

Women's Studies Unbound: Revolution, Mourning, Politics

Wendy Brown

We are convened in Belfast to ask what women's studies is, what feminism might be, 'beyond sex and gender'.¹ This beyond is a strange place, if it is indeed a place, where it is proposed that the subject and object of the field might be left behind even as the field persists. It is a place where the 'what' and the 'we' of feminist scholarly work is so undecided or so disseminated that it can no longer bound such work, where the identity that bore women's studies into being has dissolved without dissolving the field itself. Or is it not a place but a time, this 'beyond' of sex and gender? Are we proposing to be *after* sex and gender, no longer bound by them or perhaps no longer believing in them, and yet, in the peculiar offering that only temporality makes, bringing along what we are after even as we locate it behind us?

If feminist scholarship came into being through the analytic circumscription of sex and gender, being feminist scholars beyond or after sex and gender is not the same as dispensing with them but rather, perhaps, is more like being after The Fall, after their fall. Fallen yes, but like all toppled sovereigns and overthrown founders they do not thereby cease to govern. ('The dead are mighty rulers', Freud reminds us, prophesying among other things his own continued hovering over our work.²) So we are compelled, now that we know the impossibility of circumscribing gender without participating in its construction and regulation, and now that we know the indissociability of sex and gender from race, caste, class, nation and culture, to think feminism and women's studies in this condition of afterness, in this temporal condition of 'knowing better' about our naive yet founding past, and thus also to grieve what we now know we never should have loved ... a tortured and guilty grieving to be sure. What is the cost of such grieving, not just to ourselves, but to this field that lives on after the death of its subject and object? And if we are not grieving, if we are only delighted to be 'beyond sex and gender' what then is the quality of this afterness, what parasitic relationship to a past that it does not love do these practices maintain?

But wait! A place and a time 'beyond sex and gender' – wasn't this the revolutionary feminist dream? Wasn't feminism born of the utopian aspiration to make a world in which sex and gender would become history as significant markers of human difference, as vehicles of inequality and injury, as keys to life possibility, as ways of distinguishing worth, potential, humanity from its other? How and when did sex and gender become essential objects of feminism rather than that which we aimed to

parallax

ISSN 1353-4645 print/ISSN 1460-700X online © 2003 Wendy Brown

<http://www.tandf.co.uk/journals>
DOI: 10.1080/1353464032000064955

parallax

3

overthrow? No, the question has to be put differently now: what kind of feminism aims to conserve rather than reduce, eliminate, or at the very least diffuse sex and gender? If women's studies has difficulty imagining itself beyond sex and gender, this would seem to confess its contemporary investment in their persistent social, political, psychic or economic importance, thus locating a non-revolutionary sensibility and aim at the core of women's studies. Women's studies invested thus comes after the loss of revolutionary feminism; it figures itself as a non-utopian enterprise with more than a minor attachment to the unhappy present.

In this light, I want to turn the question of the future of women's studies a bit, to ask not whether feminism and feminist scholarship can live without sex or gender, but how it lives, and will continue to live, without a revolutionary horizon. Not how we may thrive in the aftermath of the dissemination of our analytical objects, but *what we are* in the wake of a dream in which those objects were consigned to history? What does it mean for feminist scholars to be working in a time after revolution, after the loss of belief in the possibility and the viability of a radical overthrow of existing social relations? What kind of lost object is this? Revolution belongs to modernity and whatever our respective orientations toward the value of modern vs. postmodern *thought*, there is little question that *the time* of modernity is no longer securely ours, that key elements of modernity are waning, that if we are not 'beyond' modernity we are most certainly 'post' modernity. The post, of course, is a complex transitional and conjunctural moment, one in which we continue to live 'with' what we are also 'after'. This *living with* is uneasy work: ghosts and ungrieved losses clutter a present and future that are anything but sure footed. 'We suffer,' Marx reminds us, 'not only from the living, but from the dead. [Indeed], *le mort saisit le vif!*'³

i. Mourning Revolution

What do we mourn when we imagine we are mourning revolution today? Something has died but we argue over what the body is (there will turn out not to be a body). A unified Left? Reason? Social totality? Marxism? Belief in the Good, the True, and the Beautiful? Hope? Grand narratives? Utopia? The promise of the twentieth century? Love of the world? Modernity? Humanity? Is radical transformation itself no longer imaginable or is it the fantasy of human control over human destiny that has vanished? Or are we stymied at conjuring postcapitalist, postpatriarchal, postcolonial social, economic and political forms that could emancipate and satisfy all and each? Is it a postrevolutionary vision that eludes us today?

