

WENDY BROWN / RAINER FORST

THE POWER OF TOLERANCE

A Debate

Edited by

Luca Di Blasi and Christoph F. E. Holzhey

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VERLAG TURIA + KANT
A-1010 Wien, Schottengasse 3A/5/DG1
Office Berlin: D-10827 Berlin, Crellestraße 14 / Remise
info@turia.at | www.turia.cc

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EDITORIAL NOTE

This volume documents the public discussion between Wendy Brown and Rainer Forst that took place on 8 December 2008 at the ICI Berlin Institute for Cultural Inquiry within the framework of the ICI series *Spannungsübungen*. The debate was planned and moderated by Antke Engel, and the epilogue for this publication was written by Christoph Holzhey and Luca Di Blasi in 2013.

THE POWER OF TOLERANCE

A Debate between Wendy Brown and Rainer Forst

ANTKE ENGEL: Good evening and a warm welcome to everyone. It is wonderful to have Wendy Brown and Rainer Forst as our guests of tonight's *Spannungsübung*, and I'm very enthused to see that so many of you are here, looking forward to an inspiring evening. We invited Wendy Brown, who is Emanuel Heller professor of political science at the University of California, Berkeley, and Rainer Forst, who is professor of political theory and philosophy at the Johann Wolfgang Goethe University in Frankfurt as well as co-director of the Research Cluster 'Formation of Normative Orders', because both have written major and very decisive books on tolerance as a political category.

Wendy Brown's *Regulating Aversion: Tolerance in the Age of Identity and Empire* makes an argument that tolerance is – among other things – an instrument of liberal governance and a discourse of power that legitimizes white Western supremacy and state violence.¹ Brown is particularly interested in the question as to how tolerance as a discourse of power has decidedly depoliticizing effects. Rainer Forst's *Toleration in Conflict* provides a genealogy of tolerance as a phenomenon that indicates socio-historical conflicts and suggests specific forms of conflict resolution that may reinforce as well as decrease social hierarchies and inequalities.² Forst is interested in figuring out how and

Before I hand over to our speakers let me say a few words about the structure of tonight's event. We will now start with short inputs by both Wendy Brown and Rainer Forst. After that they will have approximately twenty minutes' time to react to their respective talks, and then I would like to open the discussion for the audience. My moderation will be guided by the overarching question as to whether you see tolerance discourses as suited for modifying existing social and societal power relations. There are three major topics that I hope will be covered in the discussion. The first one is the topic of subject constitution: How does tolerance actually constitute specific subjectivities of those tolerating and those tolerated? The second one relates to conflicts: To what extent and how can conflicts be understood as productive tensions? Thirdly, I would like us to focus on the role of the state, on tolerance as a discourse of governmentality, and the question as to what extent tolerance depoliticizes the social field. And, of course, I am curious as to which modes and topics of tension will arise during the next two hours. And with these remarks I will end my little introduction and give the floor to Wendy Brown.

WENDY BROWN: It is a pleasure to be in Berlin, and it is a profound pleasure to be in the gorgeous Institute for Cultural Inquiry, which I have never seen before but plan on returning to. Before I begin, I have to thank Rainer, and this isn't a trick, it goes like this: Rainer is actually responsible, as he knows, for my work on tolerance. He invited me, some ten years ago, to contribute to an edited volume he was putting together on

tolerance and he had a very specific assignment for me.³ He asked if I would revisit Marcuse's little essay on 'repressive tolerance' and consider it in light of Foucault – to think about disciplinary dimensions of repressive tolerance.⁴ That would have been a wonderful essay, and somebody probably still should write it [*audience laughs*]. I thought it sounded interesting enough that I decided to say yes to Rainer. But when I read Marcuse's essay I was saddened to find that it didn't actually withstand the test of time very well, for a variety of reasons that I don't have to go into since I didn't write the essay and no one has yet. But, I didn't write that essay – instead I started thinking about tolerance, and I wrote a different essay and then I wrote a book. And, in some ways, Rainer probably thinks that he created a Frankenstein because the book I wrote, as you will see this evening, will quarrel with Rainer's own views on tolerance. It does not quarrel with his expertise – he is without question the expert in the intellectual history of tolerance and I won't even begin to compete with him there; that is not the kind of work I did. But we do have some arguments.

