Wendy Brown’s 2006 book *Regulating Aversions : Tolerance in the Age of Identity and Empire* offers a compelling critique of tolerance in the age of triumphant liberalism. The second part of chapter 1 is titled ”Tolerance and/as depoliticization” and tries to reveal how tolerance is intertwined with a process of depoliticization.

1 Two Kinds of Tolerance

The author starts by identifying two kinds of tolerance:

1. *Personal* tolerance, which can hardly be criticized, refers to “a willingness to abide the offensive or disturbing predilections and tastes of others” (p. 13). An example of this kind of tolerance is to tolerate somebody’s irritating personality.

2. *Governmentality* of tolerance, a “political discourse concerned with designated modalities of diversity, identity, justice, and civic cohabitation” (p. 13). This kind of tolerance is not related to withholding one’s action in response to individual dislikes but rather to the ”enactment of social, political, religious, and cultural norms” (p. 13).

What interests Brown is this second type of tolerance or rather, call for tolerance. According to her, its true, somehow hidden objective is to produce and manage

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identities by making them the object of tolerance. It does so by depoliticizing and naturalizing the discriminatory processes that create these identities (p. 14). It justifies itself by taking the position of a mediator that needs to be there in order to lessen what it portrays as a natural conflict between identities:

That is, tolerance discourse reduces conflict to an inherent friction among identities and makes religious, ethnic, and cultural difference itself an inherent site of conflict, one that calls for and is attenuated by the practice of tolerance. (p. 15)

2 Two Meanings of Depoliticization

The process of depoliticization has two meanings for Brown:

1. The remove of the politics from its historical and power context

2. The replacement of a justice project with a therapeutic one

The first case involves “removing a political phenomenon from comprehension of its historical emergence and from a recognition of the powers that produce and contour it”. Depoliticization replaces those phenomenons by “an ontological naturalness or essentialism”. Removed from the context that actually produce and situate both the tolerated object and the tolerating subject, the former “appears as a natural provocation” to the latter.

When, for example, middle and high schoolers are urged to tolerate one another’s race, ethnicity, culture, religion, or sexual orientation, there is no suggestion that the differences at issue, or the identities through which these differences are negotiated, have been socially and historically constituted and are themselves the effect of power and hegemonic norms, or even of certain discourses about race, ethnicity, sexuality, and culture. Rather, difference itself is what students learn they must tolerate. (p. 16)

The second meaning of depoliticization for Brown is the result of using “emotional and personal vocabularies” when talking about politics. This idea has the effect to reduce human suffering into a matter of personal feeling and justice into a matter of respect and sensitivity. Thus, “the field of political battle and political
transformation is replaced with an agenda of behavioral, attitudinal, and emotional practices”. (p. 16)

3 Four Sources of Depoliticization that Facilitate Tolerance

The author summarizes and concludes her views by analyzing the various sources of depoliticizations that she believes facilitate tolerance. She identifies four such sources:

1. **Liberalism**, a view of the world that focuses on the individual as a self-making, self-responsible agent, thus removing from view the norms and social relations linked to capital, gender, race, sexuality, etc.

2. **Individualism** which she qualifies as a “child’s view of history and politics” that “right attitude produces justice” (p. 18)

3. **Market rationality**, a “saturation of every feature of social and political life with entrepreneurial and consumer discourse” from which results what she refers to as a “neoliberal political rationality” that hides from view the true constitutive powers that create social relations. These three first sources “make nearly everything seem a matter of individual agency or will, on the one hand, or fortune or contingency on the other” (p. 18).

4. **Culturalization of politics**, that is, the replacement of political conflict by cultural dynamics. For example, “the interchangeability of ‘Arab American’ and ‘Muslim’ in American political discourse is as routine as is elision of the fact that many Palestinians are Christians and some Israelis are Arabs” (p. 19).

4 Liberalism vs Culture

Wendy Brown concludes by showing how this “culturalization of politics” is embedded in liberalism’s self-representation as being “above” culture. Liberalism con-

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1The author makes a parallel with the cold war era, where politics was reduced to ideology (p. 19).
structs this representation by displaying its principles as universal and by privatizing culture. (p. 23) For liberalism, culture is the Other:

Liberalism presumes to convert culture’s collectively binding powers, its shared and public qualities, into individual and privately lived choices. (p. 21)

But liberalism is a cultural form that is always tainted with nonliberal culture. It is “always institutionalized, constitutionalized, and governmentalized in articulation with other cultural norms—those of kinship, race, gender, sexuality, work, politics, leisure, and more.” (p. 23)

The main advantage of building this self-image is that it makes liberalism look like it is exceedingly tolerant and thus “incapable of cultural imperialism”:

In its self-representation as the sole political doctrine that can harbor culture and religion without being conquered by them, liberalism casts itself as uniquely tolerant of culture from its position above culture. But liberalism is no more above or outside culture than is any other political form (p. 23)

Wendy Brown finishes by challenging both the “culturalization of politics that tolerance discourse draws from” and the self-proclaimed “a-cultural nature of liberalism”. To her, recognizing liberalism as a form of culture reveals how it is already “mixed” with what it identifies as the “fundamentalist Other” and, as thus, has the potential to recognize and relate to this Other.

In this possibility may be contained liberalism’s prospects for renewal, even for redemption, or at the very least for more modest and peaceful practices. (p. 23)

References