

## INTRODUCTION

### Why *Feminism* and *Freedom* Both Begin with the Letter *F*

The *raison d'être* of politics is freedom,  
and its field of experience is action.

—HANNAH ARENDT

JUDGING FROM THE spate of publications declaring the “end of feminism,” it would seem that feminism, as a social and political movement, has more or less reached its limit.<sup>1</sup> For some critics, this end is given in the supposedly incontrovertible fact that the discrimination feminism set out to challenge is more or less a thing of the past. In their view, gender equality is a legal fact awaiting its full social realization, which, in accordance with the logic of historical progress, is imminent. For other critics, this is clearly not the case. Changes in law do not automatically result in social changes but require the vigilance of an ongoing political movement. If these same critics declare the end of feminism, then, it is more with a sense of loss than triumph. And perhaps they are right: it is increasingly hard to identify the “movement” in the feminist movement; for feminism, when it is not safely ensconced in the formal institutions of the liberal democratic state, can indeed look like a dispersed collection of diverse grassroots struggles that have lost the orientation once provided by its collective subject: “women.”

Critics who long for the clear sense of direction that they identify as the sine qua non of feminist politics like to charge third-wave feminism, especially its poststructuralist variant, with the destruction of the collective subject “women,” but their accusation flies in the face of political history. Anyone even slightly acquainted with the history of first- and second-wave American feminism will immediately recognize that the orientation provided by this putatively collective subject was illusory at best. Feminism has always been shot through with deep internal conflicts about the subject in whose name its equally conflict-ridden social and political aspirations were to be achieved.<sup>2</sup> The breathless pace with which members of the earliest second-wave feminist groups split off to

found other groups, only to find members of the new group splitting off to found yet other groups, indicates what we might call a retroactive fantasy about the wholeness of political origins, a fantasy that is by no means unique to feminism.<sup>3</sup> Far from united at origin, feminism, like all modern democratic political movements (including the American and French revolutions), was divided from the start, wracked by differences over the causes or form of oppression, disputes over the meaning of liberation, and competing understandings of what democratic ideals like freedom and equality and the public realm in which they were to find expression should look like.<sup>4</sup>

Such differences and even deep divisions, visible at particular moments in history, appear self-defeating only if we assume that the *raison d'être* of a democratic political movement like feminism is foremost the social advancement of the group, that such advancement can only be attained if it is in someone's name, and that this name must be known in advance of the political struggle itself. The most trenchant critics of identity politics, such as Judith Butler, Ernesto Laclau, and Chantal Mouffe, have strongly argued that politics (including not only a post-Marxist notion of radical democracy but the more traditional forms of social democratic politics) is indeed possible without such a unified and pre-given subject. Although these criticisms are well taken—especially insofar as they disclose the troubling exclusions that a collective subject like “women” or “workers” given in advance of politics carries with it—what they do not squarely address is the fraught question of whether the *raison d'être* of politics, feminist or any form of democratic politics, is indeed the social advancement of the group in whose name members of a political movement claim to speak.

### Freedom as a Social Question

If it is difficult to imagine the *raison d'être* of politics as anything other than the social advancement of a group and its members, that may be because we tend to think of politics in terms of what Hannah Arendt calls “the social question.” The social question arises wherever it is assumed that classic social welfare problems such as hunger, inequality of wealth, housing, a living wage, and so on are problems that can be solved by political means.<sup>5</sup> For Arendt, the social question—already fatefully (in her view) posed in the French Revolution—comes to be definitive of what politics is with the rise of “the social” in the nineteenth century. Although Arendt is not clear in her definition, the social is a kind of enlarged

“housekeeping,” whereby the public/private distinction is dissolved and citizens are situated in a relatively passive relation to the bureaucratic apparatus of the welfare state, which becomes the sole addressee of political claims and responsible for the distribution of goods and the maintenance of life. The assimilation of the political to the social restricts political action to an instrumental, means-ends activity that entails the micro- and macro-management of social relations. Since “society always demands of its members that they act as if they were members of one enormous family which has only one opinion and one interest,” writes Arendt, the rise of the social is identical with the rise of conformism and “behavior,” and with the consequent reduction of the possibility of spontaneous action (HC, 39).<sup>6</sup>

Arendt's account of social conformity and the rise of the social resonates with critiques of modern disciplinary society (such as Michel Foucault's), which have strongly influenced the shape of recent feminist theory.<sup>7</sup> But Arendt's tendency to define all issues related to the body as dangerous forms of necessity that are best kept private if not hidden and her antipathy toward the “administrative housekeeping” of the modern welfare state have made her a controversial figure both on the progressive Left and in contemporary feminism. Notwithstanding a recent shift in feminist attitudes toward Arendt, which reflect a willingness to consider the potential value of her work for a postidentity politics, what stubbornly remains at the end of the day is her apparent refusal to include social issues among the concerns of politics.<sup>8</sup> An ungenerous but not entirely inaccurate reading of Arendt on the social question (found in the secondary literature) accuses her of eliminating from politics anything that we could possibly recognize as political.<sup>9</sup> If issues of housing, poverty, fair wages, and child care are by definition social, not political, what on earth would people talk about when they come together politically? Why would they come together politically at all?

A more generous reading of Arendt would respond to these legitimate questions by suggesting that she does not in fact exclude social concerns from politics but warns against the introduction of the instrumentalist attitude that such concerns often carry with them. Insofar as expediency is held to be the highest criterion, the instrumentalist attitude treats democratic politics as a means to an end, which almost inevitably leads citizens to allow the actions and judgments of experts to substitute for their own. But if Arendt's point is that expediency is an attitude we tend to take toward social issues, it is also one we could not take. Thus one could well speak politically about something such as fair wages while guarding against what Bonnie Honig, deepening a point originally made by

Hanna Pitkin, calls "the laboring sensibility," that is, "a sensibility that is taken to be characteristic of laboring as an activity [for example, a process- and necessity-driven attitude] but which may or may not be characteristic of the thinking of any particular laborer."<sup>10</sup> There is neither a determinate group of persons nor a determinate class of objects that is by definition social, not political. Instead, there is a tendency to develop an antipolitical sensibility, which arises whenever we seek political solutions to social problems, against which we need to be on our guard.

Although this more generous reading of Arendt is a valuable corrective to dismissive critiques of her work, it is not meant to be a definitive riposte to what many readers find to be the most difficult aspect of her political thought. Arendt's unqualified claim that the social question has displaced and, indeed, led to the virtual ruin of democratic politics stands there—if only we will let it—as a bold challenge to "think what we are doing," as she once unceremoniously put the task of political theorizing (HC, 5). A difficult but valuable partner in feminist dialogue, the non-feminist Arendt presses us to ask, how does the frame of the social question blind us to whatever does not fit inside the frame? How is feminism, in particular, limited in its vision by its perceived identification with the social question? Are there other political visions and practices with which feminism might instead be partnered?

Of the many topics through which we might engage these questions, none is more urgent than freedom. It is a commonplace to state that feminism has been the struggle for women's freedom. For the most part, however, Western feminists on both sides of the Atlantic have tended to justify the claim to freedom in terms of the social question, social justice, or social utility. When Mary Wollstonecraft famously argued for the rights of women, for example, she demanded freedom as the unqualified right to participate in government based on the criterion of all republican citizenship, which, in her view (as in that of other radical republicans, such as Thomas Paine), was the faculty of reason. But she also felt the need to qualify that radical demand: "Contending for the rights of women, my main argument is built on this simple principle, that if she [woman] be not prepared by education to become the companion of man, she will stop the progress of knowledge and virtue."<sup>11</sup> And besides, women were the virtuous sex that had so much to contribute to the moral advancement of society. Writing over a half a century later, John Stuart Mill strongly argued for women's unqualified claim to political freedom, warning that, should women not be given their rights, British civilization was doomed.<sup>12</sup> And besides, society was

wasting half its brainpower and talent, in particular women's facility in all social matters that required moral virtue and delicate sensibility. Likewise, in the early nineteenth-century United States, the suffragist Carrie Chapman Catt asserted, in the irrefutable logic of the syllogism, democracy is rule by the people, women are people, ergo women have the right to participate in government. And besides, women would bring to public life the special virtues of femininity, especially "in areas where mothers' skills were needed, such as schooling, caring for criminals, or dealing with unemployment."<sup>13</sup>

According to Nancy Cott, the demand for women's freedom in the writings of most late eighteenth- and nineteenth-century feminists exhibits an uneasy but ultimately successful combination of equal-rights arguments and expediency arguments, sameness arguments and difference arguments. Whereas the first set of arguments turns mostly on the idea of social justice, the second set turns on what Arendt called the social question. Cott captures this combination in the struggle for the vote.

