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Wendy Brown: Politics Out of History

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O N E



INTRODUCTION

Politics Out of History

What, other than anarchy or free fall, is harbored by the destabilization of constitutive cultural or political narratives? When fundamental premises of an order begin to erode, or simply begin to be exposed as fundamental premises, what reactive political formations emerge—and what anxieties, tensions, or binds do they carry? These studies examine political theoretical practices in an era of profound political disorientation. They are concerned with how we navigate within the tattered narratives of modernity, and especially of liberalism, in our time. Working from the presumption that certain crucial collective stories in modernity have been disturbed or undermined in recent decades, they presume as well that such stories remain those by which we live, even in their broken and less-than-legitimate-or-legitimizing form.

I do not argue that the constitutive narratives of modernity are behind us, nor that they have been superseded by other narratives. Rather, in casting certain critical features of modern regimes as troubled yet persistent, I suggest that their troubled condition has significant political implications for contemporary practices of political justice. For example, while many have lost confidence in a historiography bound to a notion of progress or to any other purpose, we have coined no political substitute for progressive understandings of where we have come from and where we are going. Similarly, while both sovereignty and right have suffered severe erosions of their naturalistic epistemological and ontological bases in modernity, we have not replaced them as sources of political agency and sites of justice claims. Personal conviction and political truth have lost their moorings in firm and level epistemological ground, but we have not jettisoned them as sources of

political motivation or as sites of collective fealty. So we have ceased to believe in many of the constitutive premises undergirding modern personhood, statehood, and constitutions, yet we continue to operate politically as if these premises still held, and as if the political-cultural narratives based on them were intact. Our attachment to these fundamental modernist precepts—progress, right, sovereignty, free will, moral truth, reason—would seem to resemble the epistemological structure of the fetish as Freud described it: “I know, but still . . .”¹ What happens when the beliefs that bind a political order become fetishes?

From each of the narratives, considered more fully below, that have grown unstable in our time, certain key political signifiers emerge that provide the terms through which the chapters of this book are organized: morality (as the basis for political values and judgments), desire (as potentially emancipatory in its aim), power (as logical in its organization and mechanics), conviction (as the basis for knowledge and political action), and progress (as the basis for political futurity). My purpose with these terms is not simply to counsel their rejection or replacement; rather the aim is to develop a critical understanding of their binding function in a certain political and epistemological story, of how this function has been disrupted as the story itself begins to stutter and fragment, and of what kinds of troubling political formation such a disruption provokes.

However, this undertaking is not only retrospective and critical: these studies also consider what political and intellectual possibilities might be generated from our current predicament. When a disintegrating political or cultural narrative seems irreplaceable, panicked and reactionary clutching is inevitable; when this perceived irreplaceability refers to a narrative or formation actually lost, melancholy sets in. So these analyses seek to attenuate reactionary and melancholic responses by considering possible alternatives to what has been destabilized: I ask how we might conceive and chart power in terms other than logic, develop historical political consciousness in terms other than progress, articulate our political investments without notions of teleology and naturalized desire, and affirm political judgment in terms that depart from moralism and conviction.² These speculations do not, of course, result in comprehensive or stable substitutes for

their predecessors. Rather, they mark partial and provisional orientations for a different inhabitation of the political world; they limn a different genre of political consciousness and political purpose. And their wellspring is not simply redress of incoherence; rather, they issue from an appreciation of the need for reprieve from a low-lying despair in late modern life, a despair about the very capacity to grasp our condition and craft our future.

Two seemingly opposite effects attend the emancipation of history (and the present) from a progressive narrative and the dispossession of political principles and truths from solid epistemological and ontological grounds. On the one hand, there is certain to be a wash of insecurity, anxiety, and hopelessness across a political landscape formerly kept dry by the floodgates of foundationalism and metaphysics. On the other hand, out of the breakup of this seamless historiography and ground of settled principles, new political and epistemological possibilities emerge. As the past becomes less easily reduced to a single set of meanings and effects, as the present is forced to orient itself amid *so much* history and *so many* histories, history itself emerges as both weightier and less deterministic than ever before. Thus, even as the future may now appear more uncertain, less predictable, and perhaps even less promising than one figured by the terms of modernism, these same features suggest in the present a porousness and uncharted potential that can lead to futures outside the lines of modernist presumptions. This book lives in those paradoxes—simultaneously taking the measure of our anxieties about what we have lost and kindling possibility from what those losses may release us to imagine.

