exchange of acts of freedom in the institutional lap—of all places—the American Sociological Association.

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The New Aesthetic-Political Avant-Garde: Linda Zerilli’s Feminism and the Abyss of Freedom

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This is an incredibly stimulating and brilliant book, a pleasure to read, and an erudite challenge to feminist and other theories of politics. My comments should be read in light of my overall enthusiasm for Linda Zerilli’s Feminism and the Abyss of Freedom.

My first set of comments has to do with theory as inaugurating a new beginning, to use the author’s own words. Linda Zerilli discusses this with respect to the second and third waves of feminist theory. Marxism has also had this quality of new beginnings, of self-renovation, first in the era of Marx himself, then again during the 1920s and 1930s (with Lukács, Horkheimer, and others), and for a third time in the 1960s (with Althusser and the various neo-Marxisms he spawned). But there is something specific about these feminism discussions, which is their greater resonance beyond their own subfield, their importance for other ongoing theoretical programs, including Marxist ones. Zerilli’s book itself has this peculiar quality, in that one often forgets that one is reading a book centered on feminist theory. The implications of her book for democratic politics and for social and political theory more generally are sweeping. And the previous waves of feminist thinking she discusses had similar radiating effects. Second-wave feminism broke Marxism’s unitary, totalizing explanatory stance. Dual systems theory, as it was called, affected Marxism more profoundly than earlier efforts to remind Marxists of the independent causal importance of power politics or cultural systems, for example, in the work of Max Weber (1930, 1978), or of the autonomous role of racism and racialization, for example, in the work of W. E. B. Du Bois (1915, 1950). Feminist standpoint theory, despite Zerilli’s valid critiques of it, invigorated other discussions of standpoint epistemology, moving the discussion beyond where it had been with Lukács
Similarly, third-wave feminism and gender, sexuality, and queer studies were able to make neo-Marxists take seriously the idea of the construction and deconstruction of social categories. Michel Foucault, whom I would include in this third wave, convinced neo-Marxists to reexamine what both Freud and Lacan had already said about the inability of biology to explain sexual difference and identification. Judith Butler's writing on performativity directed Marxists and sociologists toward Wittgenstein and Austen. Feminism in this period led Bourdieu to revisit his Algerian fieldwork, drawing out more fully its implications for understanding masculine domination (compare Bourdieu 1958, 1964 and Bourdieu 2001).

This is not to say that feminism is interesting mainly because it is relevant to nonfeminists. On the contrary, the mechanisms of masculine domination, gendered identification, and sexuality are interesting in their own light and need to be theorized as processes in their own right. But this is true of all causal mechanisms in the human sciences. Gender, like any other process, needs to be conceptualized separately even if it is always expressed in conjunction with other mechanisms (Bhaskar 1975, 1979, 1986; Collier 1994; Steinmetz 1998; Archer, Bhaskar, Collier, Lawson, and Norrie 1998). Nonetheless, social scientists have long been beguiled by the chimerical goal of "general theory," that is, the quest for a single-mechanism explanation of the social (Steinmetz 2005). Theorists of gender have been best able to disrupt the plausibility of such monocausal accounts of the social-real (even if some feminists have mimicked the positivists in promoting gender as the long sought after general explanatory category, e.g., Firestone 1970).

Linda Zerilli's book is an example of the sort of inaugural force she discusses, part of a fourth wave of feminist thinking, this time focused on democratic theory. Zerilli emphasizes the contingent inauguration and maintenance of new worlds by collectivities acting not as sovereign rational subjects exercising their free, skeptical will, but in ways that resemble the capacity for making aesthetic judgments as analyzed by Hannah Arendt. Politics in this sense does not resemble the logic Kant calls determinant judgment, which assimilates a new object to an existing category. Politics does not subsume a particular under a universal, explaining it as the continuation of an existing series. Instead, politics more closely resembles Kant's aesthetic or reflective judgment, which recognizes a particular as beautiful immediately, without subsuming it under a concept, before searching for a universal. Politics is also about unprecedented, unexpected new beginnings, practices that do not yet have a name or a rule. Aesthetic judgments, like political ones, are involved in streiten (quarreling), not disputerien (disputing): agreement cannot be reached through proof. Aesthetic agreement results from a common sense that preexists each act of aesthetic judgment. It is a creative, not just a reproductive force: Darstellung as opposed to Vorstellung (Zerilli, p. 153).

How then are we to imagine political agreement? How can radically novel practices be given a concept? This is necessary according to Zerilli if these radical inaugurations are not to vanish into thin air. Politics needs to be given a concept, but without transforming and renarrating its contingent novelty in ways that make the act of political inauguration appear to have been always already necessary or inevitable. Zerilli argues with Wittgenstein and Cavell that there is necessarily something nonrational and nonconceptual prior to the act of giving a concept to political praxis. Without this prerational aspect, we could not make sense of the so-called paradox of feminist founding, which directly parallels the classical problem in political theory of the necessarily nondemocratic, decisionistic character of the founding of democratic politics.
My first set of questions revolves around this use of Kant. Sociologists have always been skeptical of Kant’s critique of judgment because of its notion of the disinterested judgment (see especially Bourdieu 1984). The word interest crops up late in Zerilli’s book (pp. 147–49) and it does so in the context of Arendt’s denial of the interestedness of truly political acts, that is, of political judgments. It is somewhat unclear whether Zerilli is endorsing or merely summarizing Kant and Arendt here, however. It is also the case that Arendt is equating interest with narrowly utilitarian interests, whereas Bourdieu proposes a more paradoxical but also more compelling notion of disinterested interest. This is one place where the social forces its way back into the analysis despite Arendt’s (1958) best efforts to keep it at bay.