[I]t was an equal rights goal that enabled women to make special contributions; it sought to give women the same capacity as men so they could express their differences; it was a just end in itself, but it was also an expedient means to other ends. "Sameness" and "difference" arguments, "equal rights" and "special contributions" arguments, "justice" and "expediency" arguments existed side by side.<sup>14</sup>

Cott's broader intellectual agenda here, like that of Joan Scott in her work on the struggle for rights in French feminism, is to break the deadlock of the sameness-difference debate that has plagued American feminist historiography and theory.<sup>15</sup> Both Cott and Scott try to reframe modern feminism as constituted by paradox, by the need both to accept and refuse sexual difference. The question, however, is whether the tenacity of the impossible choice framework of equality or difference that they would expose can be properly understood, let alone overcome, without attending to the larger frame in which feminist struggles for political rights have been posed: the frame of the social question and its means-ends conception of politics.

Attending to the social question and how it has framed what can be heard as a political claim, I am more troubled than Cott by the ways in which feminists have tried to justify the demand for women's freedom. The two arguments she describes, though logically distinct, came, in the course of their articulation in concrete political contexts, to be deeply

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Freedom & social justice entangled

entangled in each other—entangled such that a claim to freedom could not be articulated or heard unless it was uttered as a claim to social justice, which in turn could only be heard in the idiom of the social question. Women's claim to freedom, in other words, was a claim to social justice, which would allow for a more just solution to the social question. In this way, issues of social justice and the social question became almost synonymous, and the feminist claim to freedom more often than not took the form of a rather complex set of justifications. These justifications, which almost always referred to something unique in femininity (be it a certain sensibility or simply a practical skill associated with the social role of women), turned, in the last instance, not on freedom as the very practice of democratic politics or as the reason we engage in such politics. Instead, freedom became a means to some other end: an attenuation of the problems associated with the social question. The "besides" that often qualified feminist claims to social justice—usually in the form of a long list of all the special contributions women would make if only they were participators in government—came to look like the very reason for women's freedom itself: the betterment of society. Thus, we might well wonder whether the claim to political freedom is perhaps being not enabled, but rather displaced, by the social question.

Freedom with masculinized

In her brief but perspicuous tracking of changes in the meaning of "women" from the eighteenth to the twentieth century, Denise Riley observes that the social "was constructed so as to dislocate the political."<sup>16</sup> Although this dislocation, which Arendt bemoaned, was in no way restricted to women's political demands, the emerging sphere of the social in the nineteenth century was deeply feminized.<sup>17</sup> By the early- to mid-twentieth century, Riley writes, "the very word 'women' was imbued in all political languages with domesticity in a broad sense, with a limiting notion of sociality."<sup>18</sup> Tracking this development, she argues that the inherited idea of a naturalized femininity in the early- to mid-nineteenth century was redeployed, by advocates and opponents of women's rights alike, in relation to the emerging idea of the social. This redeployment, Riley observes, resulted in a "bland redistribution and dilution of the sexual onto the familial," as well as a dispersal of the "irresistibly sexualized elements of 'women' onto new categories of immiseration and delinquency—which then became sociological problems [that women, in their sociologically defined capacity as citizens, were called upon to solve]."<sup>19</sup> Doubly positioned as "both agents and objects of reform in unprecedented ways with the ascent of the social," women came to be seen more as a sociological group with a particular

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social agenda than as an emerging political collectivity with unqualified democratic demands.<sup>20</sup> Claims to the political status of citizen increasingly had to be made as claims to a certain sociological status; the claim to political freedom was heard as the claim to participate in the public "social housekeeping" that Arendt so disdained.

The entanglement of women and the social, then, has deeply influenced what can be heard as a political demand for freedom. Whatever its problems, the term *social feminism*—coined by the historian William O'Neill to describe the women who were municipal civic reformers, club members, settlement house residents, and labor activists—captures the new idiom in which the struggle for American women's political rights after 1900 came to be fought.<sup>21</sup> Social feminism, I hasten to qualify the accepted narrative, developed as more than a claim to sexual difference, the difference women would make if only they were granted political rights. What feminists faced was not just conventional conceptions of femininity that had to be strategically redeployed for political purposes, but a significant displacement of the political by the social. Within the increasingly all-encompassing framework of the social question, the earlier claims to women's full political membership as a good in itself, made by feminists like Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton, were seen as selfish and narrow. Indeed, these feminists and their unqualified demand for the right to be participators in public affairs came to be seen as "hard-core." For social feminists and, indeed, for anyone who made the case for women's rights on the basis of social utility, be it in terms of difference or equality, the ballot was not an end in itself but a means to an end: the betterment of society.<sup>22</sup>

social feminism

In some sense, the displacement of the political by the social is intrinsic to the history of democratic politics more generally. Far from unique to feminism, the articulation of political demands in the language of the social is a rhetorical strategy that has been, and continues to be, taken up by many disenfranchised groups (for example, the struggle for the gradual extension of "manhood suffrage" in nineteenth-century England, for the rights of African Americans in the United States, for workers' rights in capitalist economies, and for women's human rights in a global context), whose advocates, eager to convince those in power of the rightness of their cause, framed it in the language of social utility. Although rhetorical strategy—whether conscious or not to those involved in making political claims—is surely a crucial component in any struggle for political freedom, rhetoric is often treated by historians and political theorists, to say nothing of philosophers, as if it were the mere form in which an

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independent argument is made. In that case, one could, as it were, package an argument for freedom in the rhetoric of expediency or the social question and then, after freedom has been "attained," shed the packaging like a snake sheds its skin. But things are not so simple.

Apart from Riley's account of modern feminism, which suggests that rhetoric does not merely reproduce but also constitutes the conditions of political visibility, it is also the case that rhetorical strategies have unintended meanings and effects. Indeed, in feminism, arguments for freedom were not always advanced but rather crippled by their entanglement in social justice arguments and expediency arguments. The point here is not to issue some sort of political complaint or directive (asserting, say, that feminists ought to have made, or ought now to make, arguments for freedom free of social justice claims or expediency claims, or that they should make social justice arguments for freedom free of any trace of utility). The rise of the social, as described by Arendt, and the entanglement of women in it, as portrayed by Riley, is an established fact; it is the politically problematic inheritance of contemporary feminism. If the task is to try to understand more fully the consequences of that inheritance for feminist democratic politics today, then we need to think carefully and critically about how the social question (and the economy of utility in which it dwells) has framed both our conception of what freedom is (for example, a means to an end: the betterment of society) and what an argument for freedom must look like if it is to be heard as such (for example, point to something beyond the practice of freedom). Most important, it is to become critically aware of the costs of the social question to freedom itself.

