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Judith Butler, Elizabeth Weed

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Thinking in Time

An Epilogue on Ethics and Politics

WENDY BROWN

This rich, erudite and imaginative collection of essays is testimony to the continued fecundity of gender studies and of Joan Wallach Scott's work. Particularly striking is the authors' reflexivity about gender analysis itself, as they continuously redraw and rethink analytic arcs and categories. This reflexive impulse, of course, is contoured by Scott's own explicit commitment to critique as the intellectual trace of what was once widely promulgated on the left as "permanent revolution"—a practice perhaps better suited to the needs and possibilities of theoretical than political life. Striking as well is the extent to which these papers move toward and are moved by realms, problems, and fields of knowledge exceeding gender analytics. These include but are not limited to new lines of inquiry in phenomenology, new readings of Foucault, considerations of liberalism in postcolonial spaces, revisions of art historiography, projective identificatory readings of classical and contemporary humanisms, the problem of NGOification of gender reforms, questions about the mutability of Islam, concern with democratic imperialism, lurid melodramas of failed agency, the problem of imitative reification, eccentricity in the service of an economy of erotic normalcy, isolation of the aesthetic, reproducibility of the screen, and a dozen different angles on ethics. Especially exciting is the ease with which the papers traverse from gender and sexuality to these other thematics and fields of inquiry, passing through borders once gated and policed by the keepers both of gender studies and of other fields and disciplines, but now merrily unguarded, sometimes even unmarked.

One particularly strong current in this collection is the matter of "thinking in time"—a phrase comprising the importance both of allowing historical

time to do the work of dissolving certain seeming impossibilities or contradictions and of apprehending the specificity of problematics constructed by particular historical discourses and times. It is within this current that I want to place two other recurring concerns in the volume—the strong preoccupation with ethics, and the anxiety about the co-optability of gender and sexual equality projects by forces that disingenuously appropriate them for nefarious ends, such as racism or empire. Briefly, I want to reflect on each in turn.

Perhaps the turn to ethics by humanists, especially literary scholars, is only one long overdue. If, as Lionel Trilling famously declared, “Literature is the human activity that takes the fullest and most precise account of variousness, possibility, complexity, and difficulty,” what more verdant pasture could there be for the development of ethics?¹ And yet, it is telling that fifteen years ago, at an academic conference on gender, each moment of identity configuration, knowledge production, reading, critique, interpretation, and contestation would have been identified with the “political” rather than the “ethical.” Politics carried the same ubiquitous, overreaching, and underspecified place in humanities work now held by ethics. Then, the de-naturalizing, de-essentializing and antifoundational moves of poststructuralism were mobilized to politicize everything: language, subjects, identities, readings, performances, and all social relations. Indeed, the governing assumption of critical work in the humanities was that anything not natural—and nothing was—was political. One might have worried then that such a relentless reach of the political produced at once its dilution and imperialism, and that this reach was perhaps also inattentive to constitutive features of the distinctive scene of powers binding and organizing human collectivities. Now, however, as the political has given way to the ethical in humanities discourse, it is the political that seems to have gone missing. Or, perhaps more precisely, what is often missing is the necessary connection between ethics and politics that thinkers as diverse as Aristotle, Spinoza, and Foucault taught us to sustain.

There is much to be said for concerns with ethics, of course. More than the attitudinal demeanor or set of moral ideals to which it is sometimes reduced today, the ethical is fundamentally centered on action: it signals modes of conduct toward others and hence modes of being with others. Aristotle formulated ethics simply as good men acting in the pursuit of happiness in the rich Greek sense of *eudamonia* (a simplicity that evaporates, of course, as soon as action, goodness, humanness, and happiness are plumbed for their respective complexities). Moreover, given the capacity of ethics to reckon with distinctly human affective and expressive qualities that purely political logics frequently elide, ethics is an important partner to politically animated intellectual work. However, the virtues and importance of the ethical domain do

not explain the heightened concern with ethics across the humanities today. Even if, *pace* Nietzsche, developing an ethics and acting ethically seems an uncontested good, we still might ask: What could this concern be holding or holding off, displacing or replacing, symptomizing or reacting to? I want to suggest that its ubiquity in our work today is overdetermined, spurred at the very least from the following sources:

First, we are living in dark times, by which I mean not only that the world is full of troubles and foreboding—the specters of planetary ecological collapse, economic collapse, terror, imperial wars, and more localized violence, along with the quotidian devastations wrought by global capitalism—but that many of our greatest ills have no obvious antidotes or solutions. There are no evident counters or alternatives to the present order of things, and we have ceased to rely upon either progressive or redemptive narratives to carry us forward. “Hope” may be a winning campaign slogan but, as has become painfully apparent, it is neither a program nor a strategy; nor is it, I think, a deeply felt political affect among critical intellectuals. Historically, eras of despair, especially those following on intensely politicized eras, are notable for provoking an ethical turn. The post-Socratic schools of the Stoics, Epicurians, and Cynics represented just such a turn, one that openly entailed a withdrawal from politics. Similarly, Habermas and Foucault could both be understood to have made something of an ethical withdrawal after the ferments of the 1960s and 1970s; Habermas turned to communicative ethics and Foucault to the arts of the self. Max Weber performs this turn in the very narrative structure of “Politics as a Vocation,” a darkly pessimistic meditation that nearly paints political action into a corner before resolving into a discussion of a distinctly political ethics.