Now, in thinking about this conversation, I was looking for a way to avoid two things. One was a debate in which I was positioned as being against tolerance and Rainer was positioned as being for it. That would be possible; we could get positioned there and I felt Antke almost pressing us in that direction as she concluded her introduction – you see, in the end what is going to happen is the tension is going to be with Antke. I felt her almost pushing us in that direction as she concluded by suggesting that where we might re-

cetera. One possibility though, still within the ethics–politics distinction, is that on some level, what Rainer might be saying is that he does not think these kinds of things should be political. Then tolerance, rightly understood and rightly practised, would depoliticize, in the best sense, these kinds of events or phenomena by expanding the sphere of private and individual choice that is to be respected as non-negotiable in the public sphere. Another possibility is that Rainer believes that politics can be repaired or improved with an improved ethics, an ethics that is rooted in a formulation and practice of tolerance that grasps which norms can and must be justified, which norms can and cannot be wielded publicly, which norms are subject to rational debate and which are not. Now the problem, of course, is that this last possibility, as I’ve described it, brings us to precisely the debate I wanted to avoid: the Habermas-Foucault debate; so I’m going to stop there [*audience applauds*].

RAINER FORST: Well, first of all many thanks for the invitation to the ICI and to Antke for her kind introduction – and a special word of thanks to Wendy for going first and for asking so many important questions and thus making it a bit more difficult for me. Thanks a lot. It is a true pleasure to have the occasion here to have a discussion with Wendy because it is true that ten years ago we talked about toleration, even though, as she just reminded me, it was a few days after my kids were born and she remembers that I looked pretty wrecked at that time [*audience laughs*]. So it took us, or at least me, ten years to recover and to have a proper

discussion. And, of course, the essay that Wendy wrote for the collection that I had invited her to contribute to was a wonderful essay, and in no way would I think it is anything like a Frankenstein. But, let us see what we think of that at the end of this evening.

And just to make one more remark about that: indeed, it had been my idea to ask her to take a new look at Marcuse's 'repressive tolerance' because I thought there would of course be obvious differences in the way she approaches the topic and how Marcuse did quite some time ago, but also that many of his criticisms about the neutralizing and depoliticizing effects of toleration would reappear. And I think, in a sense, even though you were not too kind to Uncle Herbert, they do reappear in your work on toleration, but in a different guise within a different theoretical setting. So Wendy was quite right to reject the idea of presenting her analysis of toleration in anything like Marcusean terms.

Now, I am a Frankfurter and Frankfurters tell dialectical stories: some grand, some less grand. Mine in this very long book is pretty grand because it goes basically from Jesus to Wendy Brown. And in the two hours that I have been given to present some thoughts here I can't possibly do justice to that. So what can I do? I will try to explain the dialectics of toleration that I see at work, and I'll also try to address some of the challenges that Wendy – not just tonight, but in her work generally – puts to me, as I perceive them, because I think that I would not quite want to separate the issues as she has divided them: between me doing a normative and conceptual analysis of toleration on

EPILOGUE

Tensions in Tolerance

Luca Di Blasi and Christoph F. E. Holzhey

The debate between Wendy Brown and Rainer Forst, which took place in December 2008, was conceived and moderated by Antke Engel as a ‘*Spannungsübung*’, that is, an exercise *of* or *in* tension. This format was developed by Luca Di Blasi at the ICI Berlin in the context of its inaugural core project *Tension/Spannung*, which aims at reflecting upon one of the Institute’s guiding ideas: to explore ways of placing different cultures, discourses, and systems into productive confrontations, rather than insulating them from each other or arriving at a violent, pernicious conflict. *Spannungsübungen* are discussions that seek to identify subtle differences and elicit tensions between and inside differing positions without dramatizing them or forcing them into a rigid antagonism.¹ The debate *The Power of Tolerance* goes in many ways right to the core of the project *Tension/Spannung*. Not only does it exhibit and work through some tensions between the discussants’ approaches towards tolerance, but the very term ‘tolerance’ – as Brown and Forst conceive of it – also contains tension in several senses of the word.