The history of first- and second-wave feminism shows that to enter into the language game of justifications, be it in the name of social justice or the social question, was more often than not to find oneself in the losing position, and this is true even if specific goals such as women's suffrage were won. To speak with Arendt on Women's Liberation, "The real question to ask is, what will we lose if we win?"<sup>23</sup> With every attempt to answer their critics in terms of social justice, which was really an argument about expediency, feminists found themselves only falling deeper into the logic of social utility or function that has historically governed every iteration of the "woman question": what is a woman for?<sup>24</sup> Feminists have challenged truncated conceptions of what woman is for, usually by questioning the naturalized femininity that supposedly determines her social function. What has been harder to challenge is the logic of social utility itself. This logic keeps women's radical demand for free-

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dom, for unqualified participation in common affairs, bound to an economy of use that deeply restricts their emergence as a political collectivity (unless, of course, we define politics itself in terms of that same economy).

Feminist efforts to substitute the idea of women as a social group (gender) for women as a natural group (sex) may question the substantive social tasks assigned on the basis of sex differences, but without in any way disrupting the logic that tightly binds political life to social utility. The problem with this binding is not only the entanglement of women's citizenship with the social functions of femininity but also the tendency for the value of expediency to trump claims to freedom. If we value women's freedom because it is useful in solving certain social problems, we may not value freedom when it interferes with social utility or when more expedient ways of reaching the same social results can be shown. Freedom disturbs the use of politics as a means to an end; it is always "out of order."

There is a way to counter the demand that freedom be a means to an end, but it requires that we pose the question of freedom anew and try to find examples of the demand for political freedom that are not easily folded into the social question (or any economy of utility and means-ends thinking whatsoever). Before we can do that, however, we need to consider another problematic framing of freedom, namely, in terms of the subject question.

### Freedom as a Subject Question

"Since the whole problem of freedom arises for us in the horizon of Christian tradition on one hand, and of an originally anti-political philosophic tradition on the other," writes Arendt, "we find it difficult to realize that there may exist a freedom which is not an attribute of the will but an accessory of doing and acting."<sup>25</sup> At once commonsensical and deeply strange, Arendt's account of freedom as political action is highly critical of the notion of freedom as a phenomenon of the will, which we, feminist and democratic thinkers alike, have inherited from the Western philosophical and political tradition.<sup>26</sup> Based on Man in the singular, freedom of the will—clearly crucial to but hardly exhausted by the liberal concept of freedom that is dominant in most Western democracies—is entangled in a dangerous fantasy of sovereignty, writes Arendt, according to which "perfect liberty is incompatible with the existence of society."<sup>27</sup> Further, genuine freedom is defined as the freedom not only

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freedom is defined as the freedom not only

from the interference of others, or what we call "negative liberty," but also from politics itself.<sup>28</sup>

Like the displacement of the political by the social, the identification of freedom with the free will of a sovereign subject is the problematic inheritance of democratic and feminist politics.<sup>29</sup> Although second- (and to a lesser extent first-) wave feminism criticized the masculinist fantasy of sovereignty that—argued Beauvoir long ago—turns on women's submission, it nonetheless inclined toward a conception of freedom that either sets the individual woman against "all her sex" (that is, the exceptional woman who escapes or denies the social condition of her gender) or requires a woman's full identification with "her sex" (that is, an antipolitical kinship relation in the form of an all-powerful sisterhood that obliterates particularity and with it plurality).<sup>30</sup> In both cases, freedom is articulated as sovereignty, be it an "I" against all the others or an "I" multiplied and extended into an omnipotent "we."

The entanglement of feminism in the ideal of sovereignty is symptomatic of a tendency to think about freedom in terms of what I will call the "subject question." This question centers primarily on the subject's very formation and on the external and internal forces that hinder its freedom. The subject question is the larger frame within which a fantasy of sovereignty has been presupposed, but such a fantasy is in no way exhaustive of the frame. What defines the frame is not a certain *theory* of the subject (autonomous, dependent, or interdependent) but the fact that *the subject* (be it as a philosophical, linguistic, or psychoanalytic category) is the nodal point around which every political question of freedom gets posed. The subject question is not meant to stand as the other to the social question in the way that, say, the "demand for recognition [of identity]" is meant to stand opposed to the "demand for redistribution [of social goods]" in Nancy Fraser's well-known essay.<sup>31</sup> By contrast with "the redistribution-recognition dilemma," the subject question and the social question are part of the same frame, namely, an instrumental and adjudicative conception of politics that minimizes the possibility of freedom as action.

In its second-wave iteration, freedom as a subject question was famously posed in *The Second Sex*.<sup>32</sup> Raised to remain within the social confines of proper femininity, argues Beauvoir, woman is subject to strong external constraints on her freedom, but she also hinders herself: rather than take the risk of freedom, woman is complicit in her own subjection. On the one hand, Beauvoir's account of a socially constituted femininity—"one is not born, but becomes, rather, a woman"—is a bold attempt to rethink "the woman question" in terms of the inner and outer constraints on the subject as they have been described in the Western

philosophical tradition and, more specifically, in the existentialist ethics of Sartre. On the other hand, Beauvoir departs from philosophy and gestures toward the specificity of politics when—as if refusing to substitute "Woman in the singular" for the tradition's "Man"—she suggests that freedom can never be strictly a subject question, for freedom is only possible in political community. Contra Sartre, for whom freedom is a subjective inner state that persists even under the most oppressive social conditions (for example, torture), Beauvoir holds that to be free is to be able to do. The woman in a harem is not free, maintains Beauvoir against Sartre, for freedom requires not only an "I-will" but an "I-can," to borrow Arendt's concise formulation.<sup>33</sup> "I-can" points to the worldly conditions that enable one to do what one wills. Thus the problem of freedom for women—initially formulated as a subject question and in terms of the free will of Woman in the singular—turns out to be a problem of transforming the conditions of the common world, hence as a problem of political action: women must learn to act in concert, to say "we," concludes Beauvoir.<sup>34</sup>

The problem of freedom that inspired Beauvoir's account of femininity was both reiterated and occluded in later interpretations of her work, which mostly focused on the identity thematic (that is, gender is made, not given) and tended to lose sight of freedom as a political problem of the I-can. More precisely, freedom comes to be formulated, in the so-called category of women debates of the late 1980s and the 1990s, strictly as a subject question, while subject formation comes increasingly to be interpreted in terms of radical subjection to agencies outside the self that Beauvoir did not see. In this spirit, Judith Butler famously takes up Beauvoir's insight, "one 'becomes' a woman, but always under a cultural compulsion to become one," to argue that the subject is deeply constrained to reiterate the very social norms that constitute it as subject/ed.<sup>35</sup> Absent such reiteration, holds Butler, the subject would suffer the fate of the most radical skeptic: it would have no sense of its own realness, no sense of social existence at all. Following Michel Foucault's account of *assujettissement* (subjectivation), Butler disputes the very idea of "an agent, a cogito," taken for granted in Beauvoir's account of gender construction, that underwrites the "conventional philosophical polarity between free will and determinism."<sup>36</sup> In Butler's third-wave view, the question for feminism becomes, "Is there a way to affirm complicity as the basis of political agency, yet insist that political agency may do more than reiterate the conditions of subordination?"<sup>37</sup>

I discuss Butler's answer to this question at length in chapter 1. For now it is important only to note the centrality and persistence of the problem



of agency in the very mode of feminist critique (that is, poststructuralist that is typically associated with the demise of the "subject." Could it be that this critique marks a move not out of the subject-centered frame (which governed identity politics) but into its negative space? When Butler and others suggest that the subject can express its freedom by reiteration and others suggest that the subject can express its freedom by reiteration of the very norms and categories that constitute it as subject/ed, have we not so much left the space of the subject as entered into one of its deepest dramas? The negative space in which this drama unfolds is visible in Butler's troubled recognition that the subject is something feminists cannot, but must, do without, something that is both the condition and the limit of feminist politics.<sup>38</sup> But then it seems as if the paradox of subject formation is installed as a vicious circle of agency at the heart of politics. In that case it would be hard to see how politics could ever be a truly transformative practice that might create something new, forms of life that would be more freedom enabling.<sup>39</sup>

Like the social question, questions of identity and, more recently, subjectification frame our thinking about politics in ways that limit our vision and contain our aspirations more to the problem of the I-will than the I-can. True, thinkers like Butler aspire to a grander politics of freedom than the focus on subjectification and its discontents suggests. Ambivalently beholden to the terms of the subject question, however, they remain tied to a conception of politics that makes agency the condition of any political existence whatsoever. Accordingly, the political formation of the "we" in a feminist practice of freedom seems wholly contingent upon *the* subject's capacity for agency, thus forever returning the subject to the vicious circle in which it plays out the drama of its subjection.<sup>40</sup> Rather than rush to solve the problem of agency, however, let us pause and ask why we think that agency is the paramount problem for feminism after identity politics. Perhaps what we need is a clearer sense of how agency is a requirement of that subject-centered frame, even when the frame itself constitutes a negative space.

