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**Wendy Brown: Regulating Aversion**

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## TOLERANCE AS A DISCOURSE OF DEPOLITICIZATION

Can't we all just get along?

—Rodney King

An enemy is someone whose story you have not heard.

—epigraph of “Living Room Dialogues  
on the Middle East”

Tolerance is not a product of politics, religion or culture. Liberals and conservatives, evangelicals and atheists, whites, Latinos, Asians, and blacks . . . are equally capable of tolerance and intolerance. . . . [T]olerance has much less to do with our opinions than with what we feel and how we live.

—Sarah Bullard, *Teaching Tolerance*

How did tolerance become a beacon of multicultural justice and civic peace at the turn of the twenty-first century? A mere generation ago, tolerance was widely recognized in the United States as a code word for mannered racialism. Early in the civil rights era, many white northerners staked their superiority to their southern brethren on a contrast between northern tolerance and southern bigotry. But racial tolerance was soon exposed as a subtle form of Jim Crow, one that did not resort to routine violence, formal segregation, or other overt tactics of superordination but reproduced white supremacy all the same. This exposé in turn metamorphosed into an artifact of social knowledge: well into the 1970s, racial tolerance remained a term of left and liberal derision, while religious tolerance seemed so basic to liberal orders that it was as rarely discussed as it was tested. Freedom and equality, rather than tolerance, became the

watchwords of justice projects on behalf of the excluded, subordinated, or marginalized.

Since the mid-1980s, however, there has been something of a global renaissance in tolerance talk. Tolerance surged back into use in the late twentieth century as multiculturalism became a central problematic of liberal democratic citizenship; as Third World immigration threatened the ethnicized identities of Europe, North America, and Australia; as indigenous peoples pursued claims of reparation, belonging, and entitlement; as ethnically coded civil conflict became a critical site of international disorder; and as Islamic religious identity intensified and expanded into a transnational political force. Tolerance talk also became prominent as domestic norms of integration and assimilation gave way to concerns with identity and difference on the left and as the rights claims of various minorities were spurned as “special” rather than universal on the right.

Today, tolerance is uncritically promoted across a wide range of venues and for a wide range of purposes. At United Nations conferences and in international human rights campaigns, tolerance is enumerated, along with freedom of conscience and speech, as a fundamental component of universal human dignity. In Europe, tolerance is prescribed as the appropriate bearing toward recent Third World immigrants, Roma, and (still) Jews and as the solution to civil strife in the Balkans. In the United States, tolerance is held out as the key to peaceful coexistence in racially divided neighborhoods, the potential fabric of community in diversely populated public schools, the corrective for abusive homophobia in the military and elsewhere, and the antidote for rising rates of hate crime. Tolerance was the ribbon hung around the choice of an orthodox Jew for the Democratic vice presidential nominee in the 2000 presidential elections and the rubric under which George W. Bush, upon taking office in his first term, declared that appointees in his administration would not have their sexual orientations scrutinized . . . or revealed. Schools teach tolerance, the state preaches tolerance, religious and secular civic associations promulgate tolerance. The current American “war on terrorism” is being fought, in part, in its name. Moreover, even as certain contemporary conservatives identify tolerance as a codeword for endorsing homosexuality,

tolerance knows no political party: it is what liberals and leftists reproach a religious, xenophobic, and homophobic right for lacking, but also what evangelical Christians claim that secular liberals refuse them and what conservative foreign policy ideologues claim America cherishes and “radical Islamicists” abhor.<sup>1</sup> Combined with this bewildering array of sites and calls for tolerance is an impressive range of potential objects of tolerance, including cultures, races, ethnicities, sexualities, ideologies, lifestyle and fashion choices, political positions, religions, and even regimes.

Moreover, tolerance has never enjoyed a unified meaning across the nations and cultures that have valued, practiced, or debated it. It has a variety of historical strands, has been provoked or revoked in relation to diverse conflicts, and has been inflected by distinct political traditions and constitutions. Today, even within the increasingly politically and economically integrated Euro-Atlantic world, tolerance signifies differently and attaches to different objects in different national contexts; for example, tolerance is related to but not equivalent to *laïcité* in France, as the recent French debate over the *hijab* made clear. And practices of tolerance in Holland, England, Canada, Australia, and Germany not only draw on distinct intellectual and political lineages but are focused on different contemporary objects—sexuality, immigrants, or indigenous peoples—that themselves call for different modalities of tolerance. That is, modalities of tolerance talk that have issued from postcolonial encounters with indigenous peoples in settler colonies do not follow the same logics as those that have issued from European encounters with immigrants from its former colonies or those that are centered on patriarchal religious anxieties about insubordinate gender and sexual practices. Similarly, an Islamic state seeking to develop codes of tolerance inflects the term differently than does a Euro-Atlantic political imaginary within which the nation-states of the West are presumed always already tolerant.

Given this proliferation of and variation in agents, objects, and political cadences of tolerance, it may be tempting to conclude that it is too polymorphous and unstable to analyze as a political or moral discourse. I pursue another hypothesis here: that the semiotically polyvalent, politically promiscuous, and sometimes incoherent use of tol-

erance in contemporary American life, closely considered and critically theorized, can be made to reveal important features of our political time and condition. The central question of this study is not “What is tolerance?” or even “What has become of the idea of tolerance?” but, What kind of political discourse, with what social and political effects, is contemporary tolerance talk in the United States? What readings of the discourses of liberalism, colonialism, and imperialism circulating through Western democracies can analytical scrutiny of this talk provide? The following chapters aim to track the social and political work of tolerance discourse by comprehending how this discourse constructs and positions liberal and nonliberal subjects, cultures, and regimes; how it figures conflict, stratification, and difference; how it operates normatively; and how its normativity is rendered oblique almost to the point of invisibility.