Since grief inevitably recalls prior and contiguous losses, perhaps settling on a single object is not so important: whatever we are mourning most immediately might be the scene for discovering all that has gone unmourned for a feminist Left in our time. But such discovery is not easily won: The condition of mourning is a stumbling and stuttering one, a condition of disturbed ground, of inarticulateness, of disorientation in and about time. A mourning being must learn to walk again, on ground once made level by the now lost object, a process that makes palpable how contingent firm and level ground always is. Indeed, in mourning, one discovers horizons, banisters, firmaments and foundations of life so taken for granted that they

were mostly unknown until they were shaken. A mourning being also learns a new temporality, one in which past meets future without moving through a present (in which the present all but vanishes) yet also one in which the future is unmoored from parts of the past, thus puncturing conceits of linearity with a different way of living time. In mourning, too, the solidity of the subject falters: even as one may be ‘consumed by grief’ and so retreat from the world, grief also diminishes the subject undergoing it, undermining illusions of autonomy and self-constitution, revealing hitherto unknown dependencies and the limits of agency, mocking the will’s desire to project itself backward and forward in time.

Revolution, the world turned upside down, through which modernity entered history, which modernity would perfect and by which modernity would be perfected, appears today both anachronistic and unprecedentedly dangerous. Anachronistic because political, economic and social powers are dispersed, thus the reins of society cannot be grasped, perhaps do not even exist. Unprecedentedly dangerous because the technologies available to counter-revolutionary forces and to states in particular are deadly beyond compare – these include not only the weapons of physical warfare but technologies of organization, infiltration, intelligence, interrogation. Dangerous too because all visions of The Good now appear to consort with fundamentalism. (It is telling that the only time revolution was meaningfully invoked in the last quarter century was to describe the transformation of Iran following the rise of Ayatollah Khomeini.) If regimes of truth are inevitably totalitarian, what remains of emancipatory claims about the best way to order and govern human beings? How even to endeavour to transform the present, whatever totalitarian elements it might harbour, without tapping this danger? Perversely, this sensitivity to fundamentalism would seem to consign us to the present, not because it is freer or in other ways better than the alternatives, but because pursuit of concrete alternatives inevitably implicates us in the deliberate imposition of a truth, as opposed to negotiating or passively living under one. The post-Enlightenment feminist Left is politically neutered, and neutralized, by this formula: if there is always a governing political truth, at least let *us* not be the fundamentalists; if every regime is an Occupation, at least let us not be the occupying force. Thus have we lost the capacity to imagine ourselves in power, self-consigned instead to the rancorous margins in which we are at best a permanent heckle to power.

For Hannah Arendt, modernity yields the radically new modality of political change, revolution, from the convergence of three principles constitutive of the age: (a) the rise of ‘the social question’ which above all denaturalized mass poverty as inherent in the human condition, (b) the centring of *freedom* as a human need or right, (c) a historical consciousness that embraced the possibility of *novelty* and the conviction that the course of history could suddenly begin anew. It is when ‘the idea of freedom and the experience of a new beginning ... coincide’, Arendt argues, that revolution in the modern sense is possible and takes the specific form of the rise of the oppressed to displace their oppressors and the regime that privileged them.⁴ There is another singular feature of modernity that makes revolution its spirit, namely the progressivism that suffused modern philosophies, histories and political dreams, the historiography that operated at the level of moral and political conviction that human existence on all fronts – freedom, prosperity, equality, civility – was steadily

improving. It is via this progressivism that the other meaning of revolution, a naturalistic phenomenon that cannot be stopped – as in the earth revolving around the sun – conjoins with the agentic features of popular uprising for bread or freedom to capture the inevitability of such uprisings and even the inevitability of their eventual triumph.⁵ In the age of freedom, equality and new beginnings, revolution emerges as the term for a continuous and inexorable push for the realization of these values against the old regimes that denied them both legitimacy and actuality. Left revolutionaries of the twentieth century placed themselves in this tradition – the press of the poor and the outcast for a freedom and equality that was their unquestionable modern entitlement, the unstoppable force of democratization, the realization of ‘true human emancipation’, indeed, the realization of modernity’s promise around the globe.⁶

It is this conviction about the inevitable triumph of the people over the illegitimate powers of wealth and rule that exploit, dominate or disenfranchise whose loss washes over us today. What has been drained from the present is not only faith in the capacity of revolution to dethrone corrupt or illegitimate power, but the standing of this capacity as a beacon of the spirit of the age. Gone is the belief in radically breaking with history; equally eviscerated is the notion of inexorable progress toward freedom and the related notion that an innate human desire for freedom is the engine of history. Shattered too is the conviction that the future belongs to the downtrodden, that power is ever anything but illegitimate, that equality, freedom and well-being for the many are inevitable, let alone possible.