What if instead we, together with Arendt, were to shift the problem of freedom outside its current subject-centered frame? Such a shift might prove to be a valuable alternative to our current entanglement in the paradoxes of subject formation and the vicious circle of agency.<sup>41</sup> Once we understand what is at stake in thinking about politics as a mode of human action in our Arendtian way, we will see why agency, as it has been thought within the subject-centered frame, is not only *not* the premier problem of democratic and feminist politics but also a deeply mis-leading problem that inclines us to misunderstand what we do when we act politically. The requirement of agency is entangled in an identification

of freedom with sovereignty and an instrumental conception of politics which deny the very condition of democratic and feminist politics, namely, plurality.

Plurality as the condition of politics,—the fact that "men, not Man, live on earth and inhabit the world"—means that one acts into an "already existing web of human relationships, with its innumerable, conflicting wills and intentions, [and consequently that] action almost never achieves its purpose [that is, realizes a goal, an end]," writes Arendt (HC, 7, 184). Plurality means that the actor no more controls the effects of her action than she does its meaning, that is, what action reveals about "who" she is. *Who* someone is, by contrast with *what* she is (for example, a white middle-class American woman, qualities she necessarily shares with others like her) is the unique disclosure of human action in Arendt's view (HC, 184). This "who" is no substance that can be cognized or in any way known; it can only show itself through "manifest signs" (HC, 182). Although any attempt to capture the "who" in language always risks reducing it to a "what," the "who" lives on from the stories, narratives, and other human artifacts which speak of it and without which it would vanish without a trace (HC, 184).<sup>42</sup> Most important, says Arendt, the impossibility of saying definitively "who" someone is "excludes in principle our ever being able to handle these [human] affairs as we handle things whose nature is at our disposal because we can name them"—it excludes, in other words, the kind of mastery over action that is assumed in the means-ends thinking that defines most theories of politics, including feminist ones (HC, 181–82).

Insofar as Arendt's account of the "who" concerns human action broadly speaking, it is not restricted to the realm of politics. But to talk about the realm of politics is, in her view, always to talk about action and thus the "who."<sup>43</sup> However it might appear as if talk of the "who" is just another way of raising the problem of agency, the Arendtian notion of the "who" is fundamentally different from the subject that haunted the category of women debates. Whereas feminists have focused on the question of whether political agency is possible in the absence of the "what" (for example, an identity such as "women"), Arendt insists that politics is not about the "what" and agency, but always about the "who" and nonsovereignty. By contrast with the feminist sense of crisis that emerged in relation to the critique of the subject, Arendt holds that politics, the realm of action, is possible *only* on the condition that there is *no* agent who can begin a process and more or less control its outcome, use a means toward an end. Refuting claims to mastery, Arendt argues not (as Butler following Nietzsche did) that "there is no doer behind the deed"

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but that the deed, once done, has effects beyond the doer's control.<sup>44</sup> "Whoever begins to act must know that he has started something whose end he can never foretell, if only because his own deed has already changed everything and made it even more unpredictable," asserts Arendt.<sup>45</sup>

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- subjects

Foregrounded in Arendt's account of action is something less about the *subject* (for example, its stability/instability or its capacity/noncapacity for agency) than about the *world* (for example, its contingency) into which the subject is arbitrarily thrown and into which it acts.<sup>46</sup> As I hope to show in the following chapters, this is not a small but crucially important difference: it turns our attention from the question of the *subject*—which, notwithstanding critical iterations of its social constitution and intrinsically paradoxical formation, almost inevitably restates the solipsism if not will-driven character of the subject-centered frame—to the question of the world. What Arendt calls the "world" is not nature or the earth as such but "is related, rather, to the human artifact, the fabrication of human hands, as well as to affairs which go on among those who inhabit the man-made world together" (HC, 52). The world is the concrete objective and subjective "space in which things become public," the space in which, when we act politically, we encounter others who, too, act and take up the effects of our action in ways that we can never predict or control with certainty.<sup>47</sup>

If it is hard to shift our focus from the question of the subject to that of the world, the space in which things become public, that is because feminist politics has been centered on the "what" (for example, "women" as a coherent identity) and its transformation. This "what" has so captivated our attention that it seems hard to imagine why politics—just as it obviously concerns agency within the subject-centered frame—would not obviously concern the transformation of socially ascribed forms of subjectivity such as gender difference. The obviousness of this political task was as clear for second-wave feminists such as Ti-Grace Atkinson (who claimed, "those individuals who are today defined as women must eradicate their own definition," in effect "commit suicide" in order to give birth to themselves as "individuals") as it is for third-wave feminists such as Wendy Brown (who albeit far more cautiously and with an entirely different notion of subjectivity call for the transformation of "women" from "wounded subjects" into subjects of freedom).<sup>48</sup>

Women from act to freedom

In light of such calls for subject transformation as the very work of political freedom, Arendt's claim that "at the center of politics stands not concern/care for people, but concern/care for the world" rings as at once

commonsensical (the world clearly matters) and strange (psychic attachments to unfreedom matter too).<sup>49</sup> In Arendt's view, the exclusive concern with the self is an expression of the "world-alienation" that characterizes modernity.<sup>50</sup> A politics that questions that alienation, she argues, is not—not in the first place—centered on the subject or the transformation of subjectivity; it is centered on the world and engaged in worldliness, that is, the creation of the space in which things become public. Like her rejection of the social question, Arendt's refusal to count the subject question among the concerns of politics seems perplexing. Leaving aside the social engineering she criticizes and with which hardly a feminist would disagree, how could a politics concerned with freedom not presuppose the transformation of subjectivity?

Let's turn the question around: what is presupposed by a politics of freedom that centers on the self and its transformation? Consider in this regard Foucault's well-known claim that a practice of freedom is "an exercise of the self on the self by which one attempts to develop and transform oneself, and to attain to a certain mode of being."<sup>51</sup> But this idea of freedom as a practice centered on the relation of the self to itself (what Foucault calls *rappor à soi*), lest it remain an I-will in the absence of an I-can, surely has its worldly conditions.<sup>52</sup> If it is hard to see how such conditions could obtain in Foucault's account of freedom, that is because Foucault—like any theorist working from within the frame of the subject question, albeit in its negative space—takes for granted the idea that freedom would begin with changes in subjectivity that then bring about changes in the world, while begging the question of how one changes subjectivity, save in the guise of a highly individualized conception of work on the self.<sup>53</sup>

The point here is neither to exclude creative work on the self as potentially relevant for political freedom—as Arendt herself might—nor to decide what comes first: changes in the structure of subjectivity or changes in the social structures that constitute subjectivity. It is to think about how the subject question and the (ethical) idea of freedom as the self's relation to itself (even in the deeply critical iteration given it by Foucault) might extend, rather than contest, the Western tradition's philosophical conception of freedom and thus the displacement of political freedom as a relation to the world and to others.<sup>54</sup> Although Foucault, like Arendt, clearly refutes the idea of free will and sees that freedom is a practice, not a property of the subject, he does not distinguish adequately between the philosophical kind of freedom that might be relevant to solitary individuals and the political kind that is certainly relevant to people who live in communities. Consequently, his otherwise

Foucault: no distinct practice or freedom - collective - nothing



valuable assertion that freedom is a practice, something “that must be exercised,” risks remaining at the individual level without ever founding the new institutions and forms of life that clearly and deeply concerned him.<sup>55</sup> Political freedom in this sense of world-building cannot simply be *rappor à soi* (or its extension) but must involve, from the start, relations with a plurality of other people in a public space created by action, that is, by the very practice and experience of freedom itself.