These aims require an appreciation of tolerance as not only protean in meaning but also historically and politically discursive in character. They require surrendering an understanding of tolerance as a transcendent or universal concept, principle, doctrine, or virtue so that it can be considered instead as a political discourse and practice of *governmentality* that is historically and geographically variable in purpose, content, agents, and objects. As a consortium of para-legal and para-statist practices in modern constitutional liberalism—practices that are associated with the liberal state and liberal legalism but are not precisely codified by it—tolerance is exemplary of Foucault’s account of governmentality as that which organizes “the conduct of conduct” at a variety of sites and through rationalities not limited to those formally countenanced as political. Absent the precise dictates, articulations, and prohibitions associated with the force of law, tolerance nevertheless produces and positions subjects, orchestrates meanings and practices of identity, marks bodies, and conditions political subjectivities. This production, positioning, orchestration, and conditioning is achieved not through a rule or a concentration of power, but rather through the dissemination of tolerance discourse across state institutions; civic venues such as schools, churches, and neighborhood associations; ad hoc social groups and political events; and international institutions or forums.<sup>2</sup>

When I commenced this study in the late 1990s, I was almost exclusively concerned with *domestic* tolerance talk. My interest in the subject was piqued by the peculiar character of the discourse of tolerance in contemporary civic and especially pedagogical culture in the United States. As multicultural projects of enfranchisement, cooperation, and conflict reduction embraced the language of tolerance, clearly both the purview and purpose of tolerance had undergone changes from its Reformation-era concern with minoritarian religious belief and modest freedom of conscience. In its current usage, tolerance seemed less a strategy of protection than a telos of multicultural citizenship, and focused less on belief than on identity broadly construed. The genuflection to tolerance in the literatures, mottos, and mission statements of schools, religious associations, and certain civic institutions suggested that what once took shape as an instrument of civic peace and an alternative to the violent exclusion or silencing of religious dissidents had metamorphosed into a generalized language of antiprejudice and now betokened a vision of the good society yet to come. And if this vision was promulgated by actors across the political spectrum, its praises as likely to be sung by a neoconservative American president or attorney general as by a United Nations chief or a leftist community organizer, tolerance was clearly having a strange new life at the turn of the century.

In the context of this profusion of subjects and objects of tolerance, this uncritical embrace of tolerance across a diverse ideological field, and this apparent conversion of tolerance from a particular form of protection against violent persecution to a late-twentieth-century vision of the good society, my questions were these: What kind of governmental and regulatory functions might tolerance discourse perform in contemporary liberal democratic nation-states? What kind of civil order does tolerance configure or envision? What kind of social subject does it produce? What kind of citizen does it hail, with what orientation to politics, to the state, and to fellow citizens? What kind of state legitimation might it supply and in response to what legitimation deficits? What kind of justice might it promise and what kinds might it compromise or displace? What retreat from stronger ideals of justice is conveyed by giving tolerance pride of place in a moral-political

vision of the good? What kind of fatalism about the persistence of hostile and irreconcilable differences in the body politic might its promulgation carry?

The original project, then, was to be a consideration of the constructive and regulatory effects of tolerance as a discourse of justice, citizenship, and community in late modern, multicultural liberal democracies, with a focus on the United States. However, in the aftermath of September 11, political rhetorics of Islam, nationalism, fundamentalism, culture, and civilization have reframed even domestic discourses of tolerance—the enemy of tolerance is now the weaponized radical Islamicist state or terror cell rather than the neighborhood bigot—and have certainly changed the cultural pitch of tolerance in the international sphere. While some of these changes have simply brought to the surface long-present subterranean norms in liberal tolerance discourse, others have articulated tolerance for genuinely new purposes. These include the legitimation of a new form of imperial state action in the twenty-first century, a legitimation tethered to a constructed opposition between a cosmopolitan West and its putatively fundamentalist Other. Tolerance thus emerges as part of a civilizational discourse that identifies both tolerance and the tolerable with the West, marking nonliberal societies and practices as candidates for an intolerable barbarism that is itself signaled by the putative intolerance ruling these societies. In the mid-nineteenth through mid-twentieth centuries, the West imagined itself as standing for civilization against primitivism, and in the cold war years for freedom against tyranny; now these two recent histories are merged in the warring figures of the free, the tolerant, and the civilized on one side, and the fundamentalist, the intolerant, and the barbaric on the other.

As it altered certain emphases in liberal discourse itself, so, too, did the post-September 11 era alter the originally intended course of this study. The new era demanded that questions about tolerance as a domestic governmentality producing and regulating ethnic, religious, racial, and sexual subjects be supplemented with questions about the operation of tolerance in and as a civilizational discourse distinguishing Occident from Orient, liberal from nonliberal regimes, “free” from “unfree” peoples. Such questions include the following: If toler-

ance is a political principle used to mark an opposition between liberal and fundamentalist orders, how might liberal tolerance discourse function not only to anoint Western superiority but also to legitimate Western cultural and political imperialism? That is, how might this discourse actually promote Western supremacy and aggression even as it veils them in the modest dress of tolerance? How might tolerance, the very virtue that Samuel Huntington advocates for preempting a worldwide clash of civilizations, operate as a key element in a civilizational discourse that codifies the superiority and legitimates the superordination of the West? What is the work of tolerance discourse in a contemporary *imperial* liberal governmentality? What kind of subject is thought to be capable of tolerance? What sort of rationality and sociality is tolerance imagined to require and what sorts are thought to inhibit it—in other words, what anthropological presuppositions does liberal tolerance entail and circulate?