The promise of Revolution delivered by the Enlightenment was premised upon presumptions about the emancipatory nature of reason and the capacity of human beings to make their own history. It was a promise that, unfettered by tradition and legal subjection, reason would carry its human subjects to truth, freedom and equality. This is also the conceit of social contract theory from Hobbes to Rousseau to Rawls: under the reign of reason, human beings could consciously and deliberately fashion their world, vanquishing gods, kings and other super-human forces as makers of history and politics. Reason, knowledge, truth and freedom against power – this was the formula that poststructuralist insight discredited in relocating power to the inside of those ostensibly emancipatory forces. But even before this insight took hold, twentieth century events had largely devastated the Enlightenment promise: the two World Wars; the Shoah; the Nakbah; the merciless pillaging of the Third World by the First; socialist revolution turned brittle, brutal, then grey; decolonization turned to bloody authoritarianism and corruption; the calculated geopolitical instrumentalization of the Third World by Cold War powers; the materialization of a form of global capitalism unprecedented in its reach and capacities for deracinating human lives; and a final decade featuring a rise in violent ethnonationalisms literally unimaginable to Kantian universalists half a century earlier.

As the promise of the twentieth century darkened, its shadow lengthened over the already foundering hopes of the Enlightenment and modernity – hopes for a steady improvement of the human condition, hopes rooted in the progress of liberty and the inevitable spread of equality, hopes tethered to the revolutionary spirit but in its calmer register.⁷ A promise and hopes that seem to have died before their time,

except Gillian Rose recalls that for something to have died prematurely involves imagining a time when death would be nothing, possible only when life is nothing, when death comes to what already does not matter.⁸ This very nothingness, Rose argues, was already contained within modernity (Weber reads Tolstoy as revealing how progressivism, especially in knowledge, empties life of meaning and knowledge of its Truth value) and is deepened, according to Rose, by ‘postmodern’ formulations in which history is not charted by progress, inherent purpose, a drive toward an end, anything at all.⁹ Yet if modernity was always only a promise, then fruition is not its telos; rather modernity’s achievement *was* this promise. When the promise dies, it does not take our earthly goods and activities but our sense of futurity, and the future is the place where almost all meaning is harboured for modern progressivist consciousness. The nihilism so often attributed to ‘the postmodern’ is not a draining of meaning from the present – where meaning can thrive even and sometimes especially in the wake of God and Truth – but a draining of the future from present meaning, a loss of redemption in Benjamin’s sense. Mourning revolution is thus mourning a particular kind of futurity, a specifically modernist kind of rightful expectation, a temporality we do not yet know how to live without.

In mourning revolution, we are not mourning dead bodies, but rather, the insufficiently dead body of the past and even, the insufficient sacrifice of the present to the future. This failure, this insufficiency, in turn breeds a different sacrifice: the promise of rebirth that arises with revolution’s unique imagined capacity to break with the past. In mourning this perverse insufficiency of killing, then, we mourn the promise that collective human will can come between past and future and that a humane future will rise out of a vanquished inhuman past.

The death of a promise is like no other because a promise is incorporeal; there is no body to claim, to bid farewell, to bury (which is why the Left argues incessantly over what the body is). In mourning a dead promise, a promise that no longer is one, we mourn ‘the disappeared’; this is a perpetual and ungratified mourning that reaches in vain for closure. The very object that we mourn – the opening of a different future, the ideal illuminating that future – has vanished. So we cannot even see or say what we mourn, gather at the site of its disappearance, weep over its remains, hold its lively embodiment in our memory as we must if the mourning is to come to an end. This is a mourning that inevitably becomes melancholia – as the loved and lost promise becomes nameless and unfathomable in a present that cancels and even mocks it, its disappearance is secured by this loss of a name and so also is our inconsolability. Melancholia too because if we experience the promise as not simply dead but betrayed, we are divided against our love for it. Love betrayed but not given up is love that literally does not know where to house itself.

ii. Socialist and Feminist Revolutions

The contemporary Euro-Atlantic Left is in mourning not just for the idea of revolution as a political modality, but for two particular revolutionary dreams that died in the last quarter of the twentieth century. One, very roughly, could be called socialist. The other, equally roughly, could be called feminist and sexual. Intertwined

in complex and differing ways for different segments of the New Left, both carried the utopian promise by which our world view was framed as well as our orientation toward critical theory. It is not easy to disentangle the collapse of a revolutionary modality at a generic level from the collapse of these particular projects of transformation; our mourning is confusing and confused here. Are we grieving a particular radical vision or radical vision as such? Or is it revolutionary cultural-political life that we are at once embarrassed by and pining for?

The New Left attachment to socialist revolution – which was never merely about economic justice, rather, its promised fruit included a panoply of betterments in human and nature-human relations – is difficult to loosen, notwithstanding the concrete failures of state socialism. Without replacing a profit-driven economic system by one rooted in common ownership and ordered by thoughtfulness about the complex needs of humans and their habitat, it is difficult to conceive not simply the relief of economic desperation on the part of the many but the building and sustaining of social forms that could cultivate modest generosity, security, equality, peaceability, mental and physical health and responsible relations with nature. But that replacement is remote to the point of vanishing today.