### Freedom as a World Question

“Men are free—as distinguished from their possessing the gift for freedom—as long as they act, neither before nor after; for to *be* free and to act are the same,” declares Arendt.<sup>56</sup> Like Foucault, Arendt understands freedom to be an activity or practice, but one that takes place in the sphere of human plurality and that therefore has a distinctive, if mostly forgotten, political genealogy. “We first become aware of freedom or its opposite in our intercourse with others, not in the intercourse with ourselves,” she writes. In a genealogical attempt to recover a political conception of freedom from the occidental tradition, Arendt, like Foucault, returns to the ancients. For her, however, this return does not recover the Greek idea of care of the self (*epimeleia heautou*) or the notion of freedom as self-rule, as it does for Foucault, but shows that an idea of freedom that begins with the self (*rappor à soi*) occludes its origins in freedom “as a worldly tangible reality.”<sup>57</sup> This worldly freedom is political: it requires not only an I-will but an I-can; it requires community. Arendt asserts, “Only where the I-will and the I-can coincide does freedom come to pass.”<sup>58</sup> And further: “If men wish to be free, it is precisely sovereignty they must renounce.”<sup>59</sup>

Rethinking freedom in terms of nonsovereignty is called for once we take account of plurality. Equating freedom with sovereignty, the Western tradition since Plato, argues Arendt, has held plurality to be a “weakness,” at best an indication of our unfortunate dependence on others, which we should strive to overcome. Consequently, “If we look upon freedom with the eyes of the tradition, identifying freedom with sovereignty, the simultaneous presence of freedom and non-sovereignty, of being able to begin something new and of not being able to control or even foretell its consequences, seems almost to force us to the conclusion that human existence is absurd” (HC, 235). Bemoaning the idea that “no man can be sovereign” (HC, 234), the tradition, beholden to the impossible fantasy of sovereignty, has tended “to turn away with despair from

the realm of human affairs and to hold in contempt the human capacity for freedom,” Arendt observes (HC, 233). In fact, when freedom is equated with sovereignty, it seems as if the only way to preserve both is by not acting or entering the public realm at all, for to enter is to be subject to forces beyond one’s control.

“If it were true that sovereignty and freedom are the same, then indeed no man could be free, because sovereignty, the ideal of uncompromising self-sufficiency and mastership, is contradictory to the very condition of plurality,” Arendt remarks (HC, 234). The question of whether freedom and nonsovereignty are indeed mutually exclusive, as the tradition has held, is important for feminists who are concerned to take account of plurality. Although feminist theorists of the third wave have been deeply critical of the fantasy of sovereignty (be it in the form of Woman in the singular or women as a unified group), they could not really think plurality without occasioning a crisis of agency. I said earlier that agency is a false problem that leads us to misunderstand what we do when we act politically. But the problem is false because it is posed within a subject-centered frame. That frame occludes a way of responding to the crisis of agency that would not require a denial of plurality. This is where third-wave feminism arrives at an impasse: how to take account of plurality (differences among women) without relinquishing the capacity to act politically. For surely action in concert, a feminist might object, must involve *some* sense of agency. If we had no sense of agency when we act politically, why would we so act?

Recognizing the dilemma posed by the tradition, Arendt’s answer is neither to resurrect its idea of agency as sovereignty nor to discount what she calls “the disabilities of non-sovereignty” (that is, that we cannot control or foretell with certainty the consequences of action). It is to ask whether action does not harbor within itself capacities that might attenuate these disabilities. Arendt remarks,

The possible redemption from the predicament of irreversibility—of being able to undo what one has done though one did not, and could not, have known what he was doing—is the faculty of forgiving. The remedy for unpredictability, for the chaotic uncertainty of the future, is contained in the faculty to make and keep promises. . . Without being forgiven, released from the consequences of what we have done, our capacity to act would, as it were, be confined to one single deed from which we could never recover. . . Without being bound to the fulfillment of promises, we would never be able to keep our identities [*who we are*]. . . [Keeping them is possible only in] the public realm

following  
1. promises

through the presence of others, who confirm the identity between the one who promises and the one who fulfills. . . . Both faculties, therefore, depend on plurality, on the presence and acting of others, for no one can forgive himself and no one can feel bound by a promise made only to himself. (HC, 237)

Although the importance of forgiveness in human affairs arose in a religious context, says Arendt, it is by no means irrelevant to secular communities (HC, 238–39). Forgiveness sounds strange as a political concept in part because we think about action in terms of sovereign individuals who use a means to an end, know what they do, and are to be held accountable for their actions. Arendt does not question accountability (though her understanding of it is complex), but she refutes the assumption of sovereignty. Her concern is that human beings will, in the spirit of the tradition, turn away from the public realm for fear that, in this realm, “they know not what they do,” they cannot possibly control the effects of their actions (HC, 239). Likewise, promising sounds strange as a political concept (though it is surely the basis of any idea of the social contract), for we think about the agreements that constitute political community as guaranteed by law. Arendt does not question the role of law in sustaining community, but she refutes the idea that community originates in law or can be so guaranteed. What holds a community together is, among other things in her view, the capacity to make and keep promises, which is an exercise of freedom. This capacity erects, as she puts it, “isolated islands of certainty in an ocean of uncertainty,” namely, the unpredictability that belongs to human action (HC, 244). Those who are mutually bound by promises gain what Arendt calls a “limited sovereignty,” not the spurious sovereignty claimed by an individual setting himself apart from all others, but a certain release from the incalculable future that accompanies human action.

Finding resources in action to counteract the defining features of action, Arendt does not claim to have discovered perfect safeguards that will protect us from action’s boundlessness and unpredictability. Being themselves forms of action, promising and forgiving could hardly play such a role. Her point, rather, is to emphasize that we might live human plurality in ways (for example, through promising and forgiving) that attenuate the problems associated with plurality as the condition of action. That we act into a context characterized by multiple wills and intentions; that others take up our actions in ways we can neither predict nor control, Arendt suggests, is the irreducible condition of human

action *tout court*. Rather than seek solace in an impossible fantasy of sovereignty, declare a crisis of agency, or turn away from the public realm to preserve sovereignty or avoid crisis, we might take leave of the tradition and affirm freedom as nonsovereignty.

Nonsovereignty is the condition of democratic politics, the condition of the transformation of an I-will into an I-can and thus freedom. This is a simple point, but also one we are forever in danger of forgetting (which is why Arendt never tired of repeating it). Political freedom requires others and is spatially limited by their presence. No subjective relation of the self to itself, freedom requires a certain kind of relation to others in the space defined by plurality that Arendt calls the “common world.”

The common world is another way of talking about the nature of democratic—and, I argue, feminist—political space. “It is the space between them that unites them, rather than some quality inside each of them,” to cite Margaret Canovan’s succinct phrasing of the Arendtian difference between a community based on “what” someone is (that is, on identity) and one based on “who” someone is (that is, on world-building).<sup>60</sup> If identities come to have political significance for us, it is because the “what” has been rearticulated as the “who” in the in-between space of the common world. In this space, plurality is not merely a numerical matter of the many identities of people who inhabit the earth or a particular geographical territory, nor is it an empirical question of the wide variety of groups to which they belong (that is, *what* people are). A political rather than ontological relation based on the ongoing constitution of the world as a public space, plurality marks the way in which subjects as members of political communities, as citizens, stand to one another.<sup>61</sup> What is crucially important for democratic and feminist politics, but mostly occluded by the subject question, is that citizens be situated in a relation of distance and proximity, relation and separation. X

“To live together in the world means essentially that a world of things is between those who have it in common, as a table is located between those who sit around it; the world, like every in-between, relates and separates men at the same time,” writes Arendt (HC, 52). Relates *and* separates: the common world “gathers us together and yet prevents our falling over each other, so to speak” (ibid.). Politics requires and takes place in this in-between space.