In the end, the effort to understand tolerance as a domestic discourse of ethnic, racial, and sexual regulation, on the one hand, and as an international discourse of Western supremacy and imperialism on the other, did not have to remain permanently forked. Contemporary domestic and global discourses of tolerance, while appearing at first blush to have relatively distinct objects and aims, are increasingly melded in encomiums to tolerance, such as those featured in the Simon Wiesenthal Museum of Tolerance discussed in chapter 4, and are also analytically interlinked. The conceit of secularism undergirding the promulgation of tolerance within multicultural liberal democracies not only legitimates their intolerance of and aggression toward non-liberal states or transnational formations but also glosses the ways in which certain cultures and religions are marked in advance as ineligible for tolerance while others are so hegemonic as to not even register *as* cultures or religions; they are instead labeled “mainstream” or simply “American.” In this way, tolerance discourse in the United States, while posing as both a universal value and an impartial practice, designates certain beliefs and practices as civilized and others as barbaric, both at home and abroad; it operates from a conceit of neutrality that is actually thick with bourgeois Protestant norms. The moral autonomy of the individual at the heart of liberal tolerance discourse is also

critical in drawing the line between the tolerable and the intolerable, both domestically and globally, and thereby serves to sneak liberalism into a civilizational discourse that claims to be respectful of all cultures and religions, many of which it would actually undermine by “liberalizing,” and, conversely, to sneak civilizational discourse into liberalism. This is not to say that tolerance in civilizational discourse is reducible to liberalism; in fact, it is strongly shaped by the legacy of the colonial settler-native encounter as well as the postcolonial encounter between white and indigenous, colonized, or expropriated peoples. This strain in the lexicon and ethos of tolerance, while not reducible to a liberal grammar and analytics, is nonetheless mediated by them and also constitutes an element in the constitutive outside of liberalism over the past three centuries.<sup>3</sup> Tolerance is thus a crucial analytic hinge between the constitution of abject domestic subjects and barbarous global ones, between liberalism and the justification of its imperial and colonial adventures.

Put slightly differently, tolerance as a mode of late modern governmentality that iterates the normalcy of the powerful and the deviance of the marginal responds to, links, and tames both unruly domestic identities or affinities and nonliberal transnational forces that tacitly or explicitly challenge the universal standing of liberal precepts. Tolerance regulates the presence of the Other both inside and outside the liberal democratic nation-state, and often it forms a circuit between them that legitimates the most illiberal actions of the state by means of a term consummately associated with liberalism.

#### TOLERANCE AS A DISCOURSE OF POWER AND A PRACTICE OF GOVERNMENTALITY

As will already be apparent, the questions with which this study is concerned place it to one side of contemporary philosophical, historical, political-theoretical, and legal considerations of tolerance as a benignly positive, if difficult, individual and collective practice. In philosophy and ethics, tolerance is typically conceived as an individual virtue, issuing from and respecting the value of moral autonomy, and acting as a sharp rein on the impulse to legislate against morally or re-

ligiously repugnant beliefs and behaviors.<sup>4</sup> Political theorists debate the appropriate purview and limits of tolerance and probe the problem of nonreciprocity between more and less tolerant individuals, cultures, or regimes.<sup>5</sup> In Western history, while scholars have unearthed premodern pockets of tolerance practice, tolerance as a political principle is mostly treated as the offspring of classical liberalism and, more precisely, as a product of the bloody early modern religious wars that initiated the prising apart of political and religious authority and the carving out of a space of individual autonomy from both.<sup>6</sup> In comparative cultural and political analysis, the standard contrast is between the millet system of tolerance famously associated with the Ottoman Empire (also practiced in limited ways in ancient Greece and Rome, medieval England, medieval China, and modern India), which divided society into communities grouped by religion, and the form of Protestant tolerance, with its emphasis on individual conscience, that flowered in the West. In American law, tolerance is either First Amendment territory or is placed on the relatively newer legal terrain of group rights and sovereignty claims.<sup>7</sup> In international law, tolerance is among the panoply of goods promised by a universal doctrine of human rights.

While benefiting substantially from these literatures, this study also works to one side of them. Rather than treating tolerance as an independent or self-consistent principle, doctrine, or practice of cohabitation, it aims to comprehend political deployments of tolerance as historically and culturally specific discourses of power with strong rhetorical functions.<sup>8</sup> Above all, it seeks to track the complex involvement of tolerance with power. As a moral-political practice of governmentality, tolerance has significant cultural, social, and political effects that exceed its surface operations of reducing conflict or of protecting the weak or the minoritized, and that exceed its formal goals and self-representation. These include contributions to political and civic subject formation and to the articulation of the political, the social, citizenship, justice, the nation, and civilization. Tolerance can function as a substitute for or as a supplement to formal liberal equality or liberty; it can also overtly block the pursuit of substantive equality and freedom. At times, tolerance shores up troubled orders of

power, repairs state legitimacy, glosses troubled universalisms, and provides cover for imperialism. There are mobilizations of tolerance that do not simply alleviate but rather circulate racism, homophobia, and ethnic hatreds; likewise, there are mobilizations that legitimize racist state violence. Not all deployments of tolerance do all of these things all the time. But the concern of this study is to consider how, when, and why these effects occur as part of the operation of tolerance, rather than to ignore them or treat them as “externalities” vis-à-vis tolerance’s main project.

