

Anthony Comegna ([00:20](#)):

Thanks so much for joining us again, everyone. And this week, we have a follow up interview with a recent Speak for a Sandwich guest, professor Brianne Wolf. You might recall that in normal eras, we have regular lectures from important scholars during our office lunch hour. I've taken the opportunity several times to have our guests on the show, right after their lecture for a bit of expansion and follow up discussion. The thinking here is mainly that we simply see too many excellent scholars with great ideas to keep them all to ourselves. Even if you can't get the full scope of the lecture, we hope to give you the general flavor and the choicest insights. Professor Wolf spoke to us today about her book manuscript, *Beyond Rights and Price: Liberalism and Taste*.

Anthony Comegna ([01:06](#)):

Professor Wolf, welcome to the show, Professor Wolf and thanks for being here really hot off the heels of your a Speak for a Sandwich lecture. We've done these episodes before where at IHS, we offer faculty the opportunity to give a lecture to those of us on staff who can tune in and listen. Or in normal times they're usually done in the office and we all get to go and hang out and listen to a lecture at lunchtime and it's really great. And so thank you for taking a huge block of time here in your day to join us. I really appreciate that. But, most people in the audience obviously will not have heard your lecture so could you give us a sort of basic overview of what your lecture was about today and what your basic thesis was? The title by the way was, *Beyond Rights and Price: Liberalism With Taste*, which grabbed me immediately. Tell us what that was all about.

Brianne Wolf ([02:04](#)):

Thank you first so much for having me and for giving me a chance to talk about my book manuscript in progress. That was the basis for my lecture today. The basic argument of the lecture I gave and the book manuscript more generally is really in response to a lot of criticism we've seen levied at liberalism recently, but really, I think the roots of those criticisms have been with us since the dawn of liberalism, before we even called liberalism liberalism. Criticisms about liberalism fostering self interest and individualism at the expense of any notions of community. And so what I do is I look at four thinkers from the 18th century, also Alexis de Tocqueville, he's just outside of that.

Brianne Wolf ([02:57](#)):

And I'm looking to them to look at whether or not they have some solutions to these criticisms that have been living in. What I find is that one, they're each outlining sort of different problems they see in society at their time in emerging liberal society and they offer a taste as a possible solution to that. And so I tie their various arguments for taste to an argument for the need for liberalism, to not only focus on economic defenses of liberalism with the market, with the role of prices or political defenses of liberalism based on rights, but also to think about the role of an affect in liberalism and taste as one component of that.

Anthony Comegna ([03:49](#)):

What exactly do you mean by an affect? When I hear somebody say that, I think the way you dress and that old Monte Python bit of the ministry of silly walks. The way you carry yourself and stuff like that. What exactly do you mean when you're talking about political economy? Things like an affect and taste, what are the implications there?

Brianne Wolf ([04:12](#)):

Yeah, so I'm really thinking about the sort of emotional side. I used affect to try to get at emotion and the senses and also moral components. And I think taste helps cover all of these. I define taste as using this term affective, meaning emotional or sensory, as opposed to simply rational judgment of the beautiful. And I also think that it's formed through both our own individual efforts at education, but also our conversations with other people. It also gets at that communal aspect. And so with taste, I'm not sort of only thinking about the way we dress, but you might also think about higher forms of art. All of these things can be included. Nature. You can also think about the character of others and whether or not someone behaved, their behavior was in good taste or something like that.

Anthony Comegna ([05:16](#)):

How does that then, obviously you're talking about a different type of taste than picking out a new couch or an outfit or the way you walk, the story is they chose Sean Connery for James Bond because he walked like a panther. You're not necessarily talking about that, but yet it does seem similar in the sense that when you're discussing political economy and the big thinkers that we'll get into in a minute here, they are definitely talking about the notion of a good society or a beautiful society, a well ordered, well functioning sort of aesthetically pleasing society. And that is quite a different thing than choosing a wardrobe that flows together well. As somebody working in political science and history of thought, how is taste usually applied? How does aesthetics usually apply to political economy and the kind of literature that you've been studying here?

Brianne Wolf ([06:23](#)):

Yeah. Sometimes it's not. There have been a big critiques that, so Pierre Bourdieu is the one I'm thinking of most that we actually shouldn't think about taste in connection with these things, because taste is elitist. It's sort of just based on what the richest in society can buy and then the rest of us try to imitate that. I think we're seeing some arguments around that now with concerns over big tech and section 230 and all of the things that go with that. But these thinkers and then just more generally what role it can have, some folks in democratic theory, talk about taste as sort of representing the beauty of the people acting together. I think what's distinctive about my approach that I'm deriving from my thinkers about political economy and taste is that it really is about the things that we buy maybe, but also the things that we might read, but also how we choose to conduct ourselves in our everyday interactions with the people that we work with, the people that maybe you pray with, that you go to school with and your social interactions.