In this epilogue, we would like to give a background for the discussion between Brown and Forst, individuate differences between them, and reflect upon some controversial aspects of the debate. In particular,

we will refer to some ideas they developed in their main books on tolerance – Forst’s *Toleranz im Konflikt* (*Toleration in Conflict*) and Brown’s *Regulating Aversion: Tolerance in the Age of Identity and Empire*.² At the same time, we would like to indicate how the debate is fruitful for a critical reflection on the productive potential not only of tension, but also of the figures of multistability and complementarity, on which the ICI Berlin has focused in the past few years. Conversely, we would like to suggest how these figures may be made productive for thinking about tolerance.

1. TOLERANCES

Anyone who deals with the notion of tolerance in some detail will very likely notice sooner or later that this apparently harmless notion is quite ‘elusive’.³ It responds to conflicts and at the same time produces them; it stands for a struggle against power and can be understood as a practice of power; it is mobilized as a demand for recognition, but can also be taken as a manifestation of contempt.⁴ Tolerance is a concept full of inner contradictions, and it is no wonder that different paradoxes can be connected with it.

The *tolerance paradox* is probably the most famous one: in order to preserve tolerance, one has to be intolerant towards those who are intolerant. Pushed to the extreme, this leads to an authoritarian ‘zero tolerance’ for the sake of securing tolerance. At the same time, there is the politically opposed, but similarly radical position that in an unjust society, tolerance favours

the persistence of social inequalities so that it is necessary – for the sake of furthering freedom, justice, and equality – to be intolerant even towards *tolerance*. This is the basic idea of Ludwig Marcuse’s famous essay ‘Repressive Tolerance’ from 1965, which became highly influential for student activism in the late 1960s.⁵

To some extent such paradoxes are already present in notions of tolerance used in other fields than those of morality and politics. The biological notion of ‘self-tolerance’, for instance, refers to the capacity of an organism to recognize endogenous substances and distinguish them from foreign substances that have to be repelled. In other words, the immune system is conceived as maintaining the organism’s identity and integrity through intolerance. However, when it becomes too intolerant and lacks in self-tolerance, one arrives at a condition called ‘autoimmunity’: unable to exclude anything from exclusion, the organism becomes completely intolerant and ends up destroying itself.

Despite such paradoxes, the notion of tolerance in biology – as well as in other scientific fields, such as medicine and technology – seems less elusive. It indicates here a degree of indifference of systems to variation, or their capacity to remain unaffected by changing environmental influences. One thus speaks of thermal, physiological, and drug (in)tolerance. In engineering, fault-tolerant design seeks to ensure that a system continues to operate even when some of its components fail or information is lost during transmission. Pain tolerance has to do with the capacity of sensitive living beings to resist pain, while ‘frustration tol-

NOTES ON THE CONTRIBUTORS

WENDY BROWN is Class of 1936 First Professor of Political Science at the University of California Berkeley, where she is also affiliated with the Department of Rhetoric and the Program in Critical Theory. Her work in political theory focuses on questions of power, the making of subjects and citizens, sovereignty, democracy, and de-democratization; she also has long-standing interests in theories of capitalism and in feminist and critical race theory. Her books in English include *Manhood and Politics: A Feminist Reading in Political Theory* (Totowa: Roman and Littlefield, 1989), *States of Injury: Power and Freedom in Late Modernity* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1995), *Politics Out of History* (Princeton UP, 2001), *Left Legalism/Left Critique* (Durham: Duke UP, 2002, co-edited), *Edgework: Essays on Knowledge and Politics* (Princeton UP, 2005), *Regulating Aversion: Tolerance in the Age of Identity and Empire* (Princeton UP, 2006), and *Walled States, Waning Sovereignty* (New York: Zone Books, 2010). She is currently completing a book provisionally entitled *The Demos Undone: Neoliberalism, Democracy, Citizenship*. Her work has been translated into more than twenty languages.

