

# “Engaging with provocations”. An Interview with Wendy Brown

## “Confrontarsi con le provocazioni”. Un’intervista a Wendy Brown

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**Abstract.** Wendy Brown is recognized internationally as one of the most important contemporary critics of neoliberalism and for her crucial contribution to feminist political theory. In this dialogue, Brown traces her intellectual itinerary, from her provocative and polemical relationship with the classic authors of political theory, to her confrontation with Marx and Foucault as both indispensable sources for the critique of neoliberalism; from the problem of political subjectivation in the age of identity politics, to the new reactionary politics which challenge feminism as a political discourse and practice. The text is a transcript, elaborated and revised by Brown, of the dialogue she had with her interviewer and the audience at the masterclass held on 13 March 2024 at the University of Trento, as part of the second series of lectures “Voices from Contemporary Philosophy”, coordinated by Tiziana Faitini, Alessandro Palazzo and Michele Nicoletti.

**Keywords:** Wendy Brown, neoliberalism, feminism, political theory.

**Riassunto.** Wendy Brown è riconosciuta a livello internazionale come una delle più importanti voci critiche del neoliberalismo contemporaneo e per il suo contributo fondamentale alla teoria politica femminista. In questo dialogo, Brown ripercorre il suo itinerario intellettuale, dal rapporto provocatorio e polemico con i principali classici della teoria politica, al confronto con Marx e Foucault come fonti entrambe indispensabili per la critica del neoliberalismo; dal problema della soggettivazione politica nell'epoca delle politiche dell'identità al femminismo come discorso e pratica politica di fronte alla sfida di nuove politiche reazionarie. Il testo è la trascrizione, opportunamente rielaborata e rivista dall'intervistata, del dialogo da lei avuto con

Paola Rudan e con il pubblico in occasione della lezione tenutasi il 13 marzo 2024 all'Università di Trento, nell'ambito del secondo ciclo "Voci dalla filosofia contemporanea" coordinato da Tiziana Faitini, Alessandro Palazzo e Michele Nicoletti.

**Parole chiave:** Wendy Brown, neoliberalismo, femminismo, teoria politica.

*I think that your work is not so much a lesson to be learned but a challenge to take up. To read political theory as history, looking for the operations of social powers behind political discourses and canons; to cope with the discomfort of political theory, profiting from a distance from politics which is not neutrality, but allows critique to be reckless; to be untimely in Nietzschean terms, that is acting counter to our time and on our time to envision possibilities that are not theologically given; to undogmatically read the words of authors such as Nietzsche himself, Marx, Freud, Foucault, Weber, among others, in order to provoke political theory and to make feminism a political critique of society. These are aspects of your work that I would like to discuss today, starting from the earlier stages of your career. I've been always shaken by the way you engaged a kind of hand-to-hand confrontation with the classic authors of political theory. This confrontation combines a close reading of their works and provocative solicitation of their thinking for the purpose of questioning the present. What is the path that led you to develop this kind of approach?*

For me, all the good things in intellectual life happen through thinking together, whether with the living or the dead. I had the good fortune, as a university student, to not be taught political philosophy as a professional form of study. I was a student of economics, I was lucky enough to be studying economics in the early 70's, when still in the US there were some Marxists, as well as some neoclassical economists in many departments – I know, it's shocking [*laughs*] – and for me what happened is that Marx led to Hegel and Hegel led to Plato, and suddenly I was falling backwards into the world of political philosophy, but even as I did that – and I will admit that it was for me not only intellectually intriguing, but something of a love affair – I encountered these works, works in the history of political philosophy, as the biggest form of thinking and the biggest form of refracting the world that I had ever encountered. I didn't even know you could build a universe as everyone from Marx to Hegel to Plato to Rousseau to Aristotle to others did, I didn't know you could build a universe that simultaneously distilled elements of the present and dislocated them from the present. For me, that was the really thrilling thing about the field of political philosophy. It was a way of thinking where we are, what we are, who the "we" is, what the "are" is, without positivism, without sim-

ply replicating the discourses that organised the present, and so without knowing it. I was already in something of a Foucauldian episteme about the history of the present, that's what political philosophy was for me: a way of exploring what constituted common life but in a language and through an approach different than the common place. So, I fell in love, but when I say I had the great advantage of not being taught political philosophy as a profession, I'm old enough to know that this all happened before the Cambridge school got to the history of philosophy. Whatever its merits, what that school of thought and that approach did was say "you can't move political philosophy out of its own time and place; you have to understand it intrinsically to its own time and place." I had instead teachers who helped us see the connections between study of great thought and predicaments of our time. The predicaments of the time that I was immediately in when I was a young person were the Vietnam war, the emergence of feminism, the anti-imperialist movement that extended from the anti-war movement, and more generally the ferment of the late 1960s and early 1970s. So, my teachers did not say "here, go figure out what Hobbes means by sovereignty and do it through a deep historical study of the language and the particular iterations of the Latin or English meanings that he engages." They allowed us the free reign to do what you described as characteristic of my work, which is to think with political theory to think about our political times. As a graduate student I also had one teacher [*laughs*] who encouraged this. While it was beginning to diminish more broadly in the field, my advisor was somebody who, on the one hand, was a serious scholar and, on the other hand, was compelled by urgent questions of the day. Now this approach is an outlier but it remains extremely important to me. I don't defend everything about my work, but I will defend that. I should add one more thing: my early training in economics perhaps explains my continued, really stubborn insistence on bringing political economy together with political theory and also my fearlessness about the monopoly by economists on that field. They don't intimidate me.