But dark times are only one condition spurring the turn to ethics. For humanists shaped by postfoundational thought, and from those opposed to (and often ignorant of the substance) of such thought, we have for several decades faced the charge that postfoundational thought is without ethics or even unethical. Feminist poststructuralists who, in their deconstruction of gendered subjects and insistence on the sliding meaning of gender, have been tarred by critics with indifference to the plight of “real women”; antimarriage queers are charged with a lack of sexual ethics; poststructuralists generally are said to be unable to distinguish good and evil and more generally to reject the foundations and limits upon which ethical life depends. Something called postmodernism, it will be recalled, was declared dead after the events of 9/11, events said to clearly enunciate a category of evil that “postmodernism” was imagined to dilute. And when not accused of ethical relativism, we are accused of displacing ethical with political concerns, politicizing everything,

seeing power everywhere, attending too little to matters of soul and suffering. We are either hapless relativists or hapless politicizers—all politics, no ethics.

But responding to charges of being unethical or antiethical with a hyperinvestment in ethics was not a simple matter of refutation or reclaiming ground. To the contrary, even while drawing on Spinoza, Hegel, Heidegger, or Kant, a poststructuralist ethics would have to be fashioned from elements quite different from those of the past. Thus a third force overdetermining the turn to ethics pertains to the effort to elaborate a responsible and responsive subject after the Kantian one. If the Kantian inheritance of an autonomous moral subject and transcendental notion of the good were an important part of what poststructuralism challenged, then this challenge redounds back to poststructuralism itself. For poststructuralists, the problem was this one: How might a historically constructed, disunified, non-self-consistent and non-self-constituting subject stand ethically for itself as an “I” and respond ethically to another “I”? This difficult question is yet another incitement to the consideration of ethics in a postfoundational vein.

Fourth, responding to the relentlessly moralizing left discourses of the 1980s, many of us yearned not only for a post-Enlightenment ethical subject but for an ethics beyond moralism. This desire also picks up a different thread of the post-Kantian ethics problem, one that aims to adumbrate possibilities for a nonregulatory ethics, and one that also varies from bourgeois morality, libertinism, or solipsism. This is what some have also called a “radical ethics,” one that is wary of the political contouring or instrumentalization of ethics for extant normative regimes.

Fifth, the ethical turn would seem to respond to two overextensions of what were important and useful critiques of conventional formulations of power. On the one hand, there are Foucault’s critique of power understood as rule, repression, or sovereignty in favor of an appreciation of power’s normativizing work and Derrida’s insights into normative operations of power in language. However important these critiques, when normativity comes to occupy the entire field of power and comprises the whole vocabulary of power, we appear left with nothing other than a politics of counternormative conduct, that is, with an incisive politics of critique or resistance but one lacking a positive project. A well-known risk here is a paralysis of action itself born from a fear of normativity in any claim or action, precisely the fear that allowed critics of poststructuralism to claim that it had no ethical *yes*, only a *no*. On the other hand, the deep attunement to power in normativity may have carried us to a point of exhaustion with power and its negotiations . . . a certain over-politicization of every field of activity and existence. Perhaps this

constitutes the affective delight generated by Lynne Huffer's return to love and lyricism in her rereading of Foucault's theory of sexuality and *Madness and Civilization* in this volume. And, again, perhaps it also signals our own exhaustion from decades of a left moralizing politics: ethics becomes our lyrical form of "awayness" amid relentless demands for political knowingness and positioning.

Here, even Derrida's and Foucault's ethical turns appear a bit different from the earlier framing of rejoinders to charges against them as nihilists or ethical relativists. The ethical turn in each was surely spurred in part by a desire for an awayness from French Marxism. Indeed, perhaps the turn to the ethical paradoxically waged an assertion of freedom from these discourses as well as from a more generally closed political universe. This reminds us again that an ethical turn can be, rather than the supplement to political life it was conceived to be by Aristotle, a reaction to or even a rejection of politics, or at least of a certain kind of politics. Today the loss of common worlds heretofore marked by the nation-state or even by the West might also be occasioning this turn, as would be the fear of the heavy normativity of a "common good" implicated by or in the political.

