

# POLITICS OUT OF HISTORY

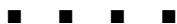


W E N D Y   B R O W N

# POLITICS OUT OF HISTORY



# POLITICS OUT OF HISTORY



Wendy Brown

PRINCETON UNIVERSITY PRESS  
Princeton and Oxford

Copyright © 2001 by Princeton University Press  
Published by Princeton University Press, 41 William Street,  
Princeton, New Jersey 08540  
In the United Kingdom: Princeton University Press, 3 Market Place,  
Woodstock, Oxfordshire OX20 1SY

*All Rights Reserved*

*Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data*

Brown, Wendy.  
Politics out of history / Wendy Brown.  
p. cm.  
Includes bibliographical references and index.  
ISBN 0-691-07084-9 — ISBN 0-691-07085-7 (pbk.)  
1. Political science—Philosophy. 2. Political science—History.  
3. Liberalism. 4. Progress. 5. Feminist theory. I. Title.  
JA71 .B76 2001  
320'.01'1—dc21 2001016371

This book has been composed in Sabon

Printed on acid-free paper. ∞

[www.pup.princeton.edu](http://www.pup.princeton.edu)

Printed in the United States of America

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4

(Pbk.)

ISBN-13: 978-0-691-07085-8 (pbk.)

TO JUDY,  
FOR HONING COURAGE  
AND INTELLIGENCE TO  
LOOSEN THE HOLD OF  
THE PAST ON THE FUTURE  
AND  
TO ISAAC, MY HIGH DIVER,  
WHO LEARNED SO YOUNG  
THE PLEASURES OF  
TRIUMPHING  
OVER FEAR.



# CONTENTS

*Acknowledgments* ix

1 ▪ INTRODUCTION 3

Politics Out of History

2 ▪ SYMPTOMS 18

Moralism as Anti-Politics

3 ▪ DESIRE 45

The Desire to Be Punished:

Freud's "‘A Child Is Being Beaten’"

4 ▪ POWER 62

Power without Logic without Marx

5 ▪ POLITICS 91

Politics without Banisters:

Genealogical Politics in Nietzsche and Foucault

6 ▪ DEMOCRACY 121

Democracy against Itself: Nietzsche's Challenge

7 ▪ FUTURES 138

Specters and Angels: Benjamin and Derrida

*Notes* 175

*Index* 189





# ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

For their careful readings of one or more chapters, I am indebted to Judith Butler, Tom Dumm, Peter Euben, Gail Hershatter, Robert Meister, Helene Moglen, Gayle Rubin, and Joan W. Scott. William Connolly read the manuscript in its entirety and made superb suggestions for improvement; he is a treasured critic. Earlier versions of these arguments were generously engaged by audiences in a number of venues, but I am especially grateful for the interlocutors who worked with rough versions of this material in five seminar settings: the “Future of Gender” seminar of the Pembroke Center for Research on Women (which caught me moralizing against moralism); the “Feminism and Discourses of Power” Residential Research Group of the University of California Humanities Research Institute (where Anne Norton urged us to think about the shape of history and Saidiya Hartmann offered me new perspectives on the materiality of truth); the “Civilizational Thinking” seminar of the Center for Cultural Studies at the University of California, Santa Cruz (which wrestled heroically with the hermeneutics of reading Benjamin); and my graduate course, “Genealogical Politics,” at the University of California, Berkeley, and at the Institut für Philosophie of the Johann Goethe University in Frankfurt (where challenges to my crafting of genealogy as a political orientation were relentless *and* gracious).

For financial support of this project at various stages, I am grateful to the University of California Humanities Research Institute, the UC Santa Cruz Division of Humanities, and the UC Santa Cruz and UC Berkeley Academic Senate Committees on Research. I was fortunate beyond measure to have the research and technical assistance of Catherine Newman, Lon Troyer, and Dean Mathiowetz, each superbly

competent and of splendid cheer. Dean Mathiowetz also prepared the index. Finally, I was graced by Alice Falk's artful and meticulous work with my text; she is, in my experience, a copyeditor without peer.

Permission to reprint material published elsewhere has been granted as follows:

"Logics of Power in Marx," *Topoi: A Journal of Philosophy* 15 (1996), for a portion of chapter 4; "Genealogical Politics," in *The Later Foucault*, ed. Jeremy Moss (Sage Books, 1998), for a portion of chapter 5; "Angels and Specters: Benjamin and Derrida on Politics without Progress," in *Vocations of Political Theory*, ed. Jason Frank and John Tambornino (University of Minnesota Press, 2000), revised as chapter 7; "Resisting Left Melancholia," *Boundary 2* 26, no. 3 (fall 1999), and *Without Guarantees: In Honour of Stuart Hall*, ed. Paul Gilroy, Lawrence Grossberg, and Angela McRobbie (Verso, 2000), for a small portion of chapter 7.