*You also confronted with very controversial authors like Friedrich Nietzsche, Carl Schmitt, Max Weber, being the latter a political thinker who has an important place both in your first and in your last book<sup>1</sup>. Could you say more about your fearless and provocative engagement with these authors, some of which – we may say – stay in the "dark side" of political theory?*

It's an important question and a lot of people ask me "how dare you! Schmitt! Weber! Nietzsche!" I get scolded from the liberals to the left for

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<sup>1</sup> Brown, *Manhood and Politics*; *Nihilistic Times*.

this. The Habermasians are all scolding me, the Marxists are all scolding me. First, just at an interpretive and learning level, my feeling is that we really have nothing to fear about thinking with whomever we need to think with. Weber, Schmitt, Nietzsche would never be my political comrades. In fact, we would be on opposite sides of the political barricades, but the other thing that my early formation gave me was an appreciation of the difference between overtly political spaces and intellectual ones. That difference for me is not absolute by any means, and there's plenty of traffic across. However, for me intellectual life is precisely a place to take apart what you cannot afford to take apart in the political realm. In the political realm you fight to win, always [*laughs*], whether that means building communities of solidarity, or whether that means winning an election, or whether that means strategies and tactics to stop something. In the intellectual realm, as long as we preserve it from strong incursions by State, by Church, by economy and by politics – that's a big "if" – as long as we struggle to prevent those incursions, we have a space to think about what we're doing politically, how we came to the predicaments and the impasses that we have, what we might be doing wrong, where we might be reiterating the very formation that we think we're opposing. All of these things, for me, require a big conversation with – I'll just put it bluntly – the dead [*laughs*] – that is to say, thinkers who have endured or persisted for reasons that I would call the "largeness and the profundity of their thought." It's my own view that we should be afraid of none of them, they are dead, they are not going to capture us, unless we believe that to study somebody is to submit to them absolutely. There's no thinker I can think of – even those I'm most closely allied with – who I may think with in order to become a devotee. Thinking, for me, is precisely about engaging with provocations, and sometimes difficult ones, like the ones that Nietzsche throws us, for example. I mean, Nietzsche is a hard thinker to think with, partly because he's constantly pulling the rug out from under you. But also because he's so deeply radical epistemologically and so deeply reactionary politically and, yet, I cannot imagine much of the work that I have done over the past twenty-five years without him. That doesn't mean I'm his scribe, or his follower, or anything else, but I would also say the same of Marx or of my favourite feminist thinkers. There's always something to wrestle with, to come up against, to query, to object to. I don't quite understand the anxiety that exists about left engagement with thinkers like Weber and Nietzsche, except to suggest that I think it's a sign of certain politicisation of thought that I diagnosed in my last book as one of the effects and symptoms of nihilism. For now, let's just put it this way. I think it's a sign of that loss of independent intellectual space in the academy and the belief that, instead, what we're always doing is a cer-

tain kind of politics or policy. This indexes erosion of that important moat or divide between political life and intellectual life.

*The relationship between political theory and politics is a topic that you often discuss in your work. This is true also in your last book, Nihilistic Times, where your reading of Max Weber's work<sup>2</sup> is another way of re-thinking the relationship between science and politics. My question is: how can you maintain an intellectual distance without falling into the political neutrality prescribed by Weber? I think this is not easy. Further, I also observed a kind of difference from your first book, Manhood and Politics, and Nihilistic times: in the latter you state that we don't have to ask, "what is to be done?" in terms of prescribing a political direction, while the last chapter of Manhood and Politics was entitled "What is to be done" [laughs]. I am curious to know more about this shift.*

So, one easy answer is that I grew up [laughs]. My first book was my dissertation revised for publication and I wrote it in my twenties when I did not have this view well formulated. I was dwelling with big thinkers in my university life and then engaged in various kinds of activism outside of the university, but I hadn't theorised the interval or distinction I drew a moment ago. To your question about political neutrality: I am not arguing for a suspension of political passions or interests in our research or our teaching, but I am arguing for holding them differently. What I mean is, when I am reading, and thinking, and researching I am trying not to simply shore up my convictions, but to transform my understanding of the world and hence, perhaps, what I think is wrong with it and what needs to be repaired or rectified. But when I am acting politically – say, in favour of abortion rights, or Palestine, or low-income housing – I'm going into that world with an analysis and a set of convictions that I'm trying to realise, to make true, to solidify, to make hegemonic. That's what political life is, it's trying to make hegemonic your view of the world – that's the little bit of Schmittian in me [laughs]. I think there are other aspects of political life but, you know, the reason for being there – let's call it the Weberian in me – is because you have passion for a cause. If you're just there because you enjoy power that's a problem – Trump embodies that – but most are in political life to try to make the world in the image that you and your comrades, or your community, want and need. But I would not understand the point of being a scholar or thinker if that's all you did in intellectual life. I mean, why spend hours and days and years in a library to shore up convictions that you already have, to reinforce an

