REVIEW

Linda M. G. Zerilli 2005. *Feminism and the Abyss of Freedom.* Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 249.

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Throughout the 1980s and 1990s feminism came to be dominated by one particular debate: the question of woman. Tied into broader concerns with identity and subjectivity second and third wave feminists vigorously argued about whether or not there existed a coherent category of Woman (or, indeed women) and, if not, what the implications were for feminist politics. For feminism, many of its advocates assumed, required a coherent feminist subject both to ground and to legitimate that politics. In *Feminism and the Abyss of Freedom*, Linda Zerilli returns to these debates, not however to align herself with one side or the other but to contest how they were framed. In particular, she is concerned with the question of what happened to the demands for political freedom that had once characterized feminism, and so it is this so-called 'lost treasure' that she aims to reclaim as the 'raison d'être of feminism' (p. 165).

The argument Zerilli develops has two strands: first, a critique of the limiting frames that second and third wave feminism has operated with and, second, the articulation of an alternative vision of (feminist) freedom. Drawing in particular on the work of Hannah Arendt, Zerilli argues that two inter-imbricated frames are responsible for feminism's misstep: first, its articulation of freedom as a social question, predicated on the social advancement of a particular group and where, criti-

cally, politics is understood in an instrumental, means-end sense and second, 'freedom as a subject question', which prioritizes the subject over its political community and conceives of freedom as an expression of a sovereign will. Against both, Zerilli argues for an Arendtian conception of *political* freedom as world-building. Here freedom is apprehended as non-sovereign and pluralist, a practice only actualized when and where people act in concert in the public realm. The goal is not to pursue group interests but to transform the world through speech and action. Feminism as a world-building practice is not tied, therefore, to the subject women, be that as sociological category or social group; it is constitutive of the very 'we' of feminism. 'Women' are the 'fragile achievement of practices of freedom' (p. 24), acting together to 'start something new' (p. 23). The 'I can' replaces the 'I will'; community action replaces individual sovereignty.

Zerilli is not content to stop here, however. Instead, borrowing from Ludwig Wittgenstein and Cornelius Castoriadis, she turns her attention to what might be thought of as a third feminist frame: the epistemological frame. Theorists on both sides of the 'foundations debates' of the 1990s, she argues, presumed that theory required the formation of 'universal concepts that can be applied in rule-like fashion to the particulars of lived experience' (p. 34). This 'craving for generality' (p. 35), as Wittgenstein termed it, has a particular effect on politics. It leads to the assumption that politics requires objective criteria to legitimate its claims. Consequently, epistemology is mistaken for politics. This conflation of politics and epistemology, Zerilli contends, applies just as much to those who argued that feminism required the subject women as to those sceptics, such as Judith Butler in *Gender Trouble*, who offered anti-essentialist critiques of that very subject. Both are caught up in problematic assumptions about what critical reflection means; both, that is, conceive of it as 'an interpretive enterprise that is noncontinuous with customs and habits' (p. 40) and where 'the strange is inevitably the exception that puts the rule into radical doubt' (p. 59). The point, for Zerilli, is not to focus on truth and falsehood, nor to exchange one concept for another. Political freedom requires the invention of new figures for understanding the world; it necessitates the generation of 'figures of the newly thinkable' (p. 61). Interestingly, according to Zerilli, Butler's account of drag offers one such figure.

While the chapter just discussed, 'Feminists Know Not What They Do', primarily develops Zerilli's critique of the effects of the subject and social questions on feminist thinking, the next three set out what feminist politics based on freedom-as-action might look like. In 'Feminists as Beginners: Monique Wittig's *Les guérillères* and the "Problem of the New", Zerilli reads Wittig's revolutionary novel about the overthrow of patriarchy as dramatizing the abyssal nature of freedom and finds in Wittig's idea of *les guérillères* a figure of the newly thinkable, a figure that breaks with the norms of heterosexuality. If Wittig is unable to successfully articulate the relations that both separate and unite those engaged in the collective practice of freedom, in her next chapter, 'Feminists Make Promises: the Milan Collective's *Sexual Difference* and the Project of World-Building', Zerilli explores precisely that: the creation of a feminist community based on women making judgements and promises with other women in a public setting. Here women enact freedom. It is the idea of community as based on the practice of judgement that is taken up in the last substantive chapter of the book: 'Feminists Make Judgments: Hannah Arendt's *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy* and the Affirmation of Freedom'. Although the Milan Collective prize judgment, they offer no real account of it as a practice. It is to Arendt that Zerilli turns once more and to her discussion of imagination (rather than reason and understanding) as central both to judgement and thus to politics.

Zerilli's re-readings of each of these texts are absorbing, particularly in my view her discussions of Wittig and the Milan Collective. In each case, she develops Arendt's discussion of the political in novel directions. The cumulative effect is to present a suggestive and provocative account of a freedom-centred feminist politics oriented to the collective invocation of the new, which as an alternative to a means-end oriented account of feminist politics predicated on the subject, certainly has appeal. Nevertheless, I am left with a series of questions: the first of which concern Zerilli's debt to Arendt.