Does such a relentlessly critical set of concerns mean that this is a book “against tolerance”? Comprehending tolerance in terms of power and as a productive force—one that fashions, regulates, and positions subjects, citizens, and states as well as one that legitimates certain kinds of actions—does not lead to a roundly negative judgment. To reveal the operations of power, governance, and subject production entailed in particular deployments of tolerance certainly divests them of a wholly blessed status, puncturing the aura of pure goodness that contemporary invocations of tolerance carry; but this fall from grace does not strip tolerance of all value in reducing violence or in developing certain habits of civic cohabitation. The recognition that discourses of tolerance inevitably articulate identity and difference, belonging and marginality, and civilization and barbarism, and that they invariably do so on behalf of hegemonic social or political powers, does not automatically negate the worth of tolerance in attenuating certain kinds of violence or abuse. Without question tolerance has been adduced at times for such purposes, from early modern efforts to stop the burning alive of religious heretics and bloody civil wars to the contemporary willingness of people who disapprove of racial mixing to forswear attempts to impose their views on others or enact them as law. Conversely, all encomiums to tolerance need not be aimed at limiting violence or subordination for some to have this aim, and degrees and forms of subordination and abjection in tolerance discourse vary substantially. For example, though tolerance of homosexuals today is often advocated as an alternative to full legal equality, this stance is significantly different from promulgating tolerance of homosexuals as an alternative to harassing, incarcerating, or

institutionalizing them; the former opposes tolerance to equality and bids to maintain the abject civic status of the homosexual while the latter opposes tolerance to cruelty, violence, or civic expulsion.

To remove the scales from our eyes about the innocence of tolerance in relation to power is not thereby to reject tolerance as useless or worse. Rather, it changes the status of tolerance from a transcendental virtue to a historically protean element of liberal governance, a re-situating that casts tolerance as a vehicle for producing and organizing subjects, a framework for state action and state speech, and an aspect of liberalism's legitimation. Yet the initial counterintuitiveness of this claim, our commonplace inclination to view tolerance as a moral rather than political practice, reminds us what an unusual figure tolerance is in liberal democracy today. Like civility, with which it is often linked, tolerance is a political value and sometimes even a *dic-tum*, but it is not precisely formulated or enshrined in law.<sup>9</sup> While the First Amendment may be understood as a constitutional codification of tolerance in the United States, it is significant that the word appears nowhere in the amendment itself; in addition, most contemporary domestic iterations of tolerance pertain to race, ethnicity, sexuality, culture, or "lifestyle," none of which is among the freedoms expressly guaranteed by this amendment. Moreover, liberal democracies feature no "right to tolerance," although their liberties of religion, assembly, and speech may together be considered to promote a tolerant regime or a tolerant society. Nor is there a "crime of intolerance," even as intolerance is often linked to "hate crime" and is also invoked to cast aspersion on regimes or societies figured as dangerous in their orthodoxy or fundamentalism. Thus, within secular liberal democratic states it is safe to say that tolerance functions politically and socially, but not legally, to propagate understandings and practices regarding how people within a nation, or regimes within an international system, can and ought to cohabit. So while tolerance may be a state or civic principle, while it may figure prominently in the preambles of constitutions or policy documents and may conceptually undergird laws and judicial decisions concerning freedom of religion, speech, and association, tolerance as such is not legally or doctrinally codified.<sup>10</sup> Nor can it be, both because the meaning and work of tolerance

is bound to its very plasticity—to when, where, and how far it will stretch—and because its legitimating goodness is tied to virtue, not to injunction or legality. Virtue is exercised and emanates from within; it cannot be organized as a right or rule, let alone commanded.

Conventionally, tolerance is adduced for beliefs or practices that may be morally, socially, or ideologically offensive but are not in direct conflict with the law. Thus, law constitutes one limit of the reach of tolerance, designating its purview as personal or private matters within the range of what is legal. Laws, of course, may be changed in the name of greater tolerance, as in the repeal of antimiscegenation or antisodomy laws, or in the name of less tolerance, as in laws banning same-sex marriage or restricting abortion. But in each case, the negotiation is between what is deemed a private or individual choice appropriately beyond the reach of law (hence tolerable) and what is deemed a matter of the public interest (hence not a matter of tolerance).<sup>11</sup> Again, tolerance is generally a civic or social practice that may be sanctioned by law but is not precisely encoded or regulated by it; we are tolerant not by law but in addition to the law. Nor are there today laws of tolerance as there are laws, say, of equality, liberty, or the franchise; and when we glance back at edicts of tolerance in past centuries, they appear incompatible with contemporary standards of egalitarianism, since they did not merely protect but simultaneously stigmatized and overtly regulated the group they targeted. This suggests that the legal codification of tolerance necessarily recedes as the purview of formal equality is expanded. But it does not follow that tolerance as governmentality therefore declines or disappears; rather, it is resituated to the para-legal and para-statist status described above.