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<sup>2</sup> Weber, "Politics as a Vocation;" "Science as a Vocation."

analysis or a viewpoint that you already have? So, to go back to your point about neutrality, it is a different thing to suspend your absolutes as you do your work, and to commit to a false objectivity or neutrality. I do my work – for example, the books that I wrote on neoliberalism – because I really thought neoliberalism was destroying worlds, human and non-human, small and big, and yet I also knew that to do good work on it I had to understand it better and more deeply and differently than I already did. So, it wasn't a neutral political position, it was an opening of positioning toward knowledge, inquiry, learning, uncertainty, but it wasn't impassionate and – after Foucault; after the whole post-structuralist turn – I don't understand how I – let alone anyone else – could argue for neutrality in the human sciences. People do, of course.

*Yes, of course. Neoliberals most of all.*

Yes, although I sometimes think neoliberalism – I said a bit about this in *Nihilistic Times* – has really subscribed to a much more relativist form of knowledge due to the effects of financialization on knowing what truth and knowledge are, the volatility in them, and also the profound effect of the immaterial on market... but that's another story, you didn't ask about that.

*But this introduces the topic of your reading of neoliberalism. Both Undoing the Demos (2015) and In the Ruins of Neoliberalism (2019) are attempts to make a diagnosis of the present time with the aim of revitalising a democracy which – as you said – was ruined by neoliberalism. In these attempts you confront with the tradition of the homo politicus from Aristotle to John Stuart Mill, and you put this tradition against the neoliberal homo oeconomicus. Your understanding of neoliberal anthropology is extremely illuminating and clear, but your reading also rises two questions: how do you cope with the history of the homo politicus as a masculinist and racist construction? And how can you recover this figure without falling into the “left melancholy”<sup>3</sup> that you always regarded as a risk for political and critical theory in our present time?*

Great question. Let me just recapitulate it a little, because you gave a dense version of it, and I just want it to open it up. So, I have a critique of what I call “left melancholy,” being bound up with attachments to the past that reject predicaments and possibilities in the present. You want to know how I can think about the survival and the future of *homo politicus*, political humans, and a political space and a distinctive appreciation

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<sup>3</sup> Brown, “Resisting Left Melancholy.”

of the political without falling into that nostalgia – that melancholy. I take the distinctly political feature of humans to rest in our capacity to generate powers and through them worlds that make history, make us, organise us into classes, casts, genders, races, other things. What the field of the political offers is the possibility of modestly controlling those powers that we collectively generate. I don't think we can ever absolutely control them because they are unleashed and form histories, subjectivities, psyches, politics and economies, short of totalitarianism, which is the one big effort to get hold of it all and control it all. I think that, even there, there are historical forces that escape. So, I think ruling or controlling powers that otherwise rule us is an aspiration, not a total achievement ever, but I take the political to be the distinctly human possibility and effort to govern the powers that we humans, otherwise, are governed by. So, it's an effort, as it were, to take charge of ourselves collectively. It varies across culture and history and space and time, it doesn't have any enduring qualities, except what I'm suggesting is something like its ontological dimension, ontological because there is no other animal – and I'm arguing with Latour and all the rest of them right now – there's no other animal that does this thing that we do, that generates collective life and with it a set of powers that get away from us, unless and until we try to govern them. Certainly, other animals generate forces by virtue of how and where they live, and generate effects by virtue of how and where they live, but they don't have our capacity – and here we can be a little bit Arendtian – through speech, through deliberation, through institutions – now I am already not Arendtian – to gather and govern these things. I take that feature of us to be what *homo politicus* is about, and what for me was one of the darkest features of neoliberalism, that is, its attempt to extinguish this feature of us as it turned us over fully to markets. This is the feature of neoliberalism that seems to me most powerful even as we are ostensibly moving to something of a post-neoliberal age. As we ostensibly move into this age, that dubiousness about political governing of the common through whatever form – democratic or autocratic – is one of neoliberalism's most enduringly damaging features. Neoliberalism decried political intervention in matters of justice and governing and reserved it exclusively for propping up markets or facilitating markets. That's why I engaged at such length in both of those books with the idea of the loss of *homo politicus* and the importance of recovering it, without being nostalgic because the form in which we recover it is not set. It's not about “oh, let's look back to the era of the social State”, it's about recognising that human beings have within their hands the capacity to make decisions together, to deliberate together, to think about what is just and sustainable together, to think about the perils and the challenges that face us and the planet together

and to do something with it. To be governed by markets or to be governed by technocrats allows that possibility to vanish. Sorry, it was a bit long, but it required an explanation of what the political is.

