its mythical former splendor.

Wendy Brown, Francis Wade

Democracy, Elections, Environment and Climate, Interview



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Events of the past decade have prompted frenzied discussion of the state of democracy across the globe. In countries across Europe, Latin America, and Asia—as well as, of course, in the United States—far-right political figures with outwardly antidemocratic stances have won office. Their misogyny and xenophobia, their promotion of violence, and their dismissal of the climate emergency haven't dented their support but rather secured it. In a number of cases, including Viktor Orbán in Hungary and Narendra Modi in India, they have been reelected several times over by sizable majorities. Meanwhile, the “only liberal democracy in the Middle East,” as Israel's Benjamin Netanyahu likes to say, is controlled by the far-right Likud party and executing a genocide in Gaza and an expanding war in Lebanon.

Attempts to diagnose the so-called crisis of democracy have led in several directions: to the explosion of economic inequality and a widespread loss of faith in the ability of public institutions to deliver for everyone; to changes in party systems that allow radical groups to enter the mainstream; to the internal contradictions of liberalism and the bordered nation-state itself, opening the door to strongmen leaders. The list goes on.

But while the concern tends to focus on declining faith in democracy—a phenomenon as old as the system itself—less attention goes to a deeper, more pressing problem. Among liberals, democracy remains the political institution par excellence, and yet, says political theorist Wendy Brown, not only is it in an exhausted form; it is wholly unsuited to the challenges posed by ecological breakdown, and indeed is hastening it. In this interview, Brown and I discuss the crisis of

democracy in all its forms, as well as a counter-conception of democracy she has been developing that seeks to orient our politics away from its destructive human-centeredness, toward connection and repair.

—Francis Wade

Francis Wade: Let's start with an event close to home for you, both in a literal and intellectual sense: the coming U.S. elections, and what its outcome will say about the so-called "crisis of democracy" in the United States (and elsewhere). A win for the Democrats—and at this moment, such a win is deeply uncertain—would mark two straight defeats for Trump and likely be received by liberals as proof that the crisis is receding, just as it seemed to do with, for instance, Lula in Brazil. What would you say to that?

Wendy Brown: Nothing would be more dangerous than treating a win for the Democrats as proof that the crisis of democracy is receding.

First, even if Harris wins, nearly half of American voters will have voted for fascism. Those who deem the fascist label hyperbole note that many hold their noses while voting for their imagined economic interests or voting against loathed liberals. But this framing ignores the willingness of millions to abide not only a violently ethnonationalist, racist, and misogynist regime, but one that would shred what little remains of liberal democratic principles and institutions. They are voting for fascism.

Second, Trump is symptom, not cause, of the "crisis of democracy." Trump did not turn the nation in a hard-right direction, and if the liberal political establishment doesn't ask what wind he caught in his sails, it will remain clueless about the wellsprings and fuel of contemporary antidemocratic thinking and practices. It will ignore the cratered prospects and anxiety of the working and middle classes wrought by neoliberalism and financialization; the unconscionable alignment of the Democratic Party with those forces for decades; a scandalously unaccountable and largely bought mainstream media and the challenges of siloed social media; neoliberalism's direct and indirect assault on democratic principles and practices; degraded and denigrated public education; and mounting anxiety about

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constitutional democracy's seeming inability to meet the greatest challenges of our time, especially but not only the climate catastrophe and the devastating global deformations and inequalities emanating from two centuries of Euro-Atlantic empire. Without facing these things, we will not develop democratic prospects for the coming century.

Sure, we would sigh with relief if Trump and Vance (the scarier one) are defeated this time around. But liberal democratic institutions—courts, majority rule, separation of powers, and more—are in tatters, democratic values are literally absent in half the population, democratic culture has been devastated by neoliberal reason, and the financing and arming of an unfathomably brutal genocide and ecocide in the Middle East by the Biden-Harris administration has soured a generation of young progressives on electoral politics.

Democrats, *real* democrats, need to ask whether “liberal democracy,” more than simply attacked by the right, might be a historically exhausted form, both for representing the demos and for addressing our gravest predicaments. If so, what follows?