Brianne Wolf ([07:48](#)):

All of those things make up sort of our concern about political economy. And so I think sometimes when people hear political economy, they think, oh, if it doesn't, my students are like this in my classes. It has to do only with the money or buying and exchanging or the market more generally. But there has really been a tradition for a long time about political economy involving much, much more than that. Lots of parts of our social lives that make up the foundation of the institutions we have politically, culturally, socially. And so when I'm thinking about taste in conjunction with that, it's really several individual choices that then relate to these broader concerns that we normally associate with political economy.

Anthony Comegna ([08:40](#)):

I'm wondering too, if you could give us sort of an overview here, obviously your focus is in, as you've already said, the 18th century, but there is probably some bleed over into other centuries, at least. Give

us an overview of the major thinkers that you cover and what they're perhaps differing perspectives on this concept and deployment of taste as it relates to a political economy is.

Brianne Wolf ([09:07](#)):

Yeah, so we really do see taste, the debate emerge in the 18th century really is the main era though it changes to more discussions about aesthetic judgment in the 19th century and in connection with the romantics and things like that. In the 18th century, I'm focusing on David Hume, Adam Smith, Jean-Jacques Rousseau and then I sneak Tocqueville in there, Alexis de Tocqueville at the end. And if you were sort of talking to someone that thinks about taste a lot, they might say that those are strange choices of thinkers to choose. Certainly not the ones we would most associate with thinking about these issues in the 18th century.

Brianne Wolf ([09:54](#)):

Hume a little bit, and Hume we think about mostly because Immanuel Kant really expanded on and most people say drastically improved upon Hume's essay on taste. But some of the key thinkers we would usually associate with taste would be people like Francis Hutcheson, who talks about taste as kind of an inner sense. Shaftesbury, Joseph Addison writes one of the earliest pieces on taste for his paper, *The Spectator*. Edmund Burke talked a lot about taste. Some people think he was actually responding to Hume. Montesquieu and Voltaire and d'Alembert who write pieces for the Enlightenment Project, the encyclopedia. And so in some ways the thinkers I've chosen are kind of strange are not the maybe key players in the conversation about taste in the 18th century.

Anthony Comegna ([10:55](#)):

Now, several of the people you mentioned there, all of them are very highly regarded, highly influential philosophers, political thinkers, et cetera, but some of them are even actual aristocrats. I'm curious to know what kind of sense do you have whether these ideas about the importance of taste and aesthetic considerations of the good type of society? How much did that either trickle down to average people and become part of the broad political culture that resulted from that period of quote enlightenment thinking about this sort of thing? Or how much was that inspired by activities of common people? I'm thinking of for example, John Locke's treatises on government were deeply inspired by the actual on the ground events inspired and directed by common people in the English revolution and people on the ground, in the colonies learning how to live together, given a more or less fresh start. And so what sense do you have that this was a more sort of popular concept outside of these elite academic circles?

Brianne Wolf ([12:13](#)):

Yeah, so I think that the elites wanted it to be and I think that it wasn't quite there yet. I think this was an elite concern to some degree. There were a number of sort of societies that would meet to sort of try to talk about these kinds of issues. And in that sense, a very aristocratic and elite, but I think all of these thinkers were concerned about how these ideas might, I don't want to necessarily use the language of trickle down, but for lack of a better word coming to me, how these ideas would spread maybe to the more common people. But I don't think they were necessarily inspired by them, but I think they hoped it would be helpful to the common people or they wanted to spread what they saw as important bits of culture to the common people that were really sort of just entering the economy in a new way for the first time. E.P. Thompson talks about this a lot, sort of the rise of the middle class in Britain.

Brianne Wolf ([13:31](#)):

And so people who now had money to spend on things of their own, as opposed to receiving things from their feudal lord. I think that they are having the common people in mind. Hume says as much, and in some of his essays, he's writing for a more popular audience. I think we see it even more in the American context. And when Tocqueville is thinking about taste, he actually is going out and sort of exploring what people are interested in. And actually his aristocratic sensibilities are set off. He's sort of disgusted by some of the things he sees more everyday people engaging in. He notes, for example, that when he's watching court proceedings, that lawyers pick their teeth while they're giving their arguments. He's frustrated by some of the dinner habits he sees. And so there though he sort of reconciles that with noticing how the same sorts of benefits he sees from taste happening in aristocratic culture, he also sees happening in sort of regular culture in America.

