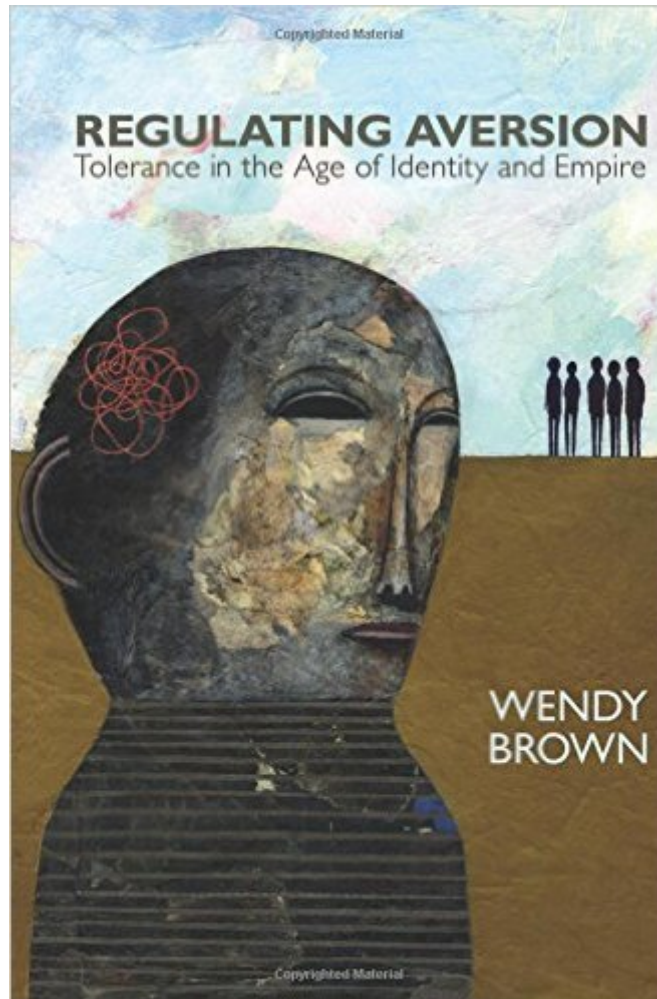


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Regulating Aversion: Tolerance In The Age Of Identity And Empire



Synopsis

Tolerance is generally regarded as an unqualified achievement of the modern West. Emerging in early modern Europe to defuse violent religious conflict and reduce persecution, tolerance today is hailed as a key to decreasing conflict across a wide range of other dividing lines-- cultural, racial, ethnic, and sexual. But, as political theorist Wendy Brown argues in *Regulating Aversion*, tolerance also has dark and troubling undercurrents. Dislike, disapproval, and regulation lurk at the heart of tolerance. To tolerate is not to affirm but to conditionally allow what is unwanted or deviant. And, although presented as an alternative to violence, tolerance can play a part in justifying violence--dramatically so in the war in Iraq and the War on Terror. Wielded, especially since 9/11, as a way of distinguishing a civilized West from a barbaric Islam, tolerance is paradoxically underwriting Western imperialism. Brown's analysis of the history and contemporary life of tolerance reveals it in a startlingly unfamiliar guise. Heavy with norms and consolidating the dominance of the powerful, tolerance sustains the abjection of the tolerated and equates the intolerant with the barbaric. Examining the operation of tolerance in contexts as different as the War on Terror, campaigns for gay rights, and the Los Angeles Museum of Tolerance, Brown traces the operation of tolerance in contemporary struggles over identity, citizenship, and civilization.

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Customer Reviews

Brown delivers a compelling critique of tolerance. In a complex, yet accessible way, she argues that

tolerance functions as an instrument of power by regulating group differences and by selectively and differentially integrating "others" into the civic space. Conferring and withholding tolerance can both function as differential modes of exclusion and regulation of difference. The problem with tolerance is that it dissimulates its political role: tolerance relies on a power differential between those who tolerate and those who are tolerated. Yet this power relation is masked because "tolerance talk" individualizes racial, cultural, and sexual difference. It treats difference as something that should be confronted by civility and behavior: if only we all behaved responsibly and tolerated others, we could all happily live together. Unsatisfactory in this view - as Brown argues convincingly - is that it substitutes a vocabulary of civility for political problems and confrontations and thus sidelines demands for freedom, equality and justice. It individualizes social and political questions, as it substitutes the individual object of tolerance for the group (and simultaneously reifies difference and otherness by construing the subject as the product of a collective identity). Brown traces the transformation of tolerance from its early modern inception (where it meant tolerating other beliefs) to its current instantiation, where it means tolerating (sexual, cultural, racial) difference. The central question of her book is how what she calls "tolerance talk" has become the beacon of multicultural justice and civic peace. Reminding readers that only a generation ago, tolerance was reviled as a thinly veiled form of racism - yet today it has emerged as the emblem of the good society.

Echoing the previous review, Brown's "Regulating Aversion" presents a brilliant analysis of the role of tolerance in modern society. She thoroughly traces the development of tolerance through history, and effectively analyzes the important role that tolerance plays in power relations. Her book begins with a (rather dense) theoretical overview of the discourse of power in the West and an analysis of "Tolerance as Governmentality," borrowing her theoretical framework from Foucault. She proceeds to analyze modern-day examples of tolerance, such as the Tolerance Museum in Los Angeles, gay rights, and the War on Terror using this framework, and duly notes the contradictions of tolerance. However, her most important point is that the act of tolerance is inherently intolerant. By expressing the need for tolerance--which she notes does not denote acceptance, but rather a clear disapproval--we have already expressly acknowledged there is a problem, and we do not readily accept the others' view. For example, we would not need to have a museum dedicated to tolerance if everybody got along. Additionally, she explains that tolerance is not out of an expression of acceptance but rather a symbol of power. Tolerance is bestowed upon others by those in power. Moreover, the powerful implicitly choose what to tolerate. In essence the very rhetoric of tolerance is intolerant, and the promotion of tolerance by the state is a means to impose intolerant beliefs, all

while publicly expressing the need for acceptance. While Brown's analysis is highly insightful, it is not easily accessible. The language is dense and complicated, and at times it felt more like an SAT vocabulary preparation than a discourse on tolerance--it is not often that the words "peregrinate" or "imbricate" are used. I disagree with the previous author that this book is accessible. However, if you are able to look past the convoluted language, this book is highly rewarding. Finally, this book has a particular relevance to today, especially as society grapples sensitive issues such as the War on Terror and gay marriage. Her book presents an incredibly useful framework for analyzing, and more importantly critiquing, modern discussions of tolerance.

A great series of discussions about a subject that is little understood and often misrepresented. I hope this book is being in introductory classes to start students on a lifelong query.

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