*This point leads me to another question about the production of subjectivity and desire. You always understood political subjects as generated by the social formations and the relations of power in which they are placed. This is something that you discuss both, for instance, in your States of Injury (1995), throughout your critique of identity politics and in Politics out of History (2001) through Nietzsche, who is the author that you use more to criticise moralism as antipolitics. In your reading, desire is never an immediate source of freedom because someone can also be attached to his or her wounds. This is something that is still more urgent to discuss today, both in relation to neoliberalism itself, and in consideration of how it turns the desire for justice into a desire for redress, into a kind of politicisation of victimhood, which is not the same thing of questioning the social powers that produce victims. How can this relationship between power and subjectivity be interrupted?*

The problem for human beings is, as you just said, that power doesn't just rule us, it saturates us and forms us, shapes us. If you accept that, then the question is "how do we not end up mirroring the powers that we think we want to resist?" You've just given an example of that in ubiquitous victimisation as a site of identity, a problem I've been thinking about since the early 90's with *States of Injury*, right up through the problem of what we could call the "wounded identities" that now underpin neo-fascism, the feelings of displacement, smallness, being thrown away that so many European and North American working-class and middle-class white people feel. These feelings are leading them to an ethno-nationalist and anti-democratic exclusionary politics that targets not just immigrants but all kinds of imagined enmities to their way of life, whether it's LGBTQ politics, feminism, migrants, whatever. So, I think your question is what is to be done? [*laughs*]. But you were also inviting me to open this up a bit more. The fortunate thing about power forming us, is that it's never complete. This is one of the things that I learned from Foucault. Because we're worked on by multiple sites of power and multiple forms of power, never just one, and because there's also formations of us that – we could say – exceed the obviousness of certain forms of power that might be cultural or familiar or other things, there are always little openings. Let me give you an example. When I first started teaching neoliberal thought to my undergraduate students and I would talk to them about the ways in which today they are formed by powers which aspire to make them into



bits of human capital – capital as opposed to complex, deep subjects choosing their own way of life and thinking about what they value –, I teach them how human capital is constantly concerned with enhancing its value and preventing its depreciation. Across every sphere of life, from one's existence on social media, to one's existence as a student, to one's existence as a young worker, one is enjoined to ask, "how do I advance my value, enhance my value as a bit of human capital and how do I prevent my value from depreciating?" Nothing is more extreme as an example than the influencer. The figure of the influencer is pure enhanced value, nothing else, there's no commodity, there's no good, there's no productivity, it's just pure value enhanced by followers-investors. The collapse of the influencer – of any particular influencer – is pure depreciation in value. But all of us have a little of this: as students we are taught that we have to be somewhat entrepreneurial about our choices, what classes to take, what departments or majors to concentrate in, what teachers to try to get to know, what internships or summer work to engage in in order to continue to build the resume, and what to avoid, what pictures not to post on the internet that could plummet one's value, what retweets and things could also damage a person. So, when I explained all of this to my students, their response wasn't: "that's how we roll, that's cool, I love it." Their response for the most part was, first: "you mean there's another way to be?" because they were so saturated by this culture – I'm talking about 18-, 19-, 20-year-olds – that it hadn't occurred to them that it was a historical formation, that it was recent. The other response was: "I don't want to be that, I don't want to just be a piece of human capital, I do want to figure out what I actually care about, what's worth doing in the world, what's right or wrong with the world." The fact that that response is possible tells us that the formation isn't total, that the power that organises contemporary humans as bits of human capital doesn't reach all the way through. This is one example, but we could use many others. We could talk about, say, ambivalence about a certain heteropatriarchal masculinity: you won't find it in every macho-man, but you will find in many an anxiety, an unhappiness, even an openness to alternatives. So, even though, as you say, I think that power is never simply governing, it's never simply ruling, it's constructing, it's saturating, I also want to say it's not absolute ever and the challenge is to create what Foucault called "counter discourses", and we could call alternative cultural and political possibilities, in which that little part of us uncolonized by governing powers is invited in. I think one can see episodes even recently, where that possibility took place. For me, in the United States, the movement that most took many of us by surprise in recent years was *Occupy* followed by *Black Lives Matter*. No one could have predicted that millions and millions and millions of

Americans weaned on neoliberal values over the past thirty years in 2011 would have been captured by the anti-neoliberal discourses of *Occupy*. It was profound and, even though, it's hard to remember this, it brought inequality and public goods back to the mainstream political agenda. Same with *Black Lives Matter*. No one would have predicted that *Black Lives Matter* or even the *Me-Too* movement would have seized popular imagination the way that they did, but the opening was there.

*This show that you always live in paradox, I would say, also because you try to grasp the processes that allow social powers to capture what is escaping their control and their rules. The anthropology of human capital is based on individualisation and competition, which is radical and devouring. The problem is which kind of collective life, collective experiences, and collective projects can be shaped starting from this. One of the neoliberal answers to claims for justice coming from below, from social subjects such as women, LGBTQ people, black people or migrants have been identity politics on the one hand and the culturalisation of differences on the other hand. You discuss these topics in different ways. I'm thinking, for instance, to the critique of the discourse of rights and the law that you developed through Marx – also being critical with Foucault, who did not understand, the productive, not only repressive, character of law and rights<sup>4</sup>. You also did so in your *Regulating Aversion* (2006) where you describe the *Beit Hashoah – Museum of Tolerance* in Los Angeles. There you highlight how Zionist politics worked and is still working at the discursive and institutional level as identity politics, but you also emphasise the way in which culturalisation “naturalises” positions of power to govern collective claims for justice. So, I would like to ask you more about these two strategies: identity politics on the one hand and the culturalisation of conflicts on the other, because “cultural wars” in the United States – and not only there – are deeply reshaping the way in which claims for justice are articulated.*