# POLITICS OUT OF HISTORY



O N E



# INTRODUCTION

## Politics Out of History

What, other than anarchy or free fall, is harbored by the destabilization of constitutive cultural or political narratives? When fundamental premises of an order begin to erode, or simply begin to be exposed as fundamental premises, what reactive political formations emerge—and what anxieties, tensions, or binds do they carry? These studies examine political theoretical practices in an era of profound political disorientation. They are concerned with how we navigate within the tattered narratives of modernity, and especially of liberalism, in our time. Working from the presumption that certain crucial collective stories in modernity have been disturbed or undermined in recent decades, they presume as well that such stories remain those by which we live, even in their broken and less-than-legitimate-or-legitimizing form.

I do not argue that the constitutive narratives of modernity are behind us, nor that they have been superseded by other narratives. Rather, in casting certain critical features of modern regimes as troubled yet persistent, I suggest that their troubled condition has significant political implications for contemporary practices of political justice. For example, while many have lost confidence in a historiography bound to a notion of progress or to any other purpose, we have coined no political substitute for progressive understandings of where we have come from and where we are going. Similarly, while both sovereignty and right have suffered severe erosions of their naturalistic epistemological and ontological bases in modernity, we have not replaced them as sources of political agency and sites of justice claims. Personal conviction and political truth have lost their moorings in firm and level epistemological ground, but we have not jettisoned them as sources of

political motivation or as sites of collective fealty. So we have ceased to believe in many of the constitutive premises undergirding modern personhood, statehood, and constitutions, yet we continue to operate politically as if these premises still held, and as if the political-cultural narratives based on them were intact. Our attachment to these fundamental modernist precepts—progress, right, sovereignty, free will, moral truth, reason—would seem to resemble the epistemological structure of the fetish as Freud described it: “I know, but still . . .”<sup>1</sup> What happens when the beliefs that bind a political order become fetishes?

From each of the narratives, considered more fully below, that have grown unstable in our time, certain key political signifiers emerge that provide the terms through which the chapters of this book are organized: morality (as the basis for political values and judgments), desire (as potentially emancipatory in its aim), power (as logical in its organization and mechanics), conviction (as the basis for knowledge and political action), and progress (as the basis for political futurity). My purpose with these terms is not simply to counsel their rejection or replacement; rather the aim is to develop a critical understanding of their binding function in a certain political and epistemological story, of how this function has been disrupted as the story itself begins to stutter and fragment, and of what kinds of troubling political formation such a disruption provokes.

However, this undertaking is not only retrospective and critical: these studies also consider what political and intellectual possibilities might be generated from our current predicament. When a disintegrating political or cultural narrative seems irreplaceable, panicked and reactionary clutching is inevitable; when this perceived irreplaceability refers to a narrative or formation actually lost, melancholy sets in. So these analyses seek to attenuate reactionary and melancholic responses by considering possible alternatives to what has been destabilized: I ask how we might conceive and chart power in terms other than logic, develop historical political consciousness in terms other than progress, articulate our political investments without notions of teleology and naturalized desire, and affirm political judgment in terms that depart from moralism and conviction.<sup>2</sup> These speculations do not, of course, result in comprehensive or stable substitutes for

their predecessors. Rather, they mark partial and provisional orientations for a different inhabitation of the political world; they limn a different genre of political consciousness and political purpose. And their wellspring is not simply redress of incoherence; rather, they issue from an appreciation of the need for reprieve from a low-lying despair in late modern life, a despair about the very capacity to grasp our condition and craft our future.

Two seemingly opposite effects attend the emancipation of history (and the present) from a progressive narrative and the dispossession of political principles and truths from solid epistemological and ontological grounds. On the one hand, there is certain to be a wash of insecurity, anxiety, and hopelessness across a political landscape formerly kept dry by the floodgates of foundationalism and metaphysics. On the other hand, out of the breakup of this seamless historiography and ground of settled principles, new political and epistemological possibilities emerge. As the past becomes less easily reduced to a single set of meanings and effects, as the present is forced to orient itself amid *so much* history and *so many* histories, history itself emerges as both weightier and less deterministic than ever before. Thus, even as the future may now appear more uncertain, less predictable, and perhaps even less promising than one figured by the terms of modernism, these same features suggest in the present a porousness and uncharted potential that can lead to futures outside the lines of modernist presumptions. This book lives in those paradoxes—simultaneously taking the measure of our anxieties about what we have lost and kindling possibility from what those losses may release us to imagine.

■ ■ ■

The stories constitutive of modernity are many, complex, and vary significantly by time and place; those that more narrowly undergird the doctrines and practices of liberalism are no tidier. But a few stories crucial to both, generating both the building blocks of the political and its temporality, may be capturable in a few broad brush strokes.