What happened to the dream of socialist revolution is tediously familiar. State socialism is economically unviable in a capitalist world order – inefficient, uncompetitive, impoverished. Nor does it emancipate: work is no less alienating, no more under the control of the worker, no more organized for immediate human needs, no more engaging of human creativity, no less dreary, than under any other regime. But if not state socialism, which was never the revolutionary dream anyway, then what? World socialism? Organized by what scandalously centralized global powers? Self-governing interdependent villages? In what version of history? The loss here then is not just a revolutionary agent or impulse, nor is it just the odds for revolutionary success. The problem is that it is nearly impossible to conceive of an emancipatory, ecological and economically capacious socialism that could follow upon the current development of what Marx referred to as ‘productive forces’, that is compatible with contemporary political, economic or social organizations of space and populations, and that is incorruptible by what we now know to be the many and dangerous ways of power.

Feminist revolution – which was never merely about sexual equality but, rather, carried the promise of remaking gender and sexuality that itself entailed a radical reconfiguration of kinship, sexuality, desire, psyche and the relation of private to public – went awry somewhat differently. Given the loss of the socialist possibility, there were limits to its realizability but reckoning with limits is not the same as reckoning with absolute loss, and the feminist ambition to eliminate gender as a site of subordination could technically be met within a capitalist life form, that is, there is nothing in sexed bodies or even in gender subordination that capitalism cannot live without. The stakes in the old arguments about whether feminist revolution required a socialist one were largely contoured by a male left dubious about whether feminism was ultimately radical or bourgeois, whether gender subordination was a primary or derivative contradiction in the social order, whether it was truly material in the present or mainly attitudinal, the ‘muck of ages’ not yet washed away. This

configuring diverted attention from the most crucial connection between new left and revolutionary feminist aims. It is clear enough that women and men can be rendered interchangeable cogs in a contemporary and future capitalist machinery, where physical strength is rarely at issue, where continuity on the job matters little, where reproductive work has been almost completely commodified and reproduction itself is nearly separable from sexed bodies and is in any event separable from a sexual division of labour. Notwithstanding the protracted Marxist-feminist analyses of the indispensability of unpaid housework to the production of surplus value, the home as a necessary if stricken haven in a heartless world, and the need for a malleable surplus army of labour (all of which were straining to prove both the materiality of gender subordination and its necessity to capitalism), it is evident enough today that the equal participation and remuneration of women in the economic and civic order can be achieved, if unevenly and with difficulty.

Capitalism neither loves nor hates social differences. Rather, it exploits them in the short run and erodes them in the long run. In Marx's poetics, capitalism 'batters down Chinese Walls', levelling and homogenizing every aspect of cultural and traditional differentiation that it subjects to 'its naked cash nexus'.¹⁰ Capitalism commodifies and reifies sexual difference even as it steadily erodes the ground of this difference in biology, the sexual division of labour, and the productive and reproductive functions of the family. Capitalism does not require gender subordination or even gender any more than it requires racial subordination or race; it has tendencies that augment as well as tendencies that attenuate such subordination; social movements and public policies can abet one or another tendency or both simultaneously. So the critical question for feminist revolution does not concern the inherent relationship of capitalism to gender subordination at the level of political economy. Rather, the critical question is whether what potentially issues from subordination, namely a radical critique of systemic injustices and suffering and a radical vision of alternatives, can be sustained in a capitalist social order over time and take shape as viable and organized opposition. What fuels or depletes a lived consciousness of the inhumanity, irrationality or simply unsatisfying nature of current arrangements and the impulse to make a different order of things? What sustains a willingness to risk becoming different kinds of beings, a desire to alter the architecture of the social world from the perspective of being disenfranchised in it, a conviction that the goods of the current order are worth less than the making of a different order? It is this capacity to develop and sustain a critique and a vision of the alternatives that contemporary capitalism undermines so effectively with its monopoly on the Real *and* the imaginable, with the penetration of its values into every crevice of social and subjective existence, and with its capacity to discursively erase if not concretely eliminate alternative perspectives and practices. Without another conscious vantage point from which to perceive, criticize and counter the existing order of things, a vantage point Herbert Marcuse argued largely vanished in post-War capitalism, it is almost impossible to sustain a radical vision as realistic or as livable.¹¹ And it is almost impossible to fight for something not on the liberal and capitalist agenda, a fight largely incompatible with seeking freedom *from* that agenda.