What are the implications of the fact that the cultural-political field of tolerance as a civic practice is largely *inside* the domain demarcated as legal? First, that position makes it difficult to see the extent to which tolerance at times functions as a supplement to liberal legalism and liberal egalitarianism, a function discussed at length in chapters 3 and 4. Second, the identification of the virtue of tolerance with voluntary rather than coerced or mandated behavior makes it difficult to see tolerance as a practice of power and regulation—in short, as a practice

of governmentality. Third, insofar as the legal and the political are generally conflated in liberal democratic thought, the practice of tolerance occurs off the radar screen of the formally political, in a space remaindered by liberal legalism. All of these factors contribute to the depoliticizing functions of tolerance and the depoliticization of tolerance, matters to which we now turn.

#### TOLERANCE AND/AS DEPOLITICIZATION

Some scholars of tolerance have attempted to distinguish *tolerance*, the attitude or virtue, from *toleration*, the practice.<sup>12</sup> For this study, a different distinction is useful, one that is both provisional and porous but that may stem the tendency, mentioned earlier, to mistake an insistence on the involvement of tolerance with power for a rejection or condemnation of tolerance. The distinction is between a personal ethic of tolerance, an ethic that issues from an individual commitment and has objects that are largely individualized, and a political discourse, regime, or governmentality of tolerance that involves a particular mode of depoliticizing and organizing the social. A tolerant individual bearing, understood as a willingness to abide the offensive or disturbing predilections and tastes of others, is surely an inarguable good in many settings: a friend's irritating laugh, a student's distressing attire, a colleague's religious zeal, the repellent smell of a stranger, a neighbor's horrid taste in garden plants—these provocations do not invite my action, or even my comment, and the world is surely a more gracious and graceful place if I can be tolerant in the face of them. Every human being, perhaps even every sentient animal, routinely exercises tolerance at this level. But tolerance as a political discourse concerned with designated modalities of diversity, identity, justice, and civic cohabitation is another matter. It involves not simply the withholding of speech or action in response to contingent individual dislikes or violations of taste but the enactment of social, political, religious, and cultural norms; certain practices of licensing and regulation; the marking of subjects of tolerance as inferior, deviant, or marginal vis-à-vis those practicing tolerance; and a justification for sometimes dire or even deadly action when the limits of tolerance are

considered breached. Tolerance of this sort does not simply address identity but abets in its production; it also abets in the conflation of culture with ethnicity or race and the conflation of belief or consciousness with phenotype. And it naturalizes as it depoliticizes these processes to render identity itself an object of tolerance. These are consequential achievements.

In cautiously distinguishing an individual bearing from a political discourse of tolerance, I am not arguing that the two are unrelated, nor am I suggesting that the former is always good, benign, or free of power while the latter is bad, oppressive, or power-laden. Not only does tolerance as a public value have its place, and not only does the political discourse give shape to the individual ethos and vice versa, but even an individual bearing of tolerance in nonpolitical arenas carries authority and potential subjection through unavowed norms. Almost all objects of tolerance are marked as deviant, marginal, or undesirable by virtue of being tolerated, and the action of tolerance inevitably affords some access to superiority, even as settings or dynamics of mutual tolerance may complicate renderings of superordination and superiority as matters of relatively fixed status.

Again, if tolerance is never innocent of power or normativity, this serves only to locate it solidly in the realm of the human and hence make it inappropriate for conceptualizations of morality and virtue that fancy themselves independent of power and subjection. Of itself, however, this revaluation does not yet indicate what the specifically political problematics of tolerance are. These are set not by the presence of power in the exercise of tolerance but, rather, by the historical, social, and cultural particulars of this presence in specific deployments of tolerance as well as in discourses with which tolerance intersects, including those of equality, freedom, culture, enfranchisement, and Western civilization. Tolerance as such is not the problem. Rather, the call for tolerance, the invocation of tolerance, and the attempt to instantiate tolerance are all signs of identity production and identity management in the context of orders of stratification or marginalization in which the production, the management, and the context themselves are disavowed. In short, they are signs of a buried order of politics.

Part of the project of this book, then, is to analyze tolerance, especially in its recently resurgent form, as a strand of depoliticization in liberal democracies. Depoliticization involves construing inequality, subordination, marginalization, and social conflict, which all require political analysis and political solutions, as personal and individual, on the one hand, or as natural, religious, or cultural on the other. Tolerance works along both vectors of depoliticization—it personalizes and it naturalizes or culturalizes—and sometimes it intertwines them. Tolerance as it is commonly used today tends to cast instances of inequality or social injury as matters of individual or group prejudice. And it tends to cast group conflict as rooted in ontologically natural hostility toward essentialized religious, ethnic, or cultural difference. 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. As I will suggest momentarily, tolerance is hardly the cause of the naturalization of political conflict and the ontologization of politically produced identity in liberal democracies, but it is facilitated by and abets these processes.

Although depoliticization sometimes personalizes, sometimes culturalizes, and sometimes naturalizes conflict, these tactical variations are tethered to a common mechanics, which is what makes it possible to speak of depoliticization as a coherent phenomenon.<sup>13</sup> Depoliticization involves removing a political phenomenon from comprehension of its *historical* emergence and from a recognition of the *powers* that produce and contour it. No matter its particular form and mechanics, depoliticization always eschews power and history in the representation of its subject. When these two constitutive sources of social relations and political conflict are elided, an ontological naturalness or essentialism almost inevitably takes up residence in our understandings and explanations. In the case at hand, an object of tolerance analytically divested of constitution by history and power is identified as naturally and essentially different from the tolerating subject; in this difference, it appears as a natural provocation to that which tolerates it. Moreover, not merely the parties to tolerance but the very scene of tolerance is naturalized, ontologized in its constitution as produced by

the problem of difference itself. 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.<sup>14</sup> Rather, difference itself is what students learn they must tolerate.