LUCA DI BLASI is University Lecturer in Philosophy at the Universität Bern. Until the end of 2013, he was Academic Assistant to the Director at the ICI Berlin

Institute for Cultural Inquiry. He has published widely on the topic of philosophy of religion, including *Der Geist in der Revolte: Der Gnostizismus und seine Wiederkehr in der Postmoderne* (Munich: Fink, 2002). His last publications include *Der weiße Mann: Ein Anti-Manifest* (Bielefeld: transcript, 2013), *The Scandal of Self-Contradiction: Pasolini's Multistable Geographies, Subjectivities, and Traditions*, co-edited with M. Gagnolati and C. F. E. Holzhey (Vienna: Turia + Kant, 2012), and Boris Groys and Vittorio Höslé, *Die Vernunft an die Macht: Ein Streitgespräch*, co-edited with Marc Jongen (Turia + Kant, 2011). He is currently completing a new book on the decentring of the secular.

ANTKE ENGEL is director of the Institute for Queer Theory in Berlin (www.queer-institut.de) and works as independent scholar in the fields of queer, feminist and poststructuralist theory, political philosophy, and cultural politics. She received her PhD in Philosophy at Potsdam University in 2001, was research fellow at the ICI Berlin Institute for Cultural Inquiry in 2007–09, and held visiting professorships for Queer Theory at the Universities of Hamburg and of Vienna in 2003–05 and 2011. She is author of *Wider die Eindeutigkeit* (Frankfurt a. M.: Campus, 2002) and *Bilder von Sexualität und Ökonomie* (Bielefeld: transcript, 2009), and co-editor of *Hegemony and Heteronormativity* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2011).

RAINER FORST is Professor of Political Theory and Philosophy at the Goethe University Frankfurt am Main.

He is Co-Director of the Research Cluster on the ‘Formation of Normative Orders’, of the Centre for Advanced Studies ‘Justitia Amplificata’ and Member of the Directorate of the Institute for Advanced Study in the Humanities in Bad Homburg. He has taught at the Free University Berlin, the New School for Social Research in New York, and Dartmouth College. His work in moral and political philosophy focuses on questions of justification, justice, and toleration; his major publications are *Contexts of Justice* (Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp, 1994; Berkeley: U of California P, 2002), *Toleration in Conflict* (Suhrkamp, 2003; Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2013), *The Right to Justification* (Suhrkamp, 2007; New York: Columbia UP, 2012), *Justification and Critique* (Suhrkamp, 2011; Cambridge: Polity Press, 2013). In 2012, he received the Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz Price of the German Research Foundation, the highest honor awarded to German researchers.

CHRISTOPH F. E. HOLZHEY is the founding director of the ICI Berlin Institute for Cultural Inquiry and led the core project *Tension/Spannung* with its recent foci on *Multistable Figures* and *Complementarity*. He received a PhD in theoretical physics (1993) and another one in German literature with a dissertation on the critical potential of paradoxical pleasures (2001). He has edited several volumes in the series *Cultural Inquiry* with Turia + Kant in Vienna: *Tension/Spannung* (2011), *The Scandal of Self-Contradiction: Pasolini’s Multistable Subjectivities, Traditions, Geographies* (with L. Di Blasi and M. Gagnolati, 2012), *Situiertes Wissen*

und regionale Epistemologie: Zur Aktualität Georges Canguilhems und Donna J. Haraways (with A. Deuber-Mankowsky, 2013), and *Multistable Figures: On the Critical Potentials of Ir/Reversible Aspect-seeing* (2014).