In mass societies such as our own, comments Arendt, the world has lost its power to relate and separate us. It is as if the table had suddenly disappeared from our midst, she writes, such that “two persons sitting opposite each other were no longer separated but also would be entirely

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unrelated to each other by anything tangible" (HC, 53). Couldn't that also be interpreted as the state of contemporary feminism, in which the price for attending to differences, what separates us, appears to be the absence of anything that relates us? The point is not to assert, in the nostalgic tone attributed—falsely in my view—to Arendt, the loss of something we (feminists) supposedly once had. It is, rather, to see what it would mean to affirm, in a democratic political sense, freedom as a world-building practice based on plurality and nonsovereignty. To assume, as many first- and second-wave feminists did, that a shared gender identity is what relates women politically is flawed not only because, as third-wave feminists claimed, differences among women matter and the very category of identity itself is suspect. It is flawed because it does not answer to the question of what possible relevance identity can have for feminist politics absent a space in which to articulate it as a *political* relation. Third-wave critiques, too, are mostly silent on how to constitute the political space in which the transformation of social relations, including gendered forms of subjectivity, is to occur.

The common world as the space of freedom is not exhausted by existing institutions or the citizen as the subject of law, but "comes into being whenever men are together in the manner of speech and action," that is, whenever they come together politically. Such a "space of appearance," says Arendt, "predates and precedes all formal constitution of the public realm and the various forms of government" (HC, 199). Not restricted to a set of institutions or to a specific location, this space is highly fragile and must be continually renewed by action. In Arendt's view, the space of appearance "can find its proper location almost any time and anywhere" (HC, 198). If we think about the coffeehouses, living rooms, kitchens, and street corners that served as the meeting places for early second-wave feminism, for example, we can begin to appreciate the value of an action-centered conception of politics. We can see how any physical space can be transformed into a political one and, indeed, how it is that things become public. The peculiarity of such a space of appearance is that it exists only so long as people are engaged in speech and action. The formal public realm itself (that is, that which is protected by law) is "a potential space of appearance," but only a potential one. There is nothing in its institutionalized character that guarantees it as a site of political action or practice of freedom.

What keeps the public realm, the potential space of appearance, in existence is power. Power, not as a relation of rule operating from above and forcing the submission of otherwise autonomous subjects (which is

how the Western political tradition and most first-, second-, and some third-wave feminists have tended to see it); power, not as a relation of rule understood as a productive force that circulates throughout the entire social body, constituting subjects as subject/ed and generating relations of resistance (which is how Foucault and many third-wave feminists have understood it); but power as that which "springs up between men when they act together and vanishes when they disperse," as Arendt puts it (HC, 200). Although the relations of domination we call power clearly exist in Arendt's view, her idiosyncratic use of the term is an invitation to think about politics as involving something other than relations of rule. "The commonplace notion . . . that every political community consists of those who rule and those who are ruled" (including the idea of democracy as rule of the many), she argues, is once again an "escape from the frailty of human affairs into the solidity of quiet and order" (HC, 222).<sup>62</sup> It is an escape from the unpredictability and boundlessness of action and the disturbances of plurality and nonsovereignty.

Understood as a relation of no-rule that depends on the presence of others, politics involves power, only power as that which is "generated when people gather together and 'act in concert,' [and] which disappears the moment they depart" (HC, 244). The political space created by action, says Arendt, is both an objective and subjective "in-between," which at once gathers individuals together and separates them. Far from denying that objective worldly interests (for example, the interests at stake in iterations of the social question) are what bring people together politically in the first place—as her critics accuse and as her own critique of the social could be taken to imply—Arendt redefines the very meaning of interests by shifting the frame in which they appear. She writes,

[Reducible to neither the social nor the subject question, such] interests constitute, in the word's most literal significance, something which *inter-est*, which lies between people and therefore can relate and bind them together. Most action and speech is concerned with this in-between, which varies with each group of people, so that most words and deeds are *about* some worldly objective reality in addition to being a disclosure of the acting and speaking agent ["who" she is]. Since this disclosure of the subject is an integral part of all, even the most "objective" intercourse, the physical, worldly in-between along with its interests is overlaid and, as it were, overgrown with an altogether different in-between which consists of deeds and words and owes its origin exclusively to men's acting and speaking directly to one another. This

second, subjective in-between is not tangible, since there are no tangible objects into which it could solidify; the process of acting and speaking can leave behind no such results and end products. But for all its intangibility, this in-between is no less real than the world of things we visibly have in common. We call this reality the “web” of human relationships. (HC, 182–83)

Foregrounded in Arendt’s account is politics neither as a subject question nor as a social question but as a world question or, more precisely, as a world-building activity, for which the pursuit of interests may be enabling or corrupting but is, either way, certainly secondary to the practice of freedom. In contrast with the idea, central to liberalism and to most forms of feminism, that the function of politics is to pursue individual and group interests (that is, people come to the table with certain interests already in hand, which then need to be articulated as claims and adjudicated in terms of their validity), we have the idea that interests serve as the occasion, a catalyst of sorts, to engage in politics. The instrumentalist or adjudicative approach to politics sees the pursuit of interests not only as the motor but also the *raison d’être* of politics itself, for which speech and action are a means (preferably minimizable if not fully eliminable in the interests of expediency). Arendt, by contrast, holds that speech and action can themselves be political, regardless of the interests we may pursue or the ends we may realize when we come together politically. In a very specific sense, then, politics may involve the articulation of interests but is not driven by questions of expediency; it is not a means toward an end. Political are not the interests as such but the world-building practice of publicly articulating matters of common concern.

Feminists familiar with the “endless meeting” will immediately understand why this alternative conception of politics is at once crucially important and exceedingly difficult to affirm. The moment we think about politics in terms of interests and as a means to an end, it is hard to see why we should not hand certain matters over to “those who know” and go home early for a change. Were we to hand over speaking and acting to those who know, however, we would no longer be engaged in the world-building that is surely crucial for feminist and democratic politics, nor experiencing freedom as the right to be a participator in common affairs, but merely registering our claim to a certain distribution of goods and services. Surely we can imagine far less democratic and even antidemocratic organizations and societies that would be far more efficient.

Arendt’s idea of politics as a world-building practice of freedom is unintelligible if we think about politics as something that is everywhere

or that has always existed and will always exist. The feminist claim “the personal is political,” when it identifies power with politics, risks effacing the very special character of democratic politics and also underestimating the possibility that it could be driven out of the world. At issue here is not only the logical problem that, if everything is political, nothing is, but also the difficulty of seeing that nothing is political in itself; for political relations, I argue in the following chapters, are external to their terms: they are not given in objects themselves, but are a creation. Politics, as Jacques Rancière puts it, “consists in building a relationship between things that have none.”<sup>63</sup> There is nothing intrinsically political about, say, housework, any more than there is something intrinsically political about the factory or for that matter the government: the word political signifies a relation between things, not a substance in any thing.<sup>64</sup> Housework *becomes* political when two things that are not logically related, say, the principle of equality and the sexual division of labor, are brought into a relationship as the object of a dispute, that is, as the occasion for the speech and action with which people create the common world, the space in which things become public, and create it anew.

The same could be said about the practices associated with subject-constitution that are discussed in both Butler’s and Foucault’s work. Once again, the point is not to exclude as politically irrelevant those issues that have been framed by the subject question, but to understand what it would mean to frame them anew. Arendt herself did not really consider the possibility of such reframing. She can be read as rejecting not only the frames of both the subject and the social questions, but also the concerns that are associated with each of those frames. She seems not only to reject the possibility that such questions could be relevant to politics but also to see them as destructive of democratic politics, regardless of how they are articulated. Rather than exclude these concerns, feminists need to redescribe them in ways that are less likely to lead to the displacement of political freedom by the very frames of the social and the subject in which freedom has been thought.