*Teleological and Progressive History.* The conviction that history has reason, purpose, and direction is fundamental to modernity. This be-



lief has a temporal dimension: modernity itself is imagined to have emerged from a more primitive, religious, caste- and kin-bound, inequalitarian, unemancipated, bloody, unenlightened, and stateless time. And it has a corresponding geographic and demographic dimension: Europe is presumed to be at the heart of this emergence, with other parts of the globe (to various degrees) lagging behind. Modernity is incoherent without both of these dimensions, as is liberalism, the signal political formation that operationalizes each dimension as a foundational political truth.

But modernity is not only premised on the notion of emergence *from* darker times and places, it is also structured *within* by a notion of continual progress. A fundamental Enlightenment precept, the thesis that humanity is making steady, if uneven and ambivalent, progress toward greater freedom, equality, prosperity, rationality, or peace emerged in a variety of explicit formulations in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. For Hegel, the world was growing ever more rational; for Kant, more peaceful; for Paine, more true to principles of natural right; for Tocqueville, more egalitarian; for Mill, more free and reasonable; and for Marx, perhaps, all of the above.<sup>3</sup> Today, however, it is a rare thinker, political leader, or ordinary citizen who straightforwardly invokes the premise of progress. In the Euro-Atlantic world, intellectuals of both Right and Left proclaim the “end of history” or an era of “*posthistoire*.” And even as much contemporary political rhetoric in America crowns over the benefits of technological advances and the country’s growing wealth, it also refers repeatedly to ground lost—economically, morally, and socially—and harks back to a Golden Age in the past. “Family values” talk from all parties conjures an imagined past of happy, moral, and intact families, free from the corruptions of popular culture, libidinal selfishness, illegitimate children, and working mothers. Similarly, welfare state liberals treat growing disparities of wealth in America, and the retreat from half a century’s commitments to state amelioration of poverty, as the abandonment of principles once taken as untouchable and as the very signature of progress. Even the iconoclastic left critic Gore Vidal locates the “golden age” of America in the years 1945 to 1950 (approximately the same period invoked by Bob Dole as the last time that America was wrapped in rich moral fabric).<sup>4</sup> In that slim postwar half

decade, Vidal argues, intellectual life expanded, the arts flourished, the economy boomed, and the promise of an accomplished and prosperous polity seemed realized. Then came the Korean War, Harry Truman's national security state and its accompanying debt, McCarthyism, and the general unraveling of American promise, an unraveling whose trajectory still traces the course of our lives today.<sup>5</sup>

What makes Vidal's mytho-historical account signal for our time is the figuring of corruption and decline of a once-great polity. That theme, of course, is not new: it framed Thucydides' telling of the Peloponnesian Wars, and Machiavelli's account of the demise of ancient Rome and decline of *quattrocento* republican Florence. But this pre-modern narrative of history's movement, theorized explicitly as cyclical by Aristotle and Vico, gave way in modernity to a forthrightly *progressive* story, one promising steady improvement in the human condition. Modernity itself is premised on the imagined breaking of medieval fetters on everything from individual happiness to knowledge to freedom to national wealth. For the most part, only modernity's critics (who are also critics of liberalism)—Burke, Rousseau, Nietzsche—have questioned or challenged its forward movement. That intellectuals and politicians are now gazing backward to glimpse better times suggests an important destabilization of the presumption of progress and of the claims and hopes that issue from such a presumption.

It is not only liberal democracies that appear to have lost the thread of progress in history. In postcommunist states, the "triumph of liberalism" heralded by Western pundits in 1989 was short-lived; within eighteen months, intense civil and constitutional conflicts revealed that neither *liberalism* nor *triumph* appropriately named what was unfolding, that there could be no simple resumption of a modernizing narrative temporarily interrupted by fascism, post-World War II Balkanization, and forty-three years of state communism. This collapse of expectations resulted not only from the wars in the former Yugoslavia and in Chechnya, not only from the rise of racism, ethnic conflict, and anti-Semitism across Europe in the wake of 1989. It resulted as well from the obvious impossibility of postcommunist states' participating in the wealth enjoyed by First World nations, from intensely corrupt political formations such as the Mafeeya in Russia, from the

devastating consequences for the majority of the population (and especially women) of dismantling the welfare state institutions and employment guarantees of the communist period, and from the limits of “liberalization” or “democratization” in redressing any of these developments.