Now, I'm going to leave neoliberalism aside and say that one of the limitations of liberalism, as a form of political thought, is that it disavows the powers that shape us. Think about its classic story: once upon a time we were all in the state of nature, then we made a deal, we put down our weapons and right to fight, handed these off to the State and now we're in the social contract. Nowhere in that picture are the identities that you just mentioned. So, rather than treating identity as political, most liberals treat it as a problem of difference, culture, maybe economics, but not social power giving rise to politics. The weakness of liberalism in featur-

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<sup>4</sup> Brown, “Rights and Identity in Late Modernity.”

ing social power is something which Marx was very alert to, but he only solved one little bit of that, which was class. He said "no, we don't just put down our arms and move into the social contract: the social contract is built out of property owners who secure all the goods, while the property-less end up exploited by them;" so we got class in this analysis, but what we don't have are all those other forms of social power. So, my work and the work of many others over the past, including the entire Birmingham School of cultural studies, many feminists, many critical race theorists, has been to try to bring the social powers that make racialisation, gender, etc visible politically, so that we're not just imagining that the political problem is one of the accommodating difference or including difference. Liberalism has indeed responded to the problem of difference by trying to include it, that's what we call in the US "diversity, equity and inclusion" initiatives and we have them in every institution. Every institution has a diversity, equity and inclusion policy and basically what those policies do is feature a lot of black people and women on the websites. But that doesn't reach to the powers that organise institutions, like patriarchy and racism. Our practice as scholars, what we can contribute to breaking that up, is to constantly be revealing power in the making of what is called "difference" but is actually inequality and I suspect that leads to the bigger question that you wanted to raise, which is how do we get identity politics to make claims beyond victimisation? My own argument for decades has been by imagining a world in which you are no longer that identity. What do I mean? By not saying "I want representation as a woman, as a black person, as this or as that." Of course, that's important while we're trying to get to the table. But the dream cannot be a table in which those representatives are there yelling at the dominant. The dream has to be a world in which those markers are no longer markers of power and in which they are no longer, in that sense, politicised, in which it no longer matters if you're born one sex or the other, because it will not turn into a profound advantage or disadvantage. That's hard to get to from what you describe so beautifully as identity inscribed as difference and culture, you can only get there if you understand identity as built from power that exploits difference.

*This is, in a way, an activation of the Marxian conception of the proletariat, whose aim is to abolish itself as proletariat.*

Yes, yes.

*This brings me to another aspect of your work that I would like to think with you, that is the relationship between capital and the State or*

*political institutions. You distance yourself from Foucault, because you do not limit yourself to conceive Capital as a discourse or rationality of government. At the same time, you distance yourself from Marx, because you do not regard Capital as a social totality. Both these aspects, I think, are crucial for your understanding and critique of neoliberalism. Could you say more about this?*

Both Marx and Foucault, for me, open gigantic intellectual worlds. I cannot think without either one, but I can never think one without the other. For many people that's confusing, because they seem to be something of opposites as thinkers, not because one's progressive and one's reactionary, but because of a very different understanding in each case of history and of power, but it is precisely the way each understands history and power that is so important to me. Marx understands history as governed by the mode of production. Foucault turns away from that so hard because for him it had been blinding to his generation of intellectuals. So he moves to an understanding of history that is not only not governed by the mode of production but is not governed by anything in particular. For Foucault there are forces, emergences as he puts it, eruptions of power that come and go, that do not have one bidding thread throughout. I think that is a useful counter to Marx, but if it's allowed to extinguish Marx, as it is for many Foucauldians, you won't see the obvious thing in our world, which is that today what we call "globalisation," for centuries what we've called "capitalism," have not only built much of the world and transformed humans and cultures and communities and worlds into the classes, casts and orders that they have, but have also brought us to the brink of extinction with the climate and biodiversity crisis. Marx thought that the mode of power that we needed to keep our eyes on to understand history was not just a power of capital, but the power of class to produce an order in which everything else took shape in its image. So, my reading of Marx here is not economicist. He didn't say that the only thing that matters is economics. The important thing about the powers contained within the mode of production is that they in turn produced State institutions, family forms, social forms, ideology and everything else. What did Foucault do by contrast? He argued that power comes in many forms, that it has discursive and governmentalising forms, that it produces subjectivation, psyches – though he couldn't theorise those very well –, and ways of understanding and producing knowledge itself. He also argued that to reduce it to the form that Marx did was to miss all of the ways that power was taking shape circulating and organising our world and above all the ways, as he put it, that it infiltrated and irrigated everything about life. So, for me, thinking these two together always keeps one eye

on probably the most important and dangerous force in our last four centuries, that of Capital, and at the same time, expands our understanding of power to make worlds, make us, make language, make thought, make epistemologies and ontologies. As I said at the beginning, I can't imagine working without all of that, but for many people it's like being Jewish and Catholic at once.

*This kind of discourse opens many questions: on the one hand Foucault's reductionist reading of Marx...*

It's a terrible reading. I mean, to read Foucault on Marx is really a waste of time except when you understand that he was swatting Marxists off the table so that the table could be set anew.