In addition to depoliticization as a mode of dispossessing the constitutive histories and powers organizing contemporary problems and contemporary political subjects—that is, depoliticization of *sources* of political problems—there is a second and related meaning of depoliticization with which this book is concerned: namely, that which substitutes emotional and personal vocabularies for political ones in formulating *solutions* to political problems. When the ideal or practice of tolerance is substituted for justice or equality, when sensitivity to or even respect for the other is substituted for justice for the other, when historically induced suffering is reduced to “difference” or to a medium of “offense,” when suffering as such is reduced to a problem of personal feeling, then the field of political battle and political transformation is replaced with an agenda of behavioral, attitudinal, and emotional practices. While such practices often have their value, substituting a tolerant attitude or ethos for political redress of inequality or violent exclusions not only reifies politically produced differences but reduces political action and justice projects to sensitivity training, or what Richard Rorty has called an “improvement in manners.”<sup>15</sup> A justice project is replaced with a therapeutic or behavioral one.

One sure sign of a depoliticizing trope or discourse is the easy and politically crosscutting embrace of a political project bearing its name. As we have seen, tolerance, like diversity, democracy, and family, is endorsed across political lines in liberal societies, a phenomenon that has intensified in recent years as tolerance has come to belong collectively rather than selectively to Westerners and as intolerance has become a code word not merely for bigotry or investments in whiteness but for a fundamentalism identified with the non-West, with barbarism, and with anti-Western violence. Even Westerners who oppose certain

kinds of tolerance—conservative Christians who argue against tolerating sexual libertinism, “humanism,” or atheism; self-anointed patriots who would limit political dissent; or progressives who argue against tolerating cultural or religious practices they judge abusive to women or children—even these positions are not arrayed against tolerance as such but only against extending tolerance to the obscene or the barbaric. If tolerance today is considered synonymous with the West, with liberal democracy, with Enlightenment, and with modernity, then tolerance is what distinguishes “us” from “them.” Chandran Kukathas has taken this so far as to instantiate tolerance as the *first* virtue of liberal political life; prior to equality, freedom, or any other principle of justice is the liberty of conscience and association that toleration protects.<sup>16</sup>

By no means is tolerance the only or even the most significant discourse of depoliticization in contemporary liberal democracies. In fact, the widespread embrace of tolerance today, especially in the United States, is facilitated by its convergence with other sources of discursive depoliticalization. These sources include long-standing tendencies in liberalism itself and in the peculiarly American ethos of individualism. They include the diffusion of market rationality across the political and social spheres precipitated by the ascendancy of neoliberalism. And they include the more recent phenomenon that Mahmood Mamdani has named the “culturalization of politics.”<sup>17</sup> Each of these will be considered below.

*Liberalism.* The legal and political formalism of liberalism, in which most of what transpires in the spaces designated as cultural, social, economic, and private is considered natural or personal (in any event, independent of power and political life), is a profound achievement of depoliticization. Liberalism’s excessive freightage of the individual subject with self-making, agency, and a relentless responsibility for itself also contributes to the personalization of politically contoured conflicts and inequalities. These tendencies eliminate from view various norms and social relations—especially those pertaining to capital, race, gender, and sexuality—that construct and position subjects in liberal democracies. In addition, the reduction of freedom to rights, and of equality to equal standing before the law, eliminates from view many sources of subordination, marginalization, and inequality that

organize liberal democratic societies and fashion their subjects. Liberal ideology at its most generic, then, always already eschews power and history in its articulation and comprehension of the social and the subject.

*Individualism.* The American cultural emphasis on the importance of individual belief and behavior, and of individual heroism and failure, is also relentlessly depoliticizing. An identification of belief, attitude, moral fiber, and individual will with the capacity to make world history is the calling card of the biographical backstories and anecdotes that so often substitute for political analyses and considerations of power in American popular culture.<sup>18</sup> From Horatio Algiers to demonized welfare mothers, from Private Jessica Lynch to Private Lynndie England, from mythohistories to mythobiographies, we are awash in the conceits that right attitudes produce justice, that willpower and tenacity produce success, and that everything else is, at most, background, context, luck, or accidents of history.<sup>19</sup> It is a child's view of history and politics: idealist, personal, and replete with heroes and villains, good values and bad.

*Market rationality.* A third layer of depoliticization is added to the contemporary American context by the saturation of every feature of social and political life with entrepreneurial and consumer discourse, a saturation inaugurated by capitalism in its earlier modality but taken to new levels by neoliberal political rationality. When every aspect of human relations, human endeavor, and human need is framed in terms of the rational entrepreneur or consumer, then the powers constitutive of these relations, endeavors, and needs vanish from view. As the political rationality of neoliberalism becomes increasingly dominant, its depoliticizing effects combine with those of classical political liberalism and American cultural narratives of the individual to make nearly everything seem a matter of individual agency or will, on the one hand, or fortune or contingency on the other.<sup>20</sup>

Tolerance as a depoliticizing discourse gains acceptance and legitimacy by being nestled among these other discourses of depoliticization, and it draws on their techniques of analytically disappearing the political and historical constitution of conflicts and subjects. Moreover, as is the case with liberalism, the American culture of individu-

alism, and neoliberal market rationality, tolerance masks its own operation as a discourse of power and a technology of governmentality. Popularly defined as respect for human difference or for “opinions and practices [that] differ from one’s own,”<sup>21</sup> there is no acknowledgment of the norms, the subject construction, the subject positioning, or the civilizational identity at stake in tolerance discourse; likewise, there is no avowal of the means by which certain peoples, nations, practices, or utterances get marked as beyond the pale of tolerance, or of the politics of line drawing between the tolerable and the intolerable, the tolerant and the intolerant.