In the Euro-Atlantic world, there was one decade in the last half century in which this other dimension was carved out in the form of political subcultures. The political

upheavals and formations of the Sixties included the production of a cultural-political and epistemological outside that allowed utopian visions to stake more than utopian claims, to be sustained by and partially lived out in the subcultures themselves. In Eastern Europe, this decade came later and had a different political valence, one fuelled by the ambition to topple state communism and one whose utopian vision was limned by the imagined (and overdrawn) freedom of 'the West'.¹² In both cases, though, what was so heady about these cultural-political formations, what made their risks and deprivations utterly worthwhile to the participants, was not merely the anticipation of a beautiful new world to come nor merely the effect of a popular political potency rarely felt in late modernity – it is not clear that either Sixties radicals in the West or Eighties dissidents and intellectuals in the East felt such potency much of the time. Rather, in both cases, a radical protest of the status quo was lived out in a highly charged subculture that was as libidinally compelling as a group experience can be, a revolutionary erotics that paradoxically bound its participants precisely by inciting challenges to all conventional bonds – those containing intellectual work within the academy, those restricting love and sex to the family, and above all, those separating Eros, politics, ideas and everyday existence from one another. When poetry becomes political, when politics becomes erotic, when thinking is de-commodified and comes to feel as essential to life as food and shelter, not only do ordinary fields of activity become libidinally charged, but this desublimated condition itself betokens (however illusorily) an emancipated world to come. This revolutionary awakening of the mind and the senses carries (however falsely) a promise of living beyond repression, alienation, compartmentalization, indeed beyond settled forms or institutions *tout court*. It is difficult to avoid nostalgia for the irreverent and transgressive spirit coursing through these subcultures ... brief, out-of-history times when all social practices – from marriage to literature to architecture – are open to rethinking and refashioning. Boundary smashing Eros saturates the social form ... which is also why it cannot last.

However problematically, this formation of political life and possibility carried at its heart attachment to both political and individual transformation, a deep conviction about the possibility of making humans differently, and pleasure in both the powers of critique and of collective action. Revolutionary feminism promised that we could become new women and men, that we could literally take in hand the conditions that produce gender and then produce it differently, that not simply laws and other institutions could be purged of gender bias but that humans themselves could be produced beyond gender as history has known it. Nor was this revolutionary feminist impulse circumscribed only by feminism's second wave and its convergence with the New Left. Rather, it can be traced from Wollstonecraft to feminists of the French and Russian Revolution to novelists, poets and theorists of the revolutionary moment of the second wave in North America and Europe. This was feminism that imagined humanity one day free of gender as a social production, just as the ideal of communism figured humanity not simply emancipated from class but free of domination by necessity. Androgyny was one version of this feminist vision but there were other formulations that worked with the possibility of difference delinked from subordination.

As philosophically and politically naive as this belief appears in retrospect, we are still compelled to ask: what is feminism without it, without the conviction that the

deep conditions of gender subordination – and not only the laws that encode it or the norms that regulate it – can be identified and transformed? What suspicion about the naturalness of gender subordination persists when feminism addresses only the wrongs done to women and not *the socially produced capacity for women to be wronged*, to be victims? What inevitable entanglement with a politics of *ressentiment* tinges feminism if the problem is always one of how women are *treated by* power, if the fix always entails taming power (obtaining protection through law or regulation), if we cannot figure a world in which we imagine governing ourselves *and* imagine release from the identity that has been the site of our injury? Feminism without revolution means giving up on seizing the conditions through which gender is made, and it is the illusion of such a seizure – the illusion that the conditions are distinct, objectifiable and could be taken in hand – that we have necessarily abandoned. If we learned from de Beauvoir that women are made not born, it was first Marxist, then psychoanalytic and then Foucauldian feminism that illuminated not only how extensive and elaborate but finally how beyond human grasp this making is, the degree to which it is bound up not just with attitude, law and custom, not just with a sexual division of labour, not just with racial, caste and class stratifications, not even just with the psychic economies of families and their deposits in gendered subjectivities, but also with myriad social norms buried in discursively organized practices ranging from motherhood to microchip assembly to the military. If revolution was undermined by the collapse of Enlightenment formulations of social totality, reason, truth, freedom, progress and history, it was also undone by a confrontation with the subterranean byways and nesting places of power, and with power's intangible, dispersed, unconsolidated and non-unified operations. Yet feminism without revolution, conjoined with theories of intricate social construction, comes close to producing a critique of male dominance with almost no exit. Only fools call this situation the 'triumph of biology' though clearly the fools have the monopoly on the press these days¹³.

But what precisely killed the revolutionary *spirit* of second wave feminism? This question is inseparable, of course, from what dispersed or destroyed the more general radical spirit of that epoch, a story too complex to rehearse here. There are specifics for feminism, though, worth considering. First, even as revolutionary feminism itself gave birth to lesbian separatism and various feminist nationalisms based in race and ethnicity, in crucial ways these offspring had a more conservative *Weltanschauung* than their progenitors – tending toward the consolidation rather than the disruption of identity, often inward turning in their politics, less consistently critical of capitalism and liberalism, more inclined toward interest-bound reformism than with propounding a comprehensive vision for society. It goes without saying that these movements importantly expanded the operative substantive definitions of woman and feminism. To identify politically conservative tendencies in these movements does not vitiate this achievement; rather it refuses to index the radicalism of a political programme according to this achievement. Certainly it is possible to expand the subject of feminism while narrowing feminism's political vision.