If we adopt a world- and action-centered frame, we will open a space for thinking about feminism as a practice of freedom that is creative or inaugural. Although the capacity to start something new has been central to feminism as a political movement, feminist theory, caught within the frames of the social question and the subject question, has tended to lose sight of it. We have lost sight of the possibility that counterpractices of political association need not reproduce subjected identities as the condition of having anything political to say, but might create public

spaces in which something is said that changes what can be heard as a political claim and also alters the context in which identities themselves are presently constituted as subject/ed. This possibility is related to the inaugural power of speech and action. Our ability to project a word such as *women* into new and unforeseen contexts is connected to the power of political association to create new (more freedom-affirming) attachments to the world and to others. How else could we understand or care about feminism if we did not keep our eyes on the prize: the world-transforming power of political association and speech?

In the chapters that follow I try to think about political freedom and association in terms of the power of beginning: “the freedom to call something into being, which did not exist before, which was not given, not even as an object of cognition or imagination, and which therefore, strictly speaking, could not be known,” as Arendt puts it.<sup>65</sup> This includes the formation of the “we” of feminism. Thinking about women as a political collectivity, rather than a sociological group or social subject, means thinking the “we” of feminism anew: as the fragile achievement of practices of freedom. The achievement is fragile because action’s “tremendous capacity for establishing relationships,” Arendt reminds us, is inseparable from its “inherent unpredictability” and “boundlessness” (*HC*, 191). The “we” may be pursued as willful purpose, but is rarely if ever achieved as such. Its formation remains irreducibly contingent. When we reflect on the history of feminism, however, we tend to lose sight of this contingency. Telling a story according to which freedom is identical with the struggle for liberation from oppression, feminists are inclined to narrate the formation of the “we” as if it were somehow the necessary outcome of a historical process, the necessary response of women to their centuries-long subjection. And not only necessary but justified too. For it appears once again that freedom must point beyond the demand or practice of freedom itself, be it to social justice or social utility. We find ourselves entangled in justifications that—like the social and subject questions—miss what is most important: the creation of something new, something that could not have been foretold, that was no result of some logical or historical development but rather an “infinite improbability,” to borrow Arendt’s poetic phrasing.<sup>66</sup>

What would it mean to think about feminism as an “infinite improbability”? What would come of rethinking the “we” of feminism as something utterly contingent, that is, something that could just as well have been left undone, something highly fragile that could be driven out of the world? *Contingency* is a familiar word in contemporary feminist theory,

but it has been hard to see it as the *condition* of the world-creating and world-building power of feminism as a practice of freedom. Rather, in contingency we often see the threat that deprives feminism of the all-important political ability to speak authoritatively in someone’s name. Yet Arendt tells us that the “frightening arbitrariness” of action (that is, our sheer capacity to start something that is neither the effect of a past cause nor the predictable cause of a future effect) is “the price of freedom.”<sup>67</sup> It is a price that feminists—like the “men of action” that figure in Arendt’s account of revolutionary movements—are reluctant to pay. When understood as the power of beginning, freedom has an abyssal or aporetic character that we tend to deny or cover over. What authorizes beginning? What legitimates, say, *this* form of political association, *this* constitution of community, *this* practice of freedom, *this* “we”?

I discuss the various ways in which feminists have answered these questions in the chapters that follow. For now it is useful to note that attempts to authorize feminist politics by seeking grounds for inaugural forms of political action have entangled feminists in epistemology, in claims to truth or normative rightness. If we want to understand the epistemological turn in feminism (for example, standpoint theory), which animated the divisive and all-consuming feminist “foundations debate” of the 1990s, we might consider it one problematic response to what Arendt calls “the abyss of freedom.”<sup>68</sup> Once again, it is as if women’s claim to freedom demands justification, in this case the supposedly truer account of the world that belongs to them as an oppressed group. Although an attempt to authorize the claims of feminism in this way is an understandable, and far from unique, response to the boundlessness and unpredictability of action, Arendt invites us to ask, what are the political costs of this particular recoil from the abyss?

### Feminism’s “Lost Treasure”

One risk associated with the tendency to recoil from the abyss of freedom is visible in the stories we tell—or fail to tell—ourselves about the revolutionary origins of feminism. Although modern feminism did not originate in a world-historical event like the American Revolution, it partook of the revolutionary spirit that animates such events, namely what Arendt calls “the exhilarating awareness of the human capacity of beginning.”<sup>69</sup> Akin to the failure of postrevolutionary thought to remember the simple fact that, writes Arendt, “a revolution gave birth to the United



States and that the republic was brought about by no historical necessity and no organic development," contemporary feminism, too, seems to have lost sight of its own origins in the revolutionary spirit and the contingency of action. The first two waves of feminism denied the abyssal character of political freedom by framing freedom as a social question or a subject question or by scripting the claim to freedom as a necessary historical development that flowed directly out of women's liberation from oppression. Feminism of the third wave, for its part, seems to be so thoroughly caught in the problems associated with these two frames as to have lost sight of what Arendt poignantly called the "lost treasure" of the American Revolution—political freedom itself.

Recent attempts to reclaim feminism as a practice of freedom include narrative accounts of early second-wave feminism that recreate the exhilarating sense of beginning anew that animated the individuals and groups involved. But these accounts, generally written by the feminist political actors themselves, are often characterized by a tone of incredulity and defensiveness, as if third-generation feminists were, when not downright ungrateful, dangerously ignorant of their own political past. Guided by the familiar motto of didactic political historiography—that is, "those who forget the past are destined to repeat it"—many of these accounts treat the past as if it dictates—or ought to dictate—what the future can be.<sup>70</sup> A freedom-centered feminism needs not more rallying cries to carry on the cause of past generations—well, it can use this too—but disturbing examples of feminist practices of political freedom: disturbing—if we will only pause and let them disturb us—because they resist being incorporated into the social- and subject-centered frames that shape most stories of feminism, frames in which freedom as action has mostly disappeared.

In the following chapters I offer examples of such disturbance in the form of recuperative readings of familiar and unfamiliar, celebrated and castigated, feminist texts that both foreground freedom as a practice and imagine the various practices that freedom can take: freedom as a non-rule-governed theoretical practice (chapter 1); freedom as an inaugural practice of action (chapter 2); freedom as a world-building practice of promising (chapter 3); and freedom as a critical practice of judging (chapter 4). Although I consider classic claims to political freedom (for example, "Seneca Falls"), the chapters focus on less likely examples: a founding third-wave feminist theory text that is entangled in the ideal of critical reflection it also powerfully contests (Butler's *Gender Trouble*); a work of literature that relates the world-historical event of a global

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feminist revolution organized around the political principle of freedom (Monique Wittig's *Les guérillères*); a collectively authored account of the founding of freedom in an Italian feminist community (the Milan Women's Bookstore Collective's *Sexual Difference*); and an unfinished project to develop the faculty of judgment on which any capacity to affirm human freedom depends (Arendt's *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy*).

My choice of Wittig and the Milan Collective as disturbing examples of a feminist practice of freedom may strike some readers as curious. Have their flaws not already been identified (for example, Wittig is a "humanist," the Milan women are "essentialists")? What significance can they have in the larger scheme of feminist political thought now? It is part of my intention, however, to show how our received frames of the social and subject questions have distorted feminist readings of these authors, blinding us to their concern with freedom and its creation of alternative forms of political association. I reread Wittig and the Milan Collective not only to uncover their rich imagination of political freedom in its various forms, but also to show, in so doing, how it is that we fail to apprehend freedom even when it is instantiated right before our eyes. In the more familiar case of Butler, I examine the critical reception of her early writings on gender, in particular the charge of voluntarism. Although I read (early) Butler as being entangled in a (skeptical) critical enterprise that supports this charge, I also see something else in her project: a contribution to an imaginative, non-rule-governed conception of feminist theory and a nonsovereign practice of freedom.