*...and, on the other hand, which was its role in shaping contemporary political theory by obscuring Capital as a social relation, because when we speak of it as a mode of production, we are not only speaking of economics, but – as you said – of social relations shaped by a certain mode of production as a mode of life. Maybe this also leads to another point, that is feminism. Feminism is something that shapes your work all the time, you never lost your feminist sight. I don't know if I may call this way of thinking, of problematising things, as a “perspective.” I would like to make some questions about this. The first is that, from the very beginning of your work, you did not regard feminism as a “women's question.” You did try to make feminism a political critique of society, political institutions and discourses without separating it from the rest, which is the “masculine” and remains masculine through this separation. How was this possible without essentialising the subject or the “standpoint?” Without making of feminism an identity politics?*

It's a hard thought, but I want to insist on it: we can have the subject we provisionally call “women” without hardening that into an essentialised identity to the extent that we understand that the subject we call “women” not only has variation across time and space, class, sexuality, and other things, but also is itself posited by the construction of the dominant term, that is men – this is Simone De Beauvoir<sup>5</sup>. I mean that's the thing she got right, that what woman is, is not man. If masculinity varies in time and space, in what it is in one class or another, one sexuality or another, it's not clear at all why we should assume the meaning of what a woman is shouldn't vary too. In my very first book, the reason that I

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<sup>5</sup> Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*.

wanted to study *Manhood and Politics* was precisely that I understood if I'd just wrote another book on women in political theory, it would be that add-on. Political theory would remain the same and we would start adding women in, which was exactly what was happening when I was writing that first book in the 1980s. That is what I just described earlier as the liberal predicament. You don't change anything about the institutions, the norms or anything else, you just make sure the door is open to get a few people in who didn't use to be there. I thought if I studied the question, "what is our notion of the political as a consequence of politics being one of the most historically exclusively masculine spheres of human life in the west that we have?" there must be something in there, there must be some way that politics has taken the shape of the politically, socially gendered creatures, who are conducting it and for whom it exists. It's very funny because my advisor, Sheldon Wolin, whom I loved and admired, nevertheless continued, almost to the end, to call my dissertation one that was on "the woman question." This tells you how hard it was to fathom a feminist dissertation exploring the way the political and political theory were historically saturated with manhood. He did his best, I'm not faulting him really, I thought the misunderstanding was symptomatic. Now, your question which I've given a long preface to, is not only about how you can do a critical theory of society, but how you can do feminist politics without the subject of women being essentialised. Here's what I find interesting about this question: it has changed from the present, when the trans-exclusionary feminists [TERFs] say "we can't get anywhere for women against violence, against lack of reproductive rights, protection against patriarchy unless we know what a woman is, and a woman is what we are biologically." You all know this TERFs' definition. So that's the way the question gets framed now, when thirty-five, forty years ago feminism was produced by a theoretical turn that de-essentialised women. It said "women are not born, they're made" – Beauvoir again – and there have been since then many arguments about how women are made, what produces them, from social construction theory to performativity to many other things. TERFs are not particularly interested in post-structuralism or that move to think about anti-essentialism or anti-foundationalism and the earlier one. For me, the question is not that difficult, it's obvious. Let's just take violence against women: it happens because women are whores, because women are mothers, femicide happens because women are militants, feminists, because women are insufficiently feminine – whether dykes or trans. Now, what is the constant feature of womanhood in there? I want to suggest there is no constant feature of womanhood, what there is, is a normativity from patriarchy that governs all these different ways of being either monstrous, or mothers, or wives, not just when they're butch lesbi-

ans or sex workers. There's a patriarchal governing of women there that does not essentialise us, that does not reduce us to one thing, let's call this an "equal-opportunity-misogyny" that can track and punish us across a lot of different fields. I want to suggest that yes, of course we struggle for reproductive rights, of course we struggle against violence against women, of course we struggle for pay equality – one of my favourite Italian social movement was *Wages for Housework*<sup>6</sup> – there's lots to struggle for that make us name women as the subject without essentialising them, because there are forms of violence, or inequality, or subjugation that attach to whatever the figure of woman is in those particular instances. With the TERFs I think what happens today is an anxiety about the loss of the subject rather than about the struggles, because most trans folks, most LGBTQ folks these days are deeply engaged with feminist struggles. The anti-feminism of an earlier queer social formation, one of about twenty-five years ago, seems to be pretty much gone, so I think something else is going on today.