*Culturalization of politics.* We have already noted ambiguity in the meaning and purview of tolerance: Is it respect? acceptance? repressed violence? Is it a posture? a policy? a moral principle? an ethos? a politics? Does it promote moral autonomy? equality? the protection of difference? freedom? But more than being merely ambiguous, tolerance today is often invoked in a manner that equates or conflates non-commensurable subjects and practices, including religion, culture, ethnicity, race, and sexual norms. In tolerance talk, ethnicity, race, religion, and culture are especially interchangeable. For example: In her discussion of how and why “culture” oppresses women and ought therefore to be constrained and regulated by liberal juridicism rather than always tolerated, Susan Okin slides indiscriminately between (patriarchal) culture and (patriarchal) religion, effectively conflating them.<sup>22</sup> And in a film on terror at the Simon Wiesenthal Museum of Tolerance, the narrative moves directly from a discussion of the threat posed by “Islamic extremists” to a question about the appropriateness of “racial and ethnic profiling” to manage this threat, thereby conflating religion, ethnicity, and race. Similarly, 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. And fundamentalism as one name for the post-cold war enemy of the “free world” is assigned a shifting site of emanation that floats across culture, religion, state, region, and regime.

These conflations and slides are not simply the effect of historical and political ignorance or of a sloppy multiculturalist discourse in

which all marked identities are rendered analytically equivalent. They are, rather, symptoms of the culturalization of politics, the assumption “that every culture has a tangible essence that defines it and then explains politics as a consequence of that essence.”<sup>23</sup> This reduction of political motivations and causes to essentialized culture (where *culture* refers to an amorphous polyglot of ethnically marked religious and nonreligious beliefs and practices) is mobilized to explain everything from Palestinian suicide bombers to Osama bin Laden’s world designs, mass death in Rwanda and Sudan, and the failure of democracy to take hold in the immediate aftermath of Saddam Hussein’s Iraq. It is what George W. Bush draws on when he insists that a gruesome event in the Middle East “reminds us of the *nature* of our enemy.”<sup>24</sup> The culturalization of politics analytically vanquishes political economy, states, history, and international and transnational relations. It eliminates colonialism, capital, caste or class stratification, and external political domination from accounts of political conflict or instability. In their stead, “culture” is summoned to explain the motives and aspirations leading to certain conflicts (living by the sword, religious fundamentalism, cultures of violence) as well as the techniques and weapons deployed (suicide bombing, decapitation). Samuel Huntington offers the premier inscription for the culturalization of politics: since the end of the cold war, he argues, “the iron curtain of ideology” has been replaced by a “velvet curtain of culture.”<sup>25</sup> Critically reworded, the West’s cold war reduction of political conflict to ideology has been replaced by its post-cold war reduction of political conflict to culture.

Importantly, however, this reduction bears a profound asymmetry. The culturalization of politics is not evenly distributed across the globe. Rather, culture is understood to drive Them politically and to lead them to attack our culture, which We are not driven by but which we do cherish and defend. As Mamdani puts it, “The moderns make culture and are its masters; the premoderns are said to be but conduits.”<sup>26</sup> This division into those who are said to be ruled by culture and those who are said to rule themselves but enjoy culture renders culture not simply a dividing line between various peoples or regimes or civilizations, and not simply the explanation for political conflict,

but itself the problem for which liberalism is the solution. How does this work?

The notion that culture—whatever one means by it—is political is old news. But the notion that liberalism, as a politics, is cultural, is catchrestic. The reasons for this nonreciprocity are several. There is, first, liberalism’s conceit about the universality of its basic principles: secularism, the rule of law, equal rights, moral autonomy, individual liberty. If these principles are universal, then they are not matters of culture, which is identified today with the particular, local, and provincial.<sup>27</sup> There is, second, liberalism’s unit of analysis, the individual, and its primary project, maximizing individual freedom, which together stand antithetically to culture’s provision of the coherence and continuity of groups—an antithesis that positions liberal principles and culture as mutual antagonists. This leads to the third basis on which liberalism represents itself as cultureless: namely, that liberalism presumes to master culture by privatizing and individualizing it, just as it privatizes and individualizes religion. It is a basic premise of liberal secularism and liberal universalism that neither culture nor religion are permitted to govern publicly; both are tolerated on the condition that they are privately and individually enjoyed.

