

Warren Magnusson

The *On Politics* Interview

with Amy Zicker and Sylvia Nicholles

The following is the second conversation between Dr. Warren Magnusson and undergraduates Sylvia Nicholles and Amy Zicker for *On Politics*. Unfortunately, a rather freakish accident prior to the transcribing process led to the permanent erasure of their first encounter. Hindsight says shorthand might have been a good idea. Nevertheless, the three were able to meet once more on Coast Salish territory for another rousing discussion on politics. Thankfully, the audio recorder didn't fail catastrophically again — no one thought to take notes the second time around either.

Nicholles *I think we should start with the question that we ended with last time.*

Magnusson And what was that?

This interview took place in November 2007. Warren Magnusson is a political theorist with a particular interest in the urban and the local as sites of politics and government. He has written extensively on the theory of local government, the character of urban politics, the nature of social movements, and the forms of political space. Sylvia Nicholles is a political science student struggling through her final year. She still has yet to work out what her definition of politics is, but she's getting there through her study of urban politics and theory. Amy Zicker's current deliberations regarding politics and all that is political are indebted to iconoclasts the world over. As a result, this bio proves problematic.

Nicholles *The tough one: what is politics?*

Magnusson Oh. I knew you were going to start out with the hard one! Well, I think there are two sides of it. If we remember that we are governed in many different ways, in many different forms, and that we govern ourselves and we are governed by external authorities of one sort or another, be it teachers, parents or governance in the narrow sense, [then] government is something that we confront all the time and in which, at least to a limited extent, we participate through practices of self-government. And to me, the question of politics arises in the first instance at that point: our encounter with these practices of government, our participation in these practices of government and our, as it were, our debates with ourselves about how we situate ourselves in relation to those practices and how we situate ourselves in relation to other people. And I guess I would say that all of us are necessarily engaged in politics whether we like it or not because of that intersection between us and ubiquitous and proliferating practices of government and self-government.

But there is another sense of the term politics that I find interesting, and that is that there is this long standing thought that we can trace back to the Greeks that if we become self-conscious about these matters, if we come together in some way and think through the possibilities for what we can be, that we can engage individually and collectively in processes that enable us to realize our objectives or, even more interestingly, to become otherwise different than what we were before. And that aspect of politics I think is particularly interesting.

Now I would add, as a third thing, that there's a conventionalized way of thinking about all of these things that's bound up with the heritage of the Greek *polis*. The Greek *polis* provides us with a model of what it is to be political and we in the West have always looked back to it in various ways, and in Aristotelian terms [the *polis*] is a community in which we govern and are governed in turn, where there's a kind of reciprocity, that it's a relationship between equals that is marked by deliberation and debate. That idea of the *polis* has come down to us through the idea of the re-

public, or ... these days people talk about civic republicanism or the civic order, or civil society, that notion of a particular kind of political order. It entrances us. It continues to entrances us. But it comes with certain assumptions about what the boundaries and limits are, about what is required of us to have that kind of political community. And all of that is now contested in a way that, or much more intensely than it was, even thirty years ago.

Zicker *I was going to add that it seems that, that sort of heritage that we have, has from its inception been very exclusive, and had a very particular view of who can be citizen and who can participate in politics. Is it now just as simple as adding people in? Or do we have to do away with that project and imagine something else?*

Magnusson Well, certainly not the first. The second is a big question mark and certainly the project has to be transformed. But the difficulty is that there is a certain kind of logic that is implicit in the ideal of the polis that is rather difficult for us to escape—for instance, the idea that political relationships are non-violent, so this is a way of getting beyond violence and acting peacefully with others. That's a fairly appealing kind of ideal.