Like its counterparts felt by politicians and the public at large, contemporary academic doubt about the modernist narrative of progress issues from a variety of points on the political spectrum. While some hold that history’s long march has come to an end as liberalism has triumphed around the globe, others argue that this march was always a fiction, and still others insist that something called “postmodernism” heralded the end of progress, totality, and coherence even if history had unfolded progressively up until that point.<sup>6</sup> The tension among these views leads to a question about the nature of the relation between an erosion of the progress narrative in life and in thought. Certainly the relation is not straightforwardly causal, in either direction, but neither is it wholly contingent. Yet it is clear at the very least that recent changes in the character of world history—including all that travels under the rubric of globalization, the emergence of significant nonstate national and international actors, the end of a bipolar international order, and the ambiguous development of identity-based political formations—have catalyzed popular and intellectual historical consciousness. One could also say this: the common instigators of the intellectual and political challenges to progress are certain concrete historical phenomena that include, *inter alia*, the contemporary character of capitalism and the contemporary character of liberalism. Various recent studies in political economy suggest that capitalism in the last quarter of the twentieth century, while displaying certain continuities with earlier forms (e.g., the drive for profit and the ceaseless spawning of new commodities and social effects), nonetheless has taken a qualitatively different turn. Included in the shift from “organized” to “disorganized” capitalism are a national deconcentration of capital and a dispersal rather than concentration of production; a decline in the importance of cartels, unions, and collective bargaining; a growing separation of banks from industry; a decline in the absolute and relative size of the working class (defined as manual workers in manufacturing and extraction); a decline in average plant size; a de-

cline in the importance of individual wealth-holders; and a decline in industrial cities and industry-centered wealth.<sup>7</sup> None of this suggests the diminished dominance of capital; to the contrary, the phenomenon loosely termed “globalization” signifies the ubiquity of capitalist social relations across the globe and the penetration of capital into nearly every crevice of every culture. But the steady geographic and demographic concentrations of wealth, capital, finance, and production that have characterized capitalism for the past two hundred years appear to have given way to more fragmented, dispersed, intricate, transient, and even somewhat ephemeral formations. Thus, Marx’s most important condition for the development of the contradiction that would finally break capitalism—relations of production that would “simplify class antagonisms . . . [such that] society as a whole is more and more splitting up into two great hostile camps, into two great classes directly facing each other”<sup>8</sup>—now seems as empirically remote as it is metaphysically alien.

Liberalism has undergone a parallel transformation, from a political order in which the universal rights of man were the unquestioned premise of social justice and social change to one in which both the standing of universalism and the relationship of rights to freedom have been widely challenged. How the disruption of the status of the universal in liberalism undermines the progress narrative is captured in a general questioning (if not outright rejection) of assimilationist and integrationist formulations of social change and the adoption of identity-based justice claims and local nationalisms.<sup>9</sup> Moreover, perceived stratifications and exclusions in liberal orders along lines of race, class, gender, and sexuality not only challenge egalitarian civil and political enfranchisement as the primary criteria of justice; they also expose the formal equality promised by liberalism as severely compromised by the character of a (white, bourgeois, male, heterosexual) hegemonic subject. An understanding of liberal universalism as not simply containing a history of excluded others but as having a specific normative content—heterosexual and patriarchal families, capital, and “property in whiteness”—erodes the credibility of its classic story of progressively widening its scope of freedom and equality, extending the goods of enfranchisement and abstract personhood to more and more of the world’s populations. In short, liberalism’s sharp encounter in

recent decades with its constitutive outside and constitutive others disturbs its universalist premises and promises—and disturbs as well the story of emancipatory and egalitarian progress on which much of liberalism’s legitimacy is pinned.

*The Emergence of the Sovereign Subject and Rights-Based Freedom.* The fiction of the autonomous, willing, reasoning, rights-bearing subject convened by modernity is articulated in liberal democratic constitutions and a host of other liberal institutions. Liberalism presumes sovereign individuals and states, both as units of analysis and as sites of agency. Individuals are cast as sovereign insofar as they devise their own aims and direct and are accountable for their actions. The sovereign state, similarly, is one presumed capable of managing its collective internal affairs and asserting its interests in the external world; these capacities are what justify the state technically and legitimize it politically in an order in which “the people” are said to rule.

Both state and individual sovereignty require fixed boundaries, clearly identifiable interests and identities, and power conceived as generated and directed from within the entity itself. In late modernity, none of these requirements is met easily, given a globalized economic order, unprecedented migrations of peoples across national borders, and relatively new forms of social power that increasingly undermine the notion of the self-made and self-directed individual or state subject. As the global economy grows ever more complex and integrated, both the state and the individual are increasingly frustrated in their sovereign intentions by forces beyond their control and often beyond their comprehension as well.<sup>10</sup> Faced with a plethora of transnational economic actors, forces, and movements, in the late twentieth century the idea of a unified, pursuable national economic interest became largely comic, despite the fact (and vastly complicating the fact) that national economies remain politically and economically significant. And migrations of peoples have reached such proportions that the strenuous legal and political efforts to distinguish, for example, “true Americans” or “native Hawaiians” from alien others can only be read as a symptom of this disintegration of sovereignty, this erosion of inside-outside boundaries around a state or people presumed cohesive, unified, and sovereign.<sup>11</sup>