My attempt to read against the grain of feminist interpretation should be understood as an exercise in the (reflective) judgment that (in chapters 3 and 4) I argue is crucial to recognizing and affirming freedom and thus to feminism. My choice of authors and texts is guided by a concern to develop the multifaceted idea of political freedom, for each thinker offers a different angle from which to see it. Although it is important to emphasize the inaugural character of such freedom, the power to begin anew, we cannot stop there, for freedom so conceived simply turns in on itself—or at least it risks doing so. An account of political freedom involves more than spontaneity; it must keep sight of freedom as practices of world-building (such as founding, promising, and judging). The power of beginning a new series would have no meaning for us in the absence of our capacity to create and sustain a worldly space in which to act and judge objects and events in their freedom. For that reason, I take issue with thinkers who cast freedom strictly in terms of constituent

exercise in the (reflective) judgment

power, setting it at odds with the (non-freedom-centered alternative of) constituted power of law, institutions, and the state. As I show in relation to the question of constitutionally guaranteed rights for women in chapter 3, that is a false choice: the point is not to reject but to reclaim legal artifacts such as rights as part of a practice of freedom in its multiple dimensions.

The tendency to construe false choices in feminism (for example, constituent versus constituted power; equality versus difference; recognition versus redistribution) is largely, in my view, an effect of the frames of the social and subject questions that have guided the development of feminist theory. In chapter 1, I show how the epistemological debates of the 1990s, which centered on the problem of justification, inflected these choices with a sense of crisis, namely, the collapse of "women" as the subject of feminism. The crisis, I argue, was precipitated by a means-ends conception of politics, according to which the ability to make a political claim relies on the application of categories as rules to particulars, and by an understanding of feminist theory as the activity of constituting universal rules. Thus the loss of women as a coherent category in theory was the loss of a rule that could be so applied. As theory gives the rule to praxis on this view, in the absence of such a category, we have only "differences," no political movement in the name of "women." Or so the story goes.

At the heart of these debates was Butler's performative theory of gender. What concerns me in chapter 1 is why *Gender Trouble* was interpreted in the epistemic terms of a (politically) devastating form of skeptical doubt (for example, "There are no women"), whereas Butler's whole point was to question these same terms. Reading Butler's antirealist account of gender with Wittgenstein's notion of following a rule, I interrogate her paradoxical entanglement in the skeptical problematic she rejects in favor of a genealogical approach. Butler's alternative to the epistemic concern with concept application, I argue, emerges with her mostly maligned account of drag. Contesting received interpretations, I see in Butler's discussion of drag a "figure of the newly thinkable," to borrow Cornelius Castoriadis's phrase. Such figures, given by radical imagination, are the very condition of critical thought. Whatever doubts we may raise about an "established truth" such as gender always begin with a productive moment of figuration, not (as skepticism would have it) by revealing the ungrounded nature of belief. If we arrive at the insight that a particular belief is ungrounded (as Butler does about a realist idea of gender), that is because we have created a new way of

seeing that enables us to recognize the contingency of a particular social arrangement. Feminist critique, I conclude, must always have this productive moment of figuration as its condition. It does not rely—and need not rely—on a form of doubt that is impossible because it is radical and totalizing. *Figuration*

Having indicated the potential role of imagination for negotiating the impasses associated with the epistemological turn in feminism, I go on in chapter 2 to develop a nonepistemic, action-centered conception of politics and the idea of freedom as the power of beginning. Vividly exhibited in the revolutionary poetics of Monique Wittig, feminism is an inaugural practice: the capacity to bring into existence that which could have been neither predicted nor caused, partly because it exceeds the category of sex. Like Butler's project, Wittig's work is often taken to be skeptical, as if the category of sex were something we could doubt in its entirety. By contrast with that view, I argue that Wittig fully recognizes the limits of doubt for contesting sex as central to our form of life. Her critical approach is not skeptical but productive and creative. Wittig, too, offers a figure of the newly thinkable: *les guérillères*, the beginners who break the series of normative heterosexuality and fight for the sole principle of freedom.

But Wittig is less successful in showing the need for and creation of a worldly in-between, that is, the relations that both unite and separate people engaged in a political practice of freedom. For that, I turn to the Milan Women's Bookstore Collective, which conceives freedom as action, but is also concerned with world-building. By contrast with Wittig, the Italians insist that feminist world-building requires the social inscription of sexual difference, not as a form of subjectivity but as a resolutely political practice of "free relations among women." These relations involve the articulation of a new social contract organized around not female identity (be it natural or social) but the willingness to make judgments and promises with other women in a public space. Wholly based on such practices, female freedom requires no other justification (for example, the betterment of society). Its only *raison d'être* is itself.

Demonstrating the importance of a worldly in-between, the Milan Collective foregrounds the importance of judgment for feminism, but stops short of giving any theoretical account of such a practice. And so, taking up the collective's insight that feminist community ought to be founded not on identity but on a critical practice of making shared judgments, I turn, in chapter 4, to Arendt's idiosyncratic reading of Kant's third *Critique*. In its reflective mode, judgment is the faculty that allows

us to apprehend and affirm objects and events *in their freedom*, to take pleasure in the otherwise frightening arbitrariness of action, and to create feminism as critical community. Emphasizing imagination, rather than understanding and reason, as crucial to such judgment and as the political faculty par excellence, Arendt helps us understand why the collapse of the category of women need by no means spell the end of feminism, for a freedom-centered feminism never relied on concept application in the first place. Political claims rely on the ability to exercise imagination, to think from the standpoint of others, and in this way to posit universality and thus community. The universality of such claims depends on their being not epistemologically justified, as most feminists have tended to assume, but taken up by others, in ways that we can neither predict nor control, in a public space. This space called the world is an ever-changing one in which, positing the agreement that may or may not materialize, feminists discover—daily—the nature and limits of community.

In the conclusion I argue that the project of a freedom-centered feminism cannot be developed apart from an understanding of some of the well-known paradoxes and tensions much studied by democratic theorists. By bringing feminism into a critical dialogue with democratic theory, I try to develop further a resolutely political way of working through the problems associated with the subject question and the social question. This dialogue, already initiated in the preceding chapters through an engagement with Arendt, can open a space for thinking anew some of the most tenacious problems in feminist theory. The difficulties associated with constituting a political community that remains open to critical questioning are hardly unique to feminism. The same might be said of the problem of founding a free people where the institutions and spirit of freedom are minimal or do not yet exist. These are dilemmas that belong to the theory and praxis of democracy. Feminists have rightly criticized canonical political theory for its inscription of gender hierarchy into the very grammar of politics. Perhaps it is now possible to return to some of the classic thinkers and see what they have to offer us as we negotiate our way through the impasses that have arisen in recent years and that have led to a sense of exhaustion or crisis.

Working within the tradition of democratic theory, Arendt will aid us in restarting the critical dialogue between it and feminism. Although she never had a (good) word to say about feminism, her fierce commitment to a fully conventional, artificial or non-natural understanding of the political realm as the space of a nonsovereign freedom, I hope to show in this book, offers feminists a valuable alternative to the impasses associated

with both the subject question and the social question. Admittedly, other dilemmas, paradoxes, and tensions will arise once we turn our attention to democratic thinkers like Arendt, but perhaps we will be better able to see and accept them as belonging to the difficult and unruly work of feminist and democratic politics, rather than despair at our failure to solve them once and for all. As Joan Scott and others have pointed out, feminism is full of paradoxes. Thus it should be unsurprising that together with the feminist authors discussed in the following chapters, the nonfeminist Arendt will help us refuse the “end of feminism” and take up the project of affirming feminism anew.

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