A second question concerns the question of individual versus collective categories of analysis and practice. Zerilli is quite clear that politics involves collective inaugurations. This emerges clearly in Chapter 3 on the Milan Collective and in Chapter 2 on Monique Wittig. Zerilli argues that the initial reception of Wittig as having prevented readers from understanding her contribution. This raises the question of individual versus collective creativity: Is the inaugural act the creation of the poetic work (which is an individual act) or its later reception (which is collective)?

The author also insists on acts of inauguration as free of causality and determination. There is a powerful, almost incantatory insistence throughout Feminism and the Abyss of Freedom that undetermined beginnings are possible. This insistence resonates with other contemporary thinkers such as Alain Badiou (1999, 2001, 2005) and the left-Schmittian decisionists (Mouffe 1999; Kalyvas 1998, 2004, 2008). This is the language of the left avant-garde, which also has always been involved in blurring the boundaries between aesthetics and politics. The left has always been instinctively opposed to thinkers who seem to banish the idea of completely new beginnings. But does this make sense theoretically? To return to Bourdieu (1996), he discusses Flaubert as creating an entirely new field of literature in the 19th century. Flaubert’s action is not the result of a completely conscious strategic rationality, nor is it foreordained by his background or social structural properties. But his creative project, like that of artistic innovators in general, is “a meeting point and an adjustment between determinism and a determination” (1971:185). What is gained by arguing that a form of action is completely undetermined? Hasn’t this discourse been rather disastrous for revolutionary movements in the past? And on a slightly different but related point, hasn’t this argument been used as much by the right as the left (e.g., Freyer 1933)?

A related question concerns Castoriadis’s concept of the imaginary (1987). We know that Castoriadis was reacting at least in part to Lacan and his notion of the imaginary (Ziarek 1998; Stavrakakis 2002). For Lacan, the imaginary is both determined and determining, created and creative. Could the desire for a structure-breaking event that inaugurates a new series itself be related to imaginary fantasies (of new beginnings, autogenesis, or a sort of family romance on a collective scale)? And can something that is a psychic fantasy be willed in a decisionist manner?

Zerilli’s book resonates with the recent work of Ernesto Laclau, Slavoj Žižek, Chantal Mouffe, and Alain Badiou. The latter is perhaps most relevant here, since he theorizes the “event” as a “pure invention or discovery beyond the mere transmission of recognized knowledge” that is “not of the historical order” and does not belong to any existing “set,” but is “an opening of an epoch, a change in the relations between the possible and the impossible” (Badiou 1999:49, 2005; Radical Politics 2006; Aeschimann 2007). Like Zerilli’s theory, Badiou’s operates in areas
like love and art as well as politics. There is widespread avant-gardism across the political-philosophical spectrum and in ongoing nonparliamentary politics, perhaps especially in Europe. Anyone interested in reading the most philosophically sophisticated statement of this avant-garde political program should read *Feminism and the Abyss of Freedom*.

REFERENCES


Let me first express thanks to Myra Marx Ferree, Andreas Glaeser, and George Steinmetz for reading and commenting on my book, as well as to Ann Shola Orloff and Julia Adams for their participation in the American Sociological Association panel at which this discussion began. It is an honor and a privilege for me, a feminist political theorist, to have my work discussed by such renowned sociologists. In what follows, I will first try to summarize the central concerns of the book and then turn to the individual responses.

*Feminism and the Abyss of Freedom* has its origins in my own entanglement in the so-called category of “women” debates that dominated American feminism in the late 1980s and the 1990s. These debates were initially inspired by critiques brought by “women of color” (e.g., bell hooks, Audre Lorde, and Cherrie Moraga) and developed in related but different ways by feminists working under the sign of post-structuralism (e.g., Judith Butler, Joan Scott, and Chantal Mouffe). They called into question the idea of women as a coherent identity group in order to expose the raced, classed, and sexed character of the subject of feminism. I applauded this moment in the development of feminist theory. But like other feminists of my generation, I also worried about the political consequences of such questioning. If we could no longer speak of women as a coherent group, in whose name was feminism to be fought?

With the postmodern scare mercifully behind us, the sense of crisis that emerged in American feminist circles in the 1990s, especially after the publication of *Gender Trouble*, can barely be grasped today. Butler in particular was accused of destroying feminism by calling into question the category of women. I found the vilification of Butler and of postmodern feminism generally not only absurd but somehow beside the point. For one thing, it seemed strange to think that the future of feminism could possibly hang on the status of an analytic category of feminist theory. For another, the situation that Butler and others critically described is not one that they created but one that they found: feminism, as a political movement, did not rely and never did rely, right from its very origins, on a unitary subject. Rather, feminism was and always has been the site of deep disagreements about who counts as a feminist and what the goals of feminism should be. To hold one individual or one group of thinkers responsible for the end of feminism was to blind oneself to one’s own history.

That said, I was nonetheless concerned with the consequences of such critical questioning for feminism. Apart from the nostalgic turn toward the supposedly unified movement of second-wave feminism, the desire to reground feminism in a unitary subject called “women” led to some strange solutions, one of which was “strategic essentialism”: we “know” that women as a unified group does not exist.