FW: You've lately been developing a counter-conception of democracy that you call “reparative democracy.” What do you mean by this? And what led you to it?

WB: My thinking about reparative democracy emerges from the twin crises of democracy and ecology imperiling all planetary life today, however unevenly. It aims to bring democracy into direct engagement with the deep and lasting damages of colonial capitalist modernity, an epoch built on fossil fuels, unsustainable practices of production and consumption, extreme geopolitical inequalities, and wretched forms of destruction and exploitation for both human and nonhuman life. Such direct engagement with long histories and their effects on all possible futures isn't part of the temporal orientation and practices of liberal democracies or democratic subjects. It requires some serious transformations of both, which we will want to talk about. But for now, the big points are these: if we are to sustain the commitment to collective self-rule promised by democracy, we must reorient it for this engagement and transformation. Conversely, if we are to have ecologically viable and just futures, democracy must be remade for reparative purposes.

Because it's easy to misunderstand, let me just say what reparative democracy is not. It is not about restoring liberal constitutional nation-state democracy to a mythical former splendor. That is, it is not about recuperating extant democracy as if it was once fine and

only now is broken. Nor is it primarily concerned with reparations to peoples and places brutalized or exploited under past regimes. Rather, my argument is that the democratic ethos and practices we require today must be relentlessly and radically reparative in relation to past and present damaging modes of life, especially over the past two centuries. This orientation breaks sharply with the notions structuring liberal democracy, including progressivism, anthropocentrism, and individual interests and rights as the essence of political freedom. So it radically transforms what democracy means and entails, including its ways of relating to past and future, its ways of casting the human and of relating human and nonhuman life, and its understandings of where democracy resides and matters.

The idea of reparative democracy emerged from both practical and theoretical concerns. Practically, liberal nation-state democracy centered on individual rights and interests is not just threatened by authoritarian and neofascist mobilizations. For many reasons, it's unsuited to contemporary powers and predicaments, especially but not only the climate emergency. Theoretically, while many are thinking about repair these days, I have been especially influenced by Andreas Folkers's formulation of the reparative in a critical theory of what he calls "fossil modernity." For Folkers, the very nature of critique is altered by the ongoing damages—which he calls residuals—of intensive fossil fuel use. These include fouled land and water, a heating planet, extinction chains, and more. No longer can critique be premised on overcoming the past or on an open future. Both modernist conceits have collapsed. Instead, what I would call "honest" critique must be oriented by seeking to limit and repair (forward) the damages of fossil modernity. I extend Folkers's appreciation of residuals to the politics of Euro-Atlantic modernity, especially empire, and adapt it for reparative democracy.

FW: The Ancient Greek conception of democracy was people-oriented by definition, and it accordingly instituted a range of separations and subordinations: of the "civilized" from the "uncivilized," the city from the outside, humans from nature, and so forth. Various transformations to human life in the period since have intensified that separation, not least the effort by the industrializing West from the eighteenth century onward to gain greater mastery of nature so that it would better serve human "progress" and "freedom." So is it fair to say that democracy posed a grave ecological threat from the get-go?

WB: Most good political thinking about ecological damage centers capitalism as the culprit. Certainly the reign of capital—with its need for growth based on artless and wasteful consumption, its powering by fossil fuels (coal, then oil), its valorization of profit over any other value, and more recently the capture of state projects, including decarbonization, by private finance—has been a planetary disaster. And in every way, it has roughed up the Global South more than the North. We can't overstate the need for a different political economy for a habitable and just future.

However, Western anthropocentrism is older and deeper than capitalism, which is why socialism is insufficient for addressing the climate emergency and cratering biodiversity. As you say, democracy in the West emerges at the site of ancient Greek oppositions between *polis* and *oikos*, politics and economy, city and outside lands—freedom always aligned with the former and in opposition to the latter. This means democracy is founded in a sequester of politics from life, both social and earthly. Political freedom in the West is founded in consequential political and ecological exclusions.