Brianne Wolf ([14:50](#)):

He notes that they eat a lot of the same things and they have these productive conversations about that. Or even though their architecture might not be as fancy, they still admire it in these certain ways or their literature is really different and yet they're gaining these benefits from it. I think they all have their eyes towards the common culture but they are coming from an aristocratic mindset. One last example, we do see of concerns like this with the more common people. In America it was around the time of the revolution. The subject of clothing was very important in what you would wear and the colonists actually rejected European fashions as part of the revolutionary effort. Wearing sort of more plain clothes was seen as patriotic and therefore in the fashion. And Franklin is said to have upset the French because he was always wearing a raccoon cap when he would go to parties in France as part of that movement.

Anthony Comegna ([16:05](#)):

Well I'm curious to ask because let's say everybody listening goes with the argument, which I think is pretty straightforward and acceptable, unobjectionable that a real deep important aesthetic sense about the good society, the righteous society, the best society, those kinds of things are really important toward actually creating that better society. But what about when we are in a situation now, if you agree with that premise or at sometime in the past when we have a really toxic sense of taste, that seems to be prevailing around the culture, what if you have a really bad, awful sense of taste?

Anthony Comegna ([16:55](#)):

I'm thinking like a culture wide case of polyphagia, that condition where people eat all sorts of essentially inedible things like they eat rocks and dirt and bits of plastic and it's uncontrollable and stuff like that. What if, and I'm just spit balling here. It certainly seems like we're in a society that's just barely keeping it together and could totally switch to that sense of ugliness being dominant and poor taste not only prevailing, but kind of overrunning any sense of good taste. By making this case, that tastes is so important do you risk elevating bad taste?

Brianne Wolf ([17:44](#)):

Yeah. I think any discussion of good taste has to think about the limits of that or what bad taste is or how we define bad taste. And I think that elevating taste as important doesn't necessarily mean that then we would also elevate bad taste. What I'm thinking about here is that there are a number of things that even with as many disagreements as we have in our society today over all kinds of things of seemingly more moral gravity than things of taste, there are still some things though that everyone can agree are in bad taste or the vast majority of people would agree are in bad taste. Take an extreme

example, child pornography or something. And so thinking about the danger that you express, so what if society as a whole goes toward bad taste? I think one of the important things of the model that I'm deriving from this time period where taste was discussed is really a model for how to even challenge wide ranging or really popular bad tastes.

Brianne Wolf ([19:05](#)):

And one of the components is appealing to sort of examples, experience and argumentation. And so one of the things that taste gives us is a way to discuss why we think something is good or bad, beautiful or ugly. And yes, partly that would rely on different individuals within society being willing to say, "I think this is ugly. And here's why." Or, "I think this is gross and not beautiful and here's why." I think being able to access sort of wide ranging experiences or options is another way, that kind of hold on society of a kind of bad taste could be shaken. But I don't necessarily agree that elevating taste as something that's important means that we would also equally elevate bad taste. I think it helps us in fact, navigate those kinds of things that always exist.

Anthony Comegna ([20:11](#)):

Is it fair to say that most of our political disagreements today and perhaps in the kinds of historical periods you're discussing or that I'm more familiar with in the 19th century, I'm a Jacksonian period historian and there are plenty of these kinds of things repeating themselves in that era too. Democratic society is a much more beautiful society and people like Walt Whitman spun that out to its ultimate limits or conclusions at the time at least. Is it fair to say that a lot of our political battles are actually almost artistic battles? Or they're more creative than we give them credit for when we reduce them to the level of politics?

Brianne Wolf ([21:07](#)):

Yeah. Thank you for that thought. I think that's a great way to think about it. Much of the way we think about political debates is the way that we craft the story and really they are sort of broad debates about what we think is good or beautiful and therefore should be elevated as the right way to do things in society. I think the problem comes in when, instead of following from that on a model of how we talk about why we think something is beautiful or ugly as we're having, I agree these discussions on a society wide basis about those things without using those terms, we then don't follow then the process of how we do that. And so then we treat our judgments of things as beautiful or ugly and our debates as strongly held sort of priors that aren't subject to any debate. And I think that's where we run into problems is not being able to debate things that ought to be debated, namely how we're running our society and what we're elevating to the level of the good.

Anthony Comegna ([22:35](#)):

Professor Brianne Wolf is an assistant professor of political theory and constitutional democracy at Michigan State University, where she's director of the political economy minor. We give our absolute greatest thanks to Professor Wolf for taking a solid two hours out of her day to spend it with IHS. It's a huge benefit to all of us. We certainly hope it's helpful to her along the way. And I'm very glad we got to share these ideas with you all. Thanks for joining us. And remember that the single greatest way for you to help keep our progress coming is to rate and review the show on your favorite pod catcher. My best to you all and until we speak again next week, feel free to peruse the IHS YouTube channel, which is loaded up with full Speak for a Sandwich lectures that could keep you busy for quite a while. Enjoy and see you next time.