*Just a comment on TERFs: I think that what is remarkable is how they are reaffirming a biological determinism, which was the first enemy of women, and further how they impede to think differences socially produced by class relations of power, or along the colour line. I think however that this has always been a risk also for feminism or the queer theory, that is to focus only on sex, or gender, and sexuality without looking at how they've been shaped socially and culturally throughout history. My point here, however, is about your insistence on post-structuralism as what, in a way, inaugurated the capacity of seeing "woman" as a social construct, because I think that well before post-structuralism existed, women were practically and theoretically questioning the idea of givenness or an ontology of womanhood, and this can be also tracked historically in many women's discourses. Why do you insist so much on post-structuralism?*

Of course you're right and, in fact, I could tell a different story even in the US context, especially women of colour and non-heterosexual women beginning to chafe at feminist essentialism as it emerged from the 1970s in everything from what would eventually become "care feminism," the idea that we called it then "maternal feminism" or "cultural feminism," to even versions of lesbian feminism that imagined that lesbianism was the necessary outcome of being feminist. But not only did we have a long history of Sojourner Truth and others challenging a white bourgeois figure of women, but we also had plenty of women who felt excluded from feminist

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<sup>6</sup> See for instance Federici, "Salario per il lavoro domestico."



representations of womanhood in the 1970s – early “Second Wave” feminism. What post-structuralism did was to provide a theoretical critique of foundationalism and essentialism that allowed the categories to really start sliding on ice. I’m not saying, “these social objections, these historical objections needed theory,” that’s not my point. My point is that the wars that I was formed by both had that political dimension and a theoretical one – we had the essentialist feminists on one side and the post-structuralist feminists on the other, and that doesn’t quite map on to the political story that you’re telling. That’s why I went there, because long before the TERFs there was a very explosive epistemological rupture in gender. I know that sounds precious, like “we were having epistemological ruptures and that’s as important as Sojourner Truth,” but that’s not quite what I’m saying. I am saying that what was so striking about the 1980s in feminist thought and practice, and feminist classrooms and feminist scholarship, and the activism that was affected by those spheres, was that it was so mightily informed by this disruption of the essentialist categories of everything, gender included. So, you’re absolutely right that I was telling a provincial local, even maybe personal story, as opposed to a worldly political one.

*I agree on many points, but what remains is patriarchy as a structure, which emerges also from the way you described it before, when speaking of Manhood and Politics. This means that there is a specific signification of political discourses and institutions, a specific sexualisation or genderisation of them, there are also specific institutions and relations that are historically contingent or changing, but, nonetheless, maintain a patriarchal character. This is true also when you describe patriarchy as a reaction to women’s manifold practices of “not being women enough,” as you did when speaking of femicide, of masculine violence and so on. So, patriarchy is literally reactionary, but also under this feature it is something which continues over time and shapes social relations and institutions, and this is why I call it a “structure.” How is it possible to balance the deconstructive attitudes which you called poststructuralism and a conception of patriarchy as a social power that is continuing to shape our relations?*

Let me say something about my own understanding of poststructuralism. Many people say, “there’s no structure, there’s only iterations, only language... no real.” For me poststructuralism, whether in Derrida’s or Foucault’s terms, always meant something else for political theory, which is that structures are not permanent and enduring and timeless, they iterate, they transform, pieces of them fall away, new pieces are built into them, and for me there’s no greater examples of this than Bolsonaro, Meloni,



Trump, Orban – patriarchal all of them. But these are iterations of patriarchy I do not believe we could have foreseen, even 25 years ago, and these iterations mobilize new dimensions of political life – a disenfranchised working class, the phenomenon of “the migrant” – all kinds of things that threaten the family and threaten the patriarch... that were not the threats, that what you call a “patriarchal structure” built itself from, in 1965. It was not building itself from those elements, so I take poststructuralism to be an appreciation of the languages and the contingent historical formations and the shifting pieces of any social or political landscape that build power back up from embers that sometimes are almost dying out, or that sometimes extinguish certain forms of power and then allow something else to arise. So when somebody just says “patriarchy forever it’s been the same,” that’s just inaccurate. You are not saying that, I know, but when I hear “structure” I hear something that’s alive, that’s molten, that’s transforming, that’s where, as I said, pieces of it are falling off, new pieces of it are being built in. This is not just an intellectual fussiness on my part. If we don’t understand that, we won’t understand the points of vulnerability in “structures” and the point of vulnerability are where we fight.

*I agree on this.*

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*Audience 1: You mention vulnerability... I was wondering what’s the status of the vulnerability there, not just in the understanding of contemporary patriarchy, neoliberal patriarchy somehow, but also, when it comes to legal discourses that produce vulnerability, because you are making the case of identity politics of course, but the question is: is the neoliberal discourse a discourse that produces forms of vulnerability and by producing those modes of vulnerability separates and forbids the opportunities to create alliances, to create a call for social justice, as you were saying? Is it also possible that from a condition of vulnerability, that is shared and that is performed as a site of agency by groups, for instance, there is still a way of building sociality? For instance, feminist movements and trans-feminist movements... isn’t that a way of refusing a certain dictate of how vulnerable they are and reappropriate the condition vulnerability by reformulating it?*

We have a dialectician, which I am not but I appreciate the formulation. I mean, there’s neoliberalism fragmenting, separating and depoliticising us and out of that very experience, we might come together in a new way precisely because we’re so fragmented, depoliticised and made vulnerable that it’s an experience from the bottom as it were, or from an

experience of heightened vulnerability, where we look around and think “wow, the state has abandoned me, capital has abandoned me”...