The foundational splitting of politics from everything arrayed under “necessity” and “nature”—nonhuman life as well as human production and reproduction—delivers both a very limited *demos* and an irresponsible form of rule, or *kratia*, one cut off from and self-authorized to violate the sources of its own sustenance. This suggests that Western democracy, its very ontology, might be co-responsible with the voraciousness of capitalism for histories of damage to human and nonhuman life, which are now at an emergency pitch.

FW: You've previously cited the work of the political ecologist Pierre Charbonnier, who writes in *Affluence and Freedom* (2021) that “we inherit a world that no available political category is designed to manage.” It's long been clear that liberal democracy places no constraints on our destructive impulses, and in fact seems to feed them, so can you say a little on how and where reparative democracy departs from it?

WB: Reparative democracy, as I'm thinking about it, is not a set of institutional arrangements, though it would bear on them. Rather, it is an ethos or orientation, one which refigures democratic principles, practices, and subjects. This ethos includes overcoming the foundational opposition between humans and “nature” just discussed.

However, it also involves transforming the damaging methodological individualism and “presentism” of liberal democracy—its focus on what individuals want right now rather than our interlinked and common past, present, and future.

Reparative democracy would tether the *demos* to both the nonhuman and to histories of damage bearing on the future. This challenges liberalism’s centering of justice on rights and distribution, replacing them with sustenance and regeneration amidst interdependence. Freedom would also lose its presentist and autonomous character. To mobilize human capacities for democratic ecological repair, both personal and political freedom would have to take shape as relational, responsive, and responsible, with past and future always on their horizons.

Reparative democracy also entails a transformation of political equality. Those who can and cannot represent themselves by speaking must not count differentially. Listening, and listening differently to those who do not speak one’s own language, would have to supplant speech as the ultimate citizen practice. And, concentrations of economic and social power must be vigilantly restrained from either amplifying or suppressing any part of this expanded democratic subject and constituency. Still, political equality is about more than counting or who counts, and it exceeds measure by individual units. Political equality in a reparative mode must be responsive to deep histories of inequalities and violences—racial, gendered, regional, hemispheric, and between human and nonhuman—that bear on discursive norms and agendas in democratic spheres. Political equality also requires more effectively enfranchising life forms that democracy has not previously bothered with—earthworms and coral reefs, forests, wetlands, and bee colonies.

Framed philosophically, reparative democracy is rooted in that deep ecological materialism called for by Bruno Latour. Such materialism comprises not only modes of production and reproduction, or agency discovered in “things,” but all constellations of interdependent planetary life, human and nonhuman, shaping past, present, and future. Similarly, reparative critique does not merely “grasp things by their root,” as Marx puts it in his account of materialism. Rather, the soil nourishing the root, the historical residuals within that soil, and the conditions for its regeneration, must be grasped and addressed.

FW: How does it work in practice then? Are there contemporary examples of, as you put it earlier, “direct engagement with long histories” on a scale that suggests a kind of reparative social compact in the making?

WB: There are instances of reparative democracy all over the world. Some are fleeting and partial; others are more sustained. Many emerge from the indigenous and the young, who do not need to be told that human and nonhuman life are interdependent, that the world is in an emergency state, and that constitutional liberal democracy is both incapable of addressing that emergency and itself an exhausted form.

One contemporary example can be found in #StopCopCity in Atlanta, Georgia. Cop City is the oppositional nickname for a planned militarized police training facility that involves clear-cutting forests abutting Atlanta's poorest and Blackest neighborhoods. The \$100 million project is largely privately funded and driven by the needs and demands of the global corporations and finance networks (investment banks, law, insurance, and consulting firms) at the heart of Atlanta's current growth and wealth generation. The city government kowtowed to these global economic powers to repeatedly endorse the project, spurning local public opposition that spans local and national racial justice organizations; ecological and conservation groups; lawyers guilds; area schools; neighborhood, church and community associations; abolitionists; and anarchists. These groups have not only fought together, they have learned from and protected one another. Black community organizations defend white anarchist tree sitters, and many anarchists have allied with liberals seeking to stop the facility with legal maneuvers. The state has responded with outsized military force and juridical harshness, charging occupiers and demonstrators with outlandish crimes and threatening scandalously long prison sentences.

“#StopCopCity brings into relief why ordinary political channels routinely fail the future so resoundingly.”