Second, within the academy, there were serious consequences of the contingent historical fact that sexuality studies emerged as revolutionary feminism waned. For all of its intellectual and political fecundity, sexuality studies often hit a slightly

reactionary note on the question of transforming male dominant regimes of gender. This was not simply ignorance or misogyny on the part of an initially male-dominated academic industry, although these were present and took their toll, but rather a consequence of the erotics carried in existing gender arrangements. Here, Catharine MacKinnon must be credited with grasping something important and deadly about sexual life in male dominant regimes: the eroticization of gender subordination constitutes the major (not the only) erotic economy of such regimes. So, when the focus is on the politics of sexuality rather than the politics of sexism, that which aims to eliminate gender subordination by undermining the grounds and performance of gender difference can appear at the same time to be opposing sexual pleasure. Thus does revolutionary feminism come to be figured as anti-sexual, and thus does a certain reification of gender difference (regardless of how it is distributed across biologically sexed bodies) appear as a means of reappropriating the erotics that feminism would otherwise seem to degrade or aim to eliminate.

Third, feminism emerging from the Third World and the former Soviet Bloc was routinely represented in the West as uninterested in or even hostile to critiques of femininity or compulsory heterosexuality, and consequently, as uninterested in critiques of the family, marriage, gendered subjectivity, etc. When combined with many Third World feminists' suspicion of male 'revolutionaries' and the overt hostility of many Chinese, Russian and East European feminists to Marxist regimes and to the infelicitous communist state regulation of gender and the family, feminism in the Second and Third Worlds came to be figured as an indictment of a decadent radicalism of First World feminism.

Taken together, these three sources of rejection of revolutionary Euro-Atlantic feminism tarred it as self-indulgent, white, unconnected to the real needs of most of the world's women, and/or as opposed to pleasure and anti-sexual. But the forces disintegrating revolutionary feminism did not only come from without. Within Western feminist theory, poststructuralist insights were the final blow to the project of transforming, emancipating or eliminating gender in a *revolutionary* mode. This may seem counter-intuitive when such insight is often considered responsible for theorizing gender as a resignifiable and at least modestly flexible fiction, and makes such rich use of the Nietzschean-Foucauldian understanding that regimes of domination inadvertently produce subversive subjects and forms of agency opposed to such regimes. The point is not that poststructuralism undermines the project of transforming gender but that it illuminates the impossibility of seizing the conditions making gender as well as the impossibility of escaping gender. Indeed, in its very challenge to the line drawn in the revolutionary paradigm between 'conditions' and 'effects' it undermined the possibility of objectifying those conditions and of conceiving agents who could stand outside them to transform them. Moreover, poststructuralist feminism's appreciation of the psychic coordinates and repetitions constitutive of gender locate much of its production in social norms and deep processes of identifications and repudiations only intermittently knowable to its subjects, even less often graspable, and thus unsuited to a paradigm of transformation premised upon seizing and eliminating the conditions producing and reproducing gender. Certain gender conventions or norms might be resisted, subverted or resignified but resistance and resignification are not equivalent to a transformation

of *the conditions* of gendered erotics, conditions that are no longer posited as outside of its subjects, and hence are not ours to mastermind but at best only to resist or negotiate.

Thus, gender is regarded (and lived) by contemporary young scholars and activists raised on poststructuralism as something that can be bent, proliferated, troubled, resignified, morphed, theatricalized, parodied, deployed, resisted, imitated, regulated ... but not emancipated. Gender is very nearly infinitely plastic and divisible, but as a domain of subjection with no outside, it cannot be liberated in the classical sense and the powers constituting and regulating it cannot be seized and inverted or abolished. In one crucial respect, then, gendered regimes can be seen to share a predicament with global capitalism: each is available to almost any innovation and possibility except freedom, equality and collective human control. Each is beyond the reach of revolution.

iii. Beyond Revolution

Historically outmoded, exhausted as an ambition, ruptured as political ontology, discredited by contemporary political epistemology – revolution is unquestionably finished. Why, though, would we mourn it? Quite simply, this death seems to carry with it our dreams for a better world. Notwithstanding much brave left talk about ‘localism’, ‘coalition politics’, ‘postidentity politics’ and ‘resistance’, without revolution, it is hard to see how our political labours – intellectual or otherwise – enable the transformation of the current order into a more just, free and egalitarian one. Our critique of the present is not matched by prospects for transformation – there are neither credible alternatives nor credible roads to them. A severe critique that does not articulate with anticipation of a different future ... an illness with no cure ... how to proceed when this has become our condition? What, under these circumstances, are the alternatives to despair, melancholy or resignation?