It's also implicit in it that it's an egalitarian relationship, and so it becomes a very powerful rationale for including people, saying, "Well no, the exclusions that the ancient Greeks and Romans made were not justifiable." And that what we moderns, gradually, with difficulty, have come to understand is that in principle, everyone should be included. So again, that's a very powerful idea, that we include everybody, we overcome the kind of limitations, which you're right, were always in there. But that's again, along with the ideal of non-violence, a very powerful kind of ideal.

Thirdly, there's an idea of freedom in there because there's this notion that for politics to work, people have to freely express their ideas, they have to say what they actually think and feel, there has to be an exchange, there has to be a deliberation, there has to be some mutual recognition involved for these processes to work. Boy, that's a pretty appealing ideal as well, so when you begin to put all these ideas together, it's rather difficult to kind of step away from

that tradition and say well no, we need something totally different.

The problem, I would say with this, is that there's always the hidden violence in this, that we can't imagine this domain where we relate to one another as we should. But there's always an implicit assumption there that there's some folks outside there who refuse to abide by the rules or aren't suited for this community that we are creating, and there's an edge of violence there, how are we going to keep them down? How are we going to keep them out? And, if you look at the line, if you look at how folks at that line are treated, like this recent case about [the RCMP tasing Robert] Dziekanski at the [Vancouver] airport. Many people look at that and say, holy smokes, this is how we treat people that are behaving a little bit oddly. That's absolutely terrible. And, it's a sign of something that is very, very badly wrong with this particular polis if a, clearly, a harmless middle-aged man like that can't be included in the community.

There are harder cases, of course, and one of the difficulties with the Western tradition of political thought is that there tends always to be this move to forget about the hard cases, to deal with the easier cases, and then draw a line around and say, oh we are not going to talk about that, this stuff at the margins. And of course, it's the stuff at the margins that's arguably the most important stuff to think about.

Nicholles *How do you think that methodologies and ways of studying political science have played into ignoring the margins?*

Magnusson That's a big question. The discipline as it was constituted was always about what came to be called the advanced modern state; the discipline has its origins in the U.S. in the late 19th century. It has European origins as well; it's a bit of a complicated story. But it's quite a recent discipline, just over 100 years old. It was always about how we constitute our place in the world: "us" being Americans or Europeans, whites, and at that time, at the beginning, basically men, and men who were reasonably well educated and so forth.

So, I think that the discipline continues to bear the marks of its origins, so there is implicit in it a norm of what a standard kind of political order is. So there's an assumption that a country like Canada is "normal" and a country like Chad or Burma or Thailand is "abnormal," even though if we use that kind of measure the normal countries are in a minority in the world, so that kind of skews the whole discipline. There's always the assumption that politics is separate from economics, it's separate from sociology; that narrows the focus. So it becomes a study of the state, a study of public policy and it presupposes a certain relationship between state and society, between state and state.

And connected to my first point, it presupposes that a "normal" state has a kind of political system that we associate with liberal democracy. Which actually, how shall I put it ... the liberal democracy is in some sense the condition of possibility for political science, that it's only in that kind of political order that you actually have the freedom to ask certain kinds of questions. So, Sylvia, going and talking to a cop, this is not, in many countries, this would not be something you would want to do, unless you had a bribe with you or something.

So you might argue that the relationship between the discipline and this particular kind of political order is symbiotic, and not surprisingly, it's a discipline that constantly reaffirms the value of that particular type of political order, says, well this is nice or, at least it's nice for the people at the centre, that are within these walls. That's too bad for the folks that are outside and in a way, the discipline is always giving itself the mission of extending those walls outward, including replicating the liberal democratic form in other parts of the world, including more and more people under the tent and so on.

Zicker *Do you think de-centring our focus from the state shows promise for transforming the way we think about politics within the discipline?*

Magnusson Potentially, but it has to be done in the right way. You might argue that, if you think about the social sciences in general, that in a way they already have been de-centred. That is,

there already is this discipline called sociology that looks at various things that are not directly related to the state, and anthropologists do their own thing in relation to the economists. So, many people would say, well you want to look at these things, well a kazillion social scientists are already looking at these things and they are attentive to relations of power, dominance, authority, the kinds of things that are interesting to political scientists, so, quite a few political scientists would say, well shouldn't somebody be paying attention to the state? And that's our job isn't it?