#StopCopCity melds ecology with racial justice aims and opposes economies of destruction of human and nonhuman life and wholly bought political representation. It also foregrounds all the painful and damaging histories on this patch of land: from the dispossession of early indigenous inhabitants to slave-based cotton farming and to carceral institutions that harbor racialized and gendered abuses. The movement constantly draws attention to the dangers of deforestation and “forest fragmentation” and to the neighborhoods, already suffering from neglect and traumatized by racialized policing, that will be most impacted by the loss of forest tree canopy and the presence of a militarized police training site.

Altogether, these features make #StopCopCity simultaneously an instance of reparative democracy and a demonstration of why it is so essential. It brings into relief why ordinary political channels routinely fail the future so resoundingly. The movement is a powerful critique of liberal democracy today—institutional corruptions and erosions, its privileging of capital interests, its blinding individualism, its ferocious repression of protest, and its radical exclusion of nonhuman worlds.

FW: Your 2015 book *Undoing the Demos* warned of the peril that neoliberalism posed to both democracy and “the meaning of citizenship itself.” It argued that no area of life was now spared from “capital enhancement,” that “neoliberalism is the rationality through which capitalism finally swallows humanity.” The picture it painted of our future was bleak. How does your thinking on reparative democracy today speak to the arguments you set out a decade ago?

WB: Neoliberalism contributed profoundly to the crisis of actually existing democracy from which theories and practices of reparative democracy emerge. Its elevation of markets to the highest form of truth and governing displaced democratic principles ranging from political equality to legislated justice. Its privatization or extractive private financing of every public good compounded its devastation of working- and middle-class prospects that turned millions in a hard-right direction. Its conversion of everything and everyone to market behavior did not spare the political sphere, which has become steadily more ruthless and less oriented by the common good, and features increasingly quotidian corruption of political institutions for partisan ends. Neoliberalism escalated the capture of law and especially of rights—that essential liberal democratic icon—to amplify the wealth and power of the powerful (from mega-churches to the mega-rich to mega-corporations) and diminish the power of the people in politics and policy.

So, yes, neoliberalism is part of the story of cratering liberal democracy.

But only part. Even as it saturates everything, neoliberalism does not explain everything, and it does not carry the whole weight of liberal democracy’s mounting failures and exhaustion. Ecocide has been intensified by deregulated capital and states increasingly subordinated to institutional finance but is older and bigger than these. Racist gerrymandering and voter suppression is an old story. And while the Global South has

been slugged harder than the North by neoliberal austerity, big finance, and exploitative manufacturing and extractivist practices, modern Euro-Atlantic democracy carried empire in its belly and carved the earth accordingly.

As I suggested earlier, reparative democracy arises from the consequential exclusions, violences, and individualist and presentist orientation of modern democracy across its liberal, social, and socialist variants. Neoliberal effects make these uniquely vivid but are not singularly causal.

“Even as it saturates everything, neoliberalism does not explain everything. Ecocide is older than deregulated capital and institutional finance.”

FW: Recognition of the interdependency of human and nonhuman life seems central to your concept, but it's on display at the #StopCopCity protests in large part because of—and say if you disagree—the very particular set of circumstances being opposed: destruction of already diminished forest cover in the service of greater state militarization, in close proximity to communities that have long felt the effects of state violence. So I wonder, how, in the absence of Cop City–like circumstances, recognition of that interdependency, or that human-nature connectedness, might be engineered, especially in modern secular and individualist societies that lack the core emotional and spiritual bonding (for instance, of ancestor worship or other forms of veneration of place) that have historically tethered humans to the nonhuman world?

WB: I'm enough of a materialist to know it is impossible to engineer any kind of consciousness in the absence of conditions that would incite and foster it. Put the other way around, given liberalism's human-centeredness and individualism, and capitalism's alienation of us from the source or production of almost everything we need and consume, what hope is there of appreciating our deep imbrication with all planetary life or becoming creatures who easily share, or have cares beyond, their own lives?