Most common today is the impulse to retrench the critique to fit the apparent horizon of possibility. ‘Don’t criticize what you cannot change’ or ‘don’t dwell on the problem if you don’t have a solution’ are the unspoken maxims of the age. Accordingly, a substantive critique of capitalism (and not just its putatively recent ‘globalized’ form), critiques of marriage and the family, critiques of mass mediated culture, indeed critique itself, have all largely fallen off a left intellectual and political agenda. But such retrenchment only compounds left despair insofar as reconciliation to the contours and content of the present abandons the unique political orientation of the left itself, one that calls into question existing social arrangements to argue for more just and humane ones. So, what possibilities are there for living and working, without bitterness or disavowal, in this difficult theoretical and political place, this place of critique that exceeds realizability, of indicting more than we can redress or replace? What as yet unpracticed political sensibility is required to dwell here?

A second widespread inclination is to blame our stymied condition on ‘Them’ (the neoCons, the Right, the Feminist Backlashers, various political or corporate Masters of the Universe) or on some loathed part of ‘Us’ (sectarian identity politics,

poststructuralism). This move forecloses attention to what has brought us to this pass and also limits discernment of troubling political formulations and formations borne from it, e.g. rejection of critique, state-centred reformism that veers into intensified regulation, or left feminist politics reduced to relatively impotent protest and complaint. Moreover, the impulse to blame and complain tends to displace any impulse to develop strategies for the assumption of power; it necessarily entrenches rather than repairs from the condition it bemoans. Its very crankiness is a recognizable symptom of mourning.

If the modality of political transformation in modernity was revolution, what lies beyond it? What is the 'beyond' of this loss and how does the loss itself open the field of this beyond? What are the possible postrevolutionary modalities of radical political and social transformation in our time? Revolution was always finest in its opening of possibility, in the sensibility and practices of political risk, imagination, upheaval, questioning and vision this opening incited. By contrast, the lowest point in revolution was usually its furious will to power distilled into fundamentalism – Bolshevik authoritarianism, the Cultural Revolution, Napoleon and/or the Terror, in its own way even the Constitutional Convention of the United States. The 'non-political' revolutions – scientific, industrial, informational – also inverted their emancipatory impulse as they achieved hegemony or took institutional root; as each regime contains critique, delimits what is thinkable, sayable and doable, erects its truth as deities. Every revolution's Thermidor arrives with ferocious certainty about what should follow the openings produced by upheaval, about how the promise will be realized, about the indifference of the means to the end; this surety precisely reverses the spirit of upturning and opening, of keening toward an uncertain future that makes revolutionary intellectual and political agitation so heady and fecund, so full of imagination and possibility. How, then, to cultivate the fecundity of revolutionary opening without the revolutionary push toward the knowable and the controllable? How to cultivate this remainder of revolution in the form of a utopian imaginary stripped of its promise to redeem the past and be realized in the future? Above all, how to suspend this utopian impulse in a different temporality such that it could fuel rather than haunt or taunt left political life in our time? Our task would seem to be that of prying apart an exuberant critical utopian impulse from immediate institutional and historical solutions so that the impulse can survive stumbling, disorientation, disappointment and even failure and so that the impulse remains incitational of thought and possibility rather than turning fundamentalist. The task, then, would be to recuperate a utopian imaginary in the absence of a revolutionary mechanism for its realization such that this imaginary could have a political use, that is, participate in the making of social transformation and not only constitute an escape from the felt impossibility of such transformation. Such a recuperation locates a radical politics apart from left fundamentalism on the one side, and apart from the refusal to reckon with deep social and economic powers entailed in liberal political pluralism on the other. This is the political ground between postrevolutionary despair or paralysis and resignation to liberal reformism itself no longer convincing in its narrative of incrementalism. A radical democratic critique and utopian imaginary that has no certainty about its prospects or even about the means and vehicles of its realization, that does not know what its imagined personae will be capable of – this

would seem to be the left political sensibility that could give our mourning a productive postrevolutionary form.

iv. Feminism and Women's Studies Beyond Sex and Gender

Women's studies 'beyond sex and gender' does not seem to me a right naming of our problem. Rather, the very perception of it as a problem is a symptom of a condition in which women's studies has not simply lost its revolutionary impulse but turned against this impulse, against its desire to have done with these objects. It is a symptom of a condition in which feminism's investment in its own career advancement has replaced the political impulse to overthrow itself, to lose its boundaries both by becoming part of a larger order of transformative politics and by being washed away in such politics. So what if we folded women's studies 'beyond sex and gender' into recuperating the project of emancipating sex and gender, thereby breathing a renewed emancipatory spirit into women's studies? This requires shaking off nostalgia for the Big Bang theory of social change, a nostalgia which generates either hopelessness or conservatism, often amounting to the same thing in the form of resignation. But, perhaps even more importantly, this requires a certain dwelling in that state of mourning in which a seemingly unendurable loss is also the opening of possibility to live and think differently. For this, we have to understand not only what has been lost, but also who we now are as thinking, political beings who were both formed by and lost a certain critical promise. In mourning a dead promise, we also have the gift of being able to parse the promise, distinguishing what we want to carry with us as a life force from what, at best, is hard knowledge or painful de-idealization.