*Audience 1: Democracy has abandoned me...*

Yes, you feel abandoned by it all and so, “what do I have but others?” and from that political possibility is born. I think that it helps us understand, for example, the robustness of the feminist movement here and in a number of other places – in Latin America the feminist movement has just really been quite extraordinary over the past 10 years, I mean, just amazing – and for me it also, as we were saying earlier, helps explaining why out of what is felt like just a parched landscape that neoliberalism had produced in the United States, *Occupy* could produce such almost instant radicalism among a number of young people, but also what turned out to be what I thought were settled suburbanites, people who kind of gotten used to this lousy way of life and the rest of it. But I’ll tell you what worries me: yes, there is that possibility. However, I’m always looking at the possibilities for democracy, meaning the possibility that we might once again seek to rule ourselves rather than be ruled by markets or ruled by technocrats, let alone autocrats or tyrants. Without a robust language of that possibility, I’m always a little wary of championing solidarity for its own sake. I’m not against it, it’s better than nothing, but what I see in my country, probably more than in the European context, is growing political subcultures of feminist and LGBTQ youth, also often very mobilised by *Black Lives Matter* and by the war against Gaza now, that were also so deeply alienated from politics – and I’m just going to put it that way – that they’ve given up on it. I don’t just mean electoral politics, I mean political mobilisation to gain power as to oppose to, resist and protect. So, one of the things that I worry about in the dialectical analysis that you offered, is that it doesn’t take the measure of what I’ve called in the couple of books on neoliberalism the “disparagement of democratic life” to the point that it’s been delegitimised for everyone, including the left. What I would like to do if I weren’t wasting time being an academic these days is run around with others to these worlds and say “okay, this is great, you’re all together now and we’re eating vegan food and we’re totally into supporting, protecting our LGBTQ communities and everything else. Now, how are we going to get political power? And how are we going to get that political power in a way that also introduces the possibility of democratisation again, not old forms of democracy, but forms that incorporate all the right elements now, so that we’re not always in a crouched position of resistance and protection?”

*Audience 1: I see, but what if then the perspective is that we're dealing with vulnerability of institutions themselves? So, if you're saying that, for instance, it's a system that doesn't get people to vote, that doesn't get people to participate, what if we reach the point where the institutional system itself, and the conditions for political participation themselves, are what's vulnerable in there?*

So, I guess the question is "are they vulnerable to losing any semblance of democracy at all, while enduring as governing institutions?" That's a scary kind of vulnerability to me. Or "are they vulnerable to collapsing?" and I think you're trying to figure out if the latter is the case, but I don't see it. This is where I still detect a dialectical thinker in you, it's like "well, if we pull out completely they would collapse." But what if those institutions – I mean, the European Union is a beautiful example – are perfectly capable of running without our participation, legitimation, endorsement or anything else, because they're in a nice tight embrace with finance and a few other big powers. Even if there's a democratic loss, as we withdraw more and more and more, are they collapsing? I don't think so, but I do need to learn from you why you think that collapse might be a possibility. I opened this door when I said it is important understanding how structures are not enduring and permanent, but constantly engaged in iterations and remakings and redescriptions and sometimes, losing altogether one source of sustenance and seeking for others. I said earlier we need to know that because the points of vulnerability in those structures are what we must exploit and open. So I was looking for that and I do think, to go back to the EU as an example, the so-called "legitimacy deficit" is a point of vulnerability worth exploiting.

*Audience 2: We are surrounded by technocratic systems, but we cannot take control of our thoughts. Under the subjection of individualism and obscurantism of politics, attacks on education are placing democracy, peace and rights at risk.*

Great question. One of the most powerful ways to control human beings in complex societies is to keep them ill-educated. I don't say that in a paranoid fashion, it's almost at the level of observation. If people don't understand the powers, the languages, the problems in which they live, they can't even imagine controlling their own lives, they can't even imagine governing themselves and that leads it to landing in the hands of elites who basically get to do what they want with the uneducated, even as there might be populist outrage against the elites! I'm not proud of most of the things that my country is and has been, it has a terrible set of histories

internally as well as with regard to the rest of the world, but the one thing that was really remarkable about the US in the 20<sup>th</sup> century was its public university system. It was aimed at not just allowing working and middle-class people to get an education to better their individual prospects. In the post-war period it was built out as part of the way to prevent fascism. If you go back and look at the documents, it poured an enormous amount of federal dollars into public universities. It was an explicit response to the experience in the war in Europe of how you could mobilise a people for fascism if they didn't understand anything, from the nature of media and rhetorical discourse to how economy, polity and society work. The idea then of public universities was to give everybody basic citizen capacities, basic citizen literacy in a broad way. So, you would get an education – you know, our weird American university system still has this notion of a “general education” where you get a couple years of science and a couple years of humanities and a couple years of social science, without it being aimed specifically at any particular job. Now that's over. We killed it under neoliberalism, it has been destroyed. One of the first moves neoliberalism made was to privatise the public universities and to make them extremely expensive for individuals, to make individuals pay for them rather than the State and when individuals pay, especially significant amounts, what they want at the end is a good job and their families want it as well. It was a brilliant manoeuvre to make the student into the consumer and the consumer into a person who was investing in themselves in order to have the skills they needed to get a job that would pay off the student loans or make a comfortable life. This shift of university education in an increasingly vocational direction compounds the problem of how to build citizen knowledge for enormously complex globalised forms of power, so that we have the capacity to understand this world rather than simply be thrown about in it.

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