The answer, of course, rests in the effects of the multiple crises that touch everyone on the planet, however differently: crises of climate change, extinction chains and biodiversity collapse, water availability, breathable air, pandemics, forever chemicals, and microplastics everywhere. All of these confront us directly with the perils of treating nonhuman life or

“nature” as mere exploitable resource. All bring us face to face with the disastrous conceits of Euro-Atlantic modernity: individualism, boundless growth and consumption, fossil fueled energy, “conquering” nature, Europe and Other.

These crises are conditions for curiosity, learning, reorienting, transforming. (Of course they are also conditions for denialism, hoarding, and violent barricading.) However, even with these conditions, a deep grasp of our interdependency, and a politics that addresses it, are not automatic; they have to be developed. For reparative democracy oriented by the ecological emergency, for example, we need new ways of envisioning and hearing the nonhuman and our place within it. Sound theory, and especially bioacoustics, has much to teach us here. So also do some parts of indigenous cosmologies and ways of knowing.

FW: This brings me back to something you said earlier, that “listening . . . would have to supplant speech as the ultimate citizen practice.” For millennia, rational speech or language has been understood as a key signifier of politically able actors—in other words, without rational language, you can’t *do* politics; because only we humans are thought to possess it, we are the only true political creatures. And it seems that no amount of research into, for instance, the democratic practices of certain animals has been able to shift that. As others have explored in work on “political listening,” this view has helped drive the lasting separation of humans from nonhumans. You said just now that “we need new ways of envisioning and hearing the nonhuman.” How do we do that?

WB: Yes, we conventionally identify speech as the premier political action, and free speech as an icon of democracy. We also believe this comes to us from ancient Athens. In fact, the notion of *isegoria*, one of the three pillars of Athenian democracy, translates as the equal right to speak *and be heard* in the Assembly. It is a *political* right of all citizens to persuade the collective power that is the people. *Isegoria* identifies practices of speech and listening that are constitutive of democracy, not derivative from it. It could not be further from the liberal notion of saying whatever, wherever, because you have a personal right of expression. It’s not a personal right to speak but a political right to be heard, shared equally by all citizens.

Listening as well as political persuasion have been scraped out of liberal free speech politics. This compounds the problem of what I am

**“Imagine if we all
actually listened to**

suggesting we need in the Anthropocene, an epoch in which our imbrication with all earthly life, and capacity to destroy it, is so vivid.

Listening, not speaking, is one of our most powerful forms of learning this imbrication and developing a politics appropriate to it. All life listens for survival, as a means of detecting food, water, danger, or degraded conditions. Many species—from bees and plants to worms and whales—also listen in order to coordinate among themselves for food, shelter, defense. Call it politics, if you will.

Humans need to learn to listen better for exactly these purposes, for our survival and to coordinate among ourselves, in the context of earthly life. But we have such limited hearing, have filled the world with so much noise (and then slapped on noise-cancelling headphones to block it), and have so degraded the importance of listening compared to speech in political life, that revalorizing and training our listening capacities seems nothing short of revolutionary. Fortunately, the rich fields of sound studies and animal and plant science, along with digital technologies of many kinds, are our friends here.

Together these help us to hear and to understand what we are hearing, including pain, poisoning and death in human and nonhuman worlds. Imagine if we all actually listened to cries of pain and grief at the site of contemporary genocidal violence! Books like Karen Bakker's *The Sounds of Life*, Brandon LaBelle's *Acoustic Justice*, Eva Meijer's *When Animals Speak*, and Robin Wall Kimmerer's *Braiding Sweetgrass* open these doors. Donna Haraway, Anna Tsing, and the Latourian School contribute. The point is to develop an ecological ear that most indigenous communities had, and also to learn from nonhuman communications how to listen better. As Bakker writes, with digital bioacoustics “we can listen not only *to* turtles but also *like* turtles.” This technology “reveals subtleties that might escape human listeners.” Becoming such listeners facilitates enfranchising “nature” as part of us—a far better strategy than allocating nature human rights to obtain political protection.

Becoming listeners could deprovincialize the cares of democrats, allowing us to orient toward conditions for thriving beyond our personal or national borders. Nothing could be more important in a time of ecological emergency and the persistent violence of colonial modernity.

**cries of pain and grief
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