On the one hand, only by stumbling, only by feeling what one depended on before and with what one can now replace that dependency does a mourning being begin to discern possibility in loss, in being free of an object which seemed like life itself. If we are without revolutionary possibility today, we are also free of revolution as the paradigm of transformation: what new political formations might be born from this moment? On the other hand, avowing our loss allows us to cultivate the memory – and with Benjamin, ignite that memory – of the utopian imaginary of the revolutionary paradigm and so make that imaginary part of our knowledge for working in the present, not just a lament about the unrevolutionary present. What if feminism 'beyond sex and gender' could become a site for recuperating utopian aims without the mechanism of revolution? What if it could become the site for developing postrevolutionary modalities of political thought and practice? What if we let our objects fly?

Notes

¹ This paper was the keynote lecture for the United Kingdom Women's Studies Network Conference, 'Beyond Sex and Gender: The Future of Women's Studies?' September 19–21, 2002, in Belfast, Northern Ireland. For their critical readings and suggestions, I am grateful to Judith Butler, Valerie

Hartouni, Gail Hershatter, Helene Moglen and Joan W. Scott.

² Sigmund Freud, *Totem and Taboo* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1938), p.60.

³ 'The dead seize the living!', Karl Marx, 'Preface to the First German Edition' in F. Engels [ed],

Capital, Volume 1, trans. S. Moore and E. Aveling (New York: International Publishers, 1967), p.9.

⁴ Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution* (London: Viking Press, 1965), pp.29, 34.

⁵ Arendt, *On Revolution*, pp.50–51.

⁶ Karl Marx, 'On the Jewish Question', in Robert Tucker [ed], *The Marx-Engels Reader*, 2nd edition (New York: Norton, 1978).

⁷ 'What from [the French Revolution onward] has been irrevocable, and what the agents and spectators of revolution immediately recognized as such, was that the public realm – reserved, as far as memory could reach, to those who *were* free, namely carefree of all the worries that are connected with life's necessity, with bodily needs – should offer its space and its light to this immense majority who are not free because they are driven by daily needs [...]. The notion of an irresistible movement, which the nineteenth century soon was to conceptualize into the idea of historical necessity, echoes from beginning to end through the pages of the French Revolution'. Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution*, p.48.

⁸ Gillian Rose, *Mourning Becomes the Law: Philosophy and Representation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1966), pp.125–9.

⁹ Rose, *Mourning Becomes the Law*, p.130.

¹⁰ Karl Marx, 'Manifesto of the Communist Party', in Robert Tucker [ed] *Marx-Engels Reader*, 2nd edition (New York: Norton, 1978), p.477.

¹¹ Herbert Marcuse, *One Dimensional Man* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1964).

¹² Miglena Nikolchina, 'The Seminar: *Mode d'emploi*. Impure Space in the Light of Late Totalitarianism' *differences: a journal of cultural feminist studies*, Volume 13, Number 1, (Spring 2002).

¹³ In addition to the belief that we could become new women and men, that gender could be made

differently, revolutionary feminism carried the conviction that masculinist values in every venue could be uprooted and replaced. These included values that overtly governed and produced gender but also those comprising the historical anatomy of war, diplomacy, business, sexuality, the liberal state, the family, public and private, and more. Revolutionary feminism's aim to transform the nature of public and economic life, and not simply to obtain an equal place for women in it, is routinely occluded in the endless spate of writing that ties feminism's current lack of cache to its failure to address the difficulty of balancing work and family. (Most recent in the genre is an essay by Kay S. Hymowitz in which she attributes not just the decline but the *death* of feminism to its failure to reckon with 'biology and ordinary bourgeois longings'. 'The End of Herstory', *City*, Vol. 12, Number 3, Summer 2002.) But feminism in a revolutionary mode never intended to address this difficulty; rather, it sought to transform the order that made balancing work and family women's problem in the first place and impossible in the second. It did not ask how to solve this problem within existing parameters but rather, asked what arrangements of work, love and kinship would offer a more richly humane satisfaction of a variety of human desires and needs. The fact that this utopian impulse is now routinely (mis)cast as feminists' eschewal of fixed psychic and biological coordinates testifies to how thoroughly incomprehensible, indeed, unthinkable, a revolutionary political spirit and *worldview* is today, how thoroughly both have vanished from the popular imagination, and at the same time how relentlessly reified and naturalized existing social arrangements have become.

Wendy Brown teaches political theory at the University of California, Berkeley. Her most recent books include *States of Injury: Power and Freedom in Late Modernity* (Princeton, 1995); *Politics Out of History* (Princeton, 2001), and *Left Legalism/Left Critique*, co-edited with Janet Halley (Duke University Press, 2002).