If the turn to ethics on the part of left humanists is both overdetermined and reactive, occurring at the site of an undertheorized displacement, this does not make it thoroughly wrongheaded. Rather it suggests the need for cognizance of this contextualization and practices of caution and critique, practices themselves in keeping with Joan Scott's argument for permanent revolution in thought, for upturning and calling into question assumed categories of analysis and value. Or, to borrow from one of the most incisive sentences in Scott's "The Evidence of Experience" ("Experience is . . . not the origin of our explanation but that which we want to explain"), we might say: "A turn to ethics is not only the substance of our work but also that which we want to explain."² This means doing something particularly difficult, though not impossible, in discussions of ethics, namely grasping the forces of history producing the constellation of our contemporary intellectual concerns and concepts, our projects, our passions. It requires, in short, a deep commitment to thinking in time. Such a contextualization also suggests the importance of reconnecting the concerns with ethics to politics, with express attention to the historically specific powers organizing collective human arrangements and the predicaments and affects generated by these powers.

I want to conclude here by turning from the discussion of ethics to another problem of thinking in historical time, one that also emerged frequently across these papers. This is the problem of discourses of gender equality and sexual democracy mobilized for imperialist or racist projects—Sarkozy's use

of them to distinguish progressive French republican values from those of new immigrants, American neoconservatives' use of them to distinguish a Western "us" from an Islamic "them" and their use in building "moderate Muslim networks" and the figure of the "moderate Muslim." In each case, we often stand aghast before the appropriation of feminist and queer terms and aims by conservative projects at odds with our own yet which make use of ours to legitimize racially exclusionary, openly imperialist, or more subtle Western supremacist endeavors. Thus, for example, neoconservatives identified the liberation of Afghan women as a pretext for the United States projects of regime change in the Middle East, just as some Europeans use orthodox Muslim sexual and gender *mores* as a pretext for excluding Muslims from entry or citizenship, and Israel casts gender equality and tolerance of homosexuality as indexical of its status as the "lone democracy" of the Middle East and as the civilized outpost among its barbaric neighbors. Such deployments of gender and sexual equality are neither new nor always calculated instrumentalizations. The putatively freer and more egalitarian status of Western women is an old theme in colonial discourse about nativism and the orient. It gains contemporary standing in Western feminisms ranging from those of Susan Okin to Catharine MacKinnon to Laura Bush; it is right under the surface of much international human rights discourse and at the heart of many well-intended NGOs working on behalf of women in the global South.

Here we are reminded of an especially important, albeit frustrating, political feature of thinking and living in time: there is no party monopoly on any concept, value, or even ideal, let alone on any tactic or strategy, all of which live in time and are activated in historically specific circuits of power that condition their content and ramifications. Co-optation is not the right word for this; it fails to capture the extent to which, by virtue of temporally shifting discourses and contexts, what was at one point a critical, progressive, or even revolutionary cause can, over time, be transposed into an order of domination or a strategy of exploitation. Hard-won rights or radical bids for tolerance can become regulatory regimes of biopower, the extraordinary achievement of democracy can transmute into free market savagery and liberal empire, revolutionary slogans can become institutionalized nodes of despotism or bourgeois privilege. Contemporary elder inhabitants of former Soviet republics know well how policies of state feminism operated to double the duties of women rather than emancipate them—gender equality as an instrument of state regulation and repression is not news to them. Similarly the language of civil rights and universal equality was easily deployed in the 1990s to dismantle affirmative action for racial minorities and women. The language of "revolutionary" was taken up by neoconservatives to hail a new form of

American governance, and the language of “sexual difference” has recently emerged in screeds opposing gay marriage in the United States, as it has also been used to oppose same-sex parenting in France. On the other side, it would seem that the ascendancy of the picture-perfect Obama family has successfully shorn the American right of its monopoly on “family values,” that economic “nationalization” and state ownership have been fully detached from socialism or even public welfare, and that “centrism” and “moderation” have become a liberal retort to the right.

Our ability to navigate such appropriations and inversions depends upon political perspicacity and artful strategies—neither moral outrage nor a radical ethics are likely to be much help. It depends in particular on the recognition that political life features fantastic temporal shifts and that, aided by technology and the media, its tempo is ever quickening. Thus while enduring commitments have a place in politics, these cannot be codified in unified and unchanging discourses, nor inflected by a consistent context. Here, one only need consider the historically shifting fates of “republicanism” over the course of modernity or consider today the disorientation for liberalism produced today by the coinage of “neoliberalism” to describe the saturation of every human sphere with entrepreneurial rationality. So of course feminism will be taken up for purposes that will gall, and “gender” can become a reactionary category of analysis (and politics!), but these turns of events are not well met by howling indignation or reproach, two strikingly nonpolitical responses. Rather, they are occasions to apprentice ourselves to Joan W. Scott’s incisive appreciation of paradoxical political discourse and to enlist her deep commitment to critique, to “thinking in time,” to “permanent revolution,” and to “speaking back . . . to instate the new and to open a different future.”³

NOTES

1. Lionel Trilling, *The Liberal Imagination: Essays on Literature and Society* (New York: Viking Press, 1950), xv.

2. Joan W. Scott, “Experience,” *Feminists Theorize the Political*, ed. Judith Butler and Joan W. Scott (New York: Routledge, 1992), 38.

3. Judith Butler, in this volume, p. 18.