Contemporary liberal political and legal doctrine thus positions culture as its Other and also as necessarily antagonistic to its principles unless it is subordinated—that is, unless culture is literally “liberalized” through privatization and individualization. Moreover, liberalization is taken to attenuate the claims of culture by making what are otherwise authoritative and automatically transmitted meanings, practices, behaviors, and beliefs into matters of individual attachment. Liberalism presumes to convert culture’s collectively binding powers, its shared and public qualities, into individual and privately lived choices. Liberalism, in other words, presumes culture and politics to be fused unless culture is conquered—politically neutered—by the universal, hence noncultural, principles of liberalism. Without liberalism, culture is conceived by liberals as oppressive and dangerous not only because of its disregard for individual rights and liberties and for the rule of law, but also because the inextricability of cultural principles from power, combined with the nonuniversal nature of these prin-

ciples, renders it devoid of judicial and political accountability. Hence culture must be contained by liberalism, forced into a position in which it makes no political claim and is established as optional for individuals. Rather than a universe of organizing ideas, values, and modes of being together, culture must be shrunk to the status of a house that individuals may enter and exit. Liberalism represents itself as the sole mode of governance that can do this.

In short, in our time, the conceit of the relative autonomy of the political, the economic, and the cultural within liberal democracies—a conceit shared by liberals ranging from Habermas to Huntington—has replaced the nineteenth-century conceit of the autonomy of the state from civil society. Liberal democratic governance is imagined by liberals to operate relatively independently of both capital and cultural values. This putative autonomy of liberal political principles and institutions is incarnated in the liberal insistence on the universality and hence supervenience of human rights, an insistence that runs from Jimmy Carter to Michael Ignatieff to George W. Bush. Not only does this formulation free human rights from the stigma of cultural imperialism, it also allows them to be coherently invoked as a means of protecting culture.<sup>28</sup>

But liberalism *is* cultural. This is not simply to say that liberalism promotes a certain culture—say, of individualism or of entrepreneurship—though certainly these are truisms. Nor is it simply to say that liberalism is always imbricated with what we call national cultures, although it is and too little contemporary liberal theory has considered what this imbrication implies, even as our histories of political thought have routinely compared the liberalisms emerging from different parts of Europe and the Americas. Nor is it simply to say that there is no pure liberalism but only varieties of it—republican, libertarian, communitarian, social democratic. Nor is it only to say that all liberal orders harbor, affirm, and instantiate in law nonliberal values and practices, although this is also so. Rather, the theoretical claim here is that both the constructive and repressive powers we call those of culture—the powers that produce and reproduce subjects' relations and practices, beliefs and rationalities, and that do so without their express choice or consent—are neither conquered by liberalism nor absent

from liberalism. Liberalism is not only itself a cultural form, it also is striated with nonliberal culture wherever it is institutionalized and practiced. Even in the texts of its most abstract analytic theorists, it is impure, hybridized, and fused to values, assumptions, and practices unaccounted by it and unaccountable within it. Liberalism involves a contingent, malleable, and protean set of beliefs and practices about being human and being together; about relating to self, others, and world; about doing and not doing; about valuing and not valuing select things. And liberalism is also always institutionalized, constitutionalized, and governmentalized in articulation with other cultural norms—those of kinship, race, gender, sexuality, work, politics, leisure, and more. This is one reason why liberalism, a protean cultural form, is not analytically synonymous with democracy, a protean political practice of sharing power and governance. The double ruse on which liberalism relies to distinguish itself from culture—on the one hand, casting liberal principles as universal; on the other, juridically privatizing culture—ideologically figures liberalism as untouched by culture and thus as 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, and culture is not always elsewhere from liberalism. Both the autonomy and the universality of liberal principles are myths, crucial to liberalism's reduction of questions about its imperial ambitions or practices to questions about whether forcing others to be free is consonant with liberal principles.

In sum, the contemporary “culturalization of politics” reduces nonliberal political life (including radical identity claims within liberal regimes) to something called culture at the same time that it divests liberal democratic institutions of any association with culture. Within this logic, tolerance is invoked *as* a liberal democratic principle but *for* what is named the cultural domain, a domain that comprises all essentialized identities, from sexuality to ethnicity, that produce the problem of difference within contemporary liberalism. Thus, tolerance is invoked as a tool for managing what are construed as (non-

liberal because “different” and nonpolitical because “essential”) culturalized identity claims or identity clashes. As such, tolerance reiterates the depoliticization of those claims and clashes, at the same time depicting itself as a norm-free tool of liberal governance, a mere means for securing freedom of conscience or (perhaps more apt today) freedom of identity.

This book seeks to lay bare this political landscape. It contests the culturalization of politics that tolerance discourse draws from and promulgates, and contests as well the putatively a-cultural nature of liberalism. The normative premise animating this contestation is that a more democratic global future involves affirming rather than denying and disavowing liberalism’s cultural facets and its imprint by particular cultures. Such an affirmation would undermine liberalism’s claims to universalism and liberalism’s status as culturally neutral in brokering the tolerable. This erosion, in turn, would challenge the standing of liberal regimes as uniquely, let alone absolutely, tolerant, revealing them instead to be as self-affirming and Other-rejecting as many other regimes. It would also reveal liberalism’s proximity to and bouts of forthright engagement with fundamentalism.

The recognition of liberalism as cultural is more than a project of debunking its airs of superiority or humiliating its hubristic reach. Rather, insofar as it makes explicit the inherent hybridity or impurity of every instantiation of liberalism, it underscores the impossibility of any liberalism ever being “only liberalism” and the extent to which both form and content are potted, historical, local, lived. It reveals liberalism as always already being the issue of miscegenation with its fundamentalist Other, as containing this Other within, and thus as having a certain potential for recognizing and connecting with this Other without. 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.