So I would say that the de-centring move is productive only insofar as it disrupts not only political science but also sociology and economics and all of these other disciplines, by problematizing what it is that we are looking at, and why we are looking at it. What do I mean by that? Well let's go back to the example of policing, that if you think about policing as a set of practices that vary significantly around the world but nonetheless share in a common kind of logic, and you think of those practices as political practices of a certain sort, that they are practices of government that are contested in various ways, practices in which many ordinary people participate in some degree, then you open up a field of investigation that is not confined to sociology, that poses policing as a political practice that is not exclusively centred on the state. So, you have to talk about security guards, you have to talk about surveillance systems more generally, you have to talk about security practices more generally that we engage in as individuals, in our daily lives. You suddenly open up a field of investigation that isn't necessarily centred on the state.

Well, the question of how the state regulates or organizes the field, or if it does, remains there. It's an interesting question but that's not the first question that you ask, the first question you ask is what's the nature of policing? What's the nature of surveillance? How does all this kind of stuff work? And more specifically, how does it work politically? This is that we are talking about practices of government and self-government here, we are talking about political interactions focused on those practices, we have a lot of questions to ask about that, and so far, political scientists and other social scientists have been very good at asking the

right kind of questions and investigating those sorts of practices. So, I think it opens up the field marvelously but it's not just a matter of forgetting about the state and focusing somewhere else.

Nicholles *I was just thinking about how methods in social sciences enact a certain idea of the social and I guess, with your research background and your focus on cities, do you think that through certain methods and practices you can enact a certain social reality into being?*

Magnusson I think, yes, we are always conjuring a certain social reality into existence through our research projects; that in order to get going, you have to imagine your object of study. You delimit it in your mind in a certain way, and there's a sense in which through your research you make it real. You bring it into being as an analytical object. And if enough people do that in similar ways, then the consequence is that's how people think about their own reality. So, for instance, the idea of 'a society' or of 'the social' is a particular way of thinking about how we are, that you can track its emergence at a certain period in European history and you can see how it remains persistent. You can see, in some of the contemporary literature, the claim about a 'death of the social' in favour of the death of the social and the rise of the community, for instance. And, I'm not sure if that's such a dramatic change as some people think, but at least it draws attention to the fact that you can have these shifts in the object of study that can have huge effects. So, I don't think it's so much the death of the social, but it certainly is the rise of community. Community becomes a term that's mobilized in many, many different contexts and, in a sense, communities have to be invented in order to justify the research that we do about communities and then that changes things, that changes the way people think about things, the way they act politically.

Zicker *What about larger projects like neo-liberal economics? It seems like some of these intellectual projects – I'm not sure what came first, the intellectual project or the actual practice. It seems that they have huge effects if you are taking them up as a sort of grandiose*

theory. Is that a problem when you are trying to make universalist claims and trying to apply it globally; is that something that the social sciences need to, at least, not claim innocence to what they are doing?

Magnusson Yeah, I think in relation to something like neo-liberalism, one necessarily has a very complex relationship to it. If you are going to make any sense of the large-scale changes that have happened in the world in the last fifty years, let's say, the concept of liberalism, many of us find, is quite helpful in drawing a distinction between an earlier era and the present era. So it becomes this sort of general term to refer to various kinds of changes that you can track from say, the early seventies through to the present: the rejection of the welfare state model, and the rejection of Keynesian economic management in favour of a different way of doing things. So, it's a helpful concept in that way.