It should, of course, be noted from the outset that Arendt is not the only thinker whose work Zerilli draws on: she is also indebted to Wittgenstein, Castoriadis, Stanley Cavell and Claude Lefort. Moreover, Zerilli herself identifies tensions and difficulties with Arendt's thought. This is nowhere more clear than with regard to Arendt's desire to bracket the 'social question' out of politics. Arendt is reluctant to accept the emergence of social questions into politics because, in

her view, it brings with it a tendency to engulf more creative possibilities, though as Zerilli notes, Arendt is not, in fact, consistent in excluding all social questions. Often her rejection of the social question amounts more to a stress on the dangers of the kind of instrumentalist politics it brings with it. To exempt the social from politics is, however, particularly problematic in respect of feminism. As Zerilli herself acknowledges, the feminist idea of the personal as political involved, for instance, the introduction of social concerns into politics. (Indeed, we might read the activities of the Milan Collective as social.) Tensions around the relation between the social and politics become more acute when Zerilli discusses in more detail the idea of the personal as political, particularly since to do so she draws on Rancière's account of politics, an account apparently at variance with Arendt's.

The reason Zerilli gives for her concerns about the contention that the personal is politics is that in its identification of politics with power (a view I confess I have some sympathy for) it occludes the 'special character of democratic politics' (p. 23). This is to create relations between terms. To say the personal is political is, she contends, to imply that the personal is, somehow, *inherently* political. Nothing, however, in Zerilli's view is intrinsically political (and I agree). Politics requires, she argues à la Rancière, the creation of a relation between factors that are unrelated. The issue for me is that this understanding of politics actually seems to fit the example Zerilli is discussing – the personal as political. Feminist activists and theorists together created a relation between elements that had not previously existed (between, say, the sexed body, patriarchy and violence). In so-doing, they brought about the very freedom-based consequences that Zerilli champions: creating an object of dispute, generating an occasion for action and speech such that people might produce a common world, publicizing the relation in question and opening space for creative renewal. What happens subsequently, of course, is that the relation between the personal and political has ossified into a feminist truism and its more radical potential dissipated. It seems to me, however, that this dynamic between generating a new way of seeing male-female relations and the later calcification of that way of seeing expresses the very paradox of democracy that Zerilli discusses in her conclusion: between openness and closure, between keeping contestation alive and creating moments for affirmative identification.

But there is also something more afoot here: if politics consists in creating connections between elements where none previously existed, then what sense does it make to posit the social as outside of politics anyway for surely nothing, on this logic, is *intrinsically* apolitical? Rather social practices already are (and might continue to become) sites of political action. Here it appears that the conceptualisation of politics derived from Rancière is at odds with the social frame Zerilli borrows from Arendt to illuminate deficiencies in second and third wave feminism.

My second concern relates to the characterization of Butler's work in chapter two. Zerilli is interested in why Butler's rejection of an epistemological account of woman was nevertheless read by other feminists as an epistemic move. Zerilli's argument is that for all her efforts, Butler remains entangled in the sceptical problematic she aims to contest. Zerilli's is, however, a very spare reading of *Gender Trouble*, which occludes some of its most fundamental concerns. There is, for instance, no engagement with Butler's critique of heteronormativity: with, that is, her exploration of how particular constructions of the body, sex, gender and desire become objects of political engagement. There is also no consideration of Butler's discussion of how particular norms constrain not the possibility of knowing a subject (as Zerilli might have it) but the possibility of *acknowledging* them – of determining who counts. For Butler is, in my view, far less interested in *Gender Trouble* in cognition than in *recognition*. In this sense, Zerilli's comment on Cavell, seems entirely apposite for Butler: 'it is not a matter of what we know, but what we will *acknowledge*, that is, count as part of our common world and in this way accord value' (p. 178). To see the politics of Butler's work as epistemology (albeit of a sceptical kind) is to miss too much. (It also appears to suggest that knowledge cannot be an object of political engagement.)

Finally, political freedom as Zerilli envisions it requires the creation of the new; this is why figures of the newly thinkable play such a pivotal role in her work. Vitally, the possibility of the new is tied in her work to an account of contingency and not to the idea of a sovereign will. I find her arguments about contingency very convincing. What worries me, however, is the idea of beginning anew. In what sense can people simply start afresh? How, that is, is it possible to create a new world without traces of the old inf(l)ecting it? Take drag. Zerilli sees in drag a figure that allows us to imagine gendered bod-

ies in an innovative way. Drag has, she suggests, the potential for a 'radically defamiliarizing effect on our practices', allowing us to view them as contingent and alterable (p. 62). In what senses, however, is drag a form of starting anew? As a practice, it is surely parasitic on pre-existing corporeal repertoires (gestures, movements, actions), cultural scripts, and sartorial styles. The danger is that without an explanation of how people are able to transcend their circumstances in order to constitute a new world, it might appear that humans are in fact sovereign individuals able to do what they want. Since this is a position that Zerilli rejects, to give her account of freedom the necessary bite, she needs to elucidate more convincingly how it is possible to set aside the practices and beliefs within which we are enmired and produce new worlds from scratch.

Feminism and the Abyss of Freedom is a significant and engaging book. It throws down an important challenge not only to feminists but also to political theorists: how to think of political freedom outside the frame of the subject. Even though I didn't always agree with Zerilli, I thoroughly recommend her book.