On the other hand, you can fixate it on the idea in such a way that you end up doing two things: you end up obscuring other things that are happening in the world in the last forty years that you are fixated on neo-liberalism, that it becomes, well you end up using it to explain everything. You only have to notice events like 9-11 or current upheavals in Pakistan, or something like that and ask yourself well, can that be explained by neo-liberalism? Well, it's a rather round-about explanation. It doesn't get you very far in your explanation if that's the only concept you have to work with. So that's a problem.

But, there's also the sense that critics of neo-liberalism become invested in neo-liberalism in a lot of ways. If you make your career studying neo-liberalism, the last thing you want to have happen is for it to disappear, even if you are critical of it, if you make your career knocking it. And then, you may miss the kinds of shifts that mark the emergence of something new.

When I think back to the shift towards neo-liberalism from the Keynesian welfare state, and remembering how some of the writing I was doing in the early eighties, how it still wasn't clear then which way things were going, it seemed like what we kind of call the neo-liberal agenda was on the table, as it were, the people were promot-

ing it, but, many of us thought, well, these people are basically political extremists and it's not going to go in that direction, it can't work. It may not go in the direction that I want, but these people aren't going to get their way. I was wrong! They did! But at the time, it didn't seem like this was necessarily going to happen and I still say things might have panned out differently. But, I can remember at the time looking back to the post-war era and kind of assuming that it's bound to be something like that indefinitely into the immediate future. Same thing happened but with people that were studying the Cold War, they got so used to this bipolar structure that they sort of assumed it would continue.

Well in both instances you had a transformation, which we can see in retrospect, an epochal shift, and people didn't really understand what was going on. So a lot of what political scientists were writing at the time was just wrong and they just didn't get what was happening.

Now, it may be, for instance, that we are at the moment of the death of neo-liberalism, people have been writing about it now for twenty-five years and now everybody's invested in the idea that there's this neo-liberal project and its expansion throughout the world. Maybe, maybe it's going to go on in that direction, but maybe we are actually in the midst of a shift that spells the crisis of neo-liberalism. And if it's like what it was thirty years ago most of us are going to miss it. But it happened and then you are going to have to pretend that you saw it all along. Rather difficult.

Nicholles *So, if this declines, where can you see the political order shifting?*

Zicker *Are we still in the mindset that we are shifting to big projects? Or is there something to be taken up in, well let's just deal with the local now? Is that a form of resistance against the imposition of ideas?*

Magnusson I think there is something in that, in [that] both the Keynesian projects of the welfare state and the project of neo-liberalism are premised on imperialism, premised on Western domination and the capacity of the West to generalize its ways of doing things throughout the world. And clearly the West's capacity to do that has declined, has been declining

year by year since the 1940s, and particularly as India and China become more and more powerful economically. One has to assume that the West's capacity to impose itself on the rest of the world twenty years from now [will be less] than it is now.

A question that then arises is to what extent have these non-Western countries assimilated practices that we have considered Western, domesticated these practices, made them their own to an extent that the variations in the world order – will they be on the order of the variation between Germany and France? Or Germany and the United States? Or will they be more dramatic? It's hard to tell.

The other thing is that, to the extent that the neo-liberal agenda itself results in a hollowing out of the state and the establishment of global economic and cultural, and to some extent, political relationships on a different scale, relationships that are only weakly mediated by states, one can imagine the increasing importance of arms of politics that are not state-centric. They are not necessarily local, they may be "global" more than local – both global and local simultaneously.

I think there's already evidence and there has been evidence for some time, again going back to the '70s, of the emergence of these forms of politics that have significant effects. For instance they have significant effects on the conduct of states; it's interesting following debates over climate change and to what extent, particularly Western states, are susceptible to globalized public opinion on the questions of climate change. What Stephen Harper has to worry about in this regard is not Stéphane Dion, it's those shifts in global public opinion which run through Canada in ways that could be very dangerous for him politically if he is perceived to be 'not on board' with a global agenda to do something about climate change. So, the patterns keep shifting.

Thanks to Warren Magnusson for giving his time for not just one, but two interviews.