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The stories constitutive of modernity are many, complex, and vary significantly by time and place; those that more narrowly undergird the doctrines and practices of liberalism are no tidier. But a few stories crucial to both, generating both the building blocks of the political and its temporality, may be capturable in a few broad brush strokes.

Teleological and Progressive History. The conviction that history has reason, purpose, and direction is fundamental to modernity. This be-

lief has a temporal dimension: modernity itself is imagined to have emerged from a more primitive, religious, caste- and kin-bound, inegalitarian, unemancipated, bloody, unenlightened, and stateless time. And it has a corresponding geographic and demographic dimension: Europe is presumed to be at the heart of this emergence, with other parts of the globe (to various degrees) lagging behind. Modernity is incoherent without both of these dimensions, as is liberalism, the signal political formation that operationalizes each dimension as a foundational political truth.

But modernity is not only premised on the notion of emergence *from* darker times and places, it is also structured *within* by a notion of continual progress. A fundamental Enlightenment precept, the thesis that humanity is making steady, if uneven and ambivalent, progress toward greater freedom, equality, prosperity, rationality, or peace emerged in a variety of explicit formulations in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. For Hegel, the world was growing ever more rational; for Kant, more peaceful; for Paine, more true to principles of natural right; for Tocqueville, more egalitarian; for Mill, more free and reasonable; and for Marx, perhaps, all of the above.³ Today, however, it is a rare thinker, political leader, or ordinary citizen who straightforwardly invokes the premise of progress. In the Euro-Atlantic world, intellectuals of both Right and Left proclaim the “end of history” or an era of “posthistoire.” And even as much contemporary political rhetoric in America crows over the benefits of technological advances and the country’s growing wealth, it also refers repeatedly to ground lost—economically, morally, and socially—and harks back to a Golden Age in the past. “Family values” talk from all parties conjures an imagined past of happy, moral, and intact families, free from the corruptions of popular culture, libidinal selfishness, illegitimate children, and working mothers. Similarly, welfare state liberals treat growing disparities of wealth in America, and the retreat from half a century’s commitments to state amelioration of poverty, as the abandonment of principles once taken as untouchable and as the very signature of progress. Even the iconoclastic left critic Gore Vidal locates the “golden age” of America in the years 1945 to 1950 (approximately the same period invoked by Bob Dole as the last time that America was wrapped in rich moral fabric).⁴ In that slim postwar half

decade, Vidal argues, intellectual life expanded, the arts flourished, the economy boomed, and the promise of an accomplished and prosperous polity seemed realized. Then came the Korean War, Harry Truman's national security state and its accompanying debt, McCarthyism, and the general unraveling of American promise, an unraveling whose trajectory still traces the course of our lives today.⁵

What makes Vidal's mytho-historical account signal for our time is the figuring of corruption and decline of a once-great polity. That theme, of course, is not new: it framed Thucydides' telling of the Peloponnesian Wars, and Machiavelli's account of the demise of ancient Rome and decline of *quattrocento* republican Florence. But this pre-modern narrative of history's movement, theorized explicitly as cyclical by Aristotle and Vico, gave way in modernity to a forthrightly *progressive* story, one promising steady improvement in the human condition. Modernity itself is premised on the imagined breaking of medieval fetters on everything from individual happiness to knowledge to freedom to national wealth. For the most part, only modernity's critics (who are also critics of liberalism)—Burke, Rousseau, Nietzsche—have questioned or challenged its forward movement. That intellectuals and politicians are now gazing backward to glimpse better times suggests an important destabilization of the presumption of progress and of the claims and hopes that issue from such a presumption.

It is not only liberal democracies that appear to have lost the thread of progress in history. In postcommunist states, the "triumph of liberalism" heralded by Western pundits in 1989 was short-lived; within eighteen months, intense civil and constitutional conflicts revealed that neither *liberalism* nor *triumph* appropriately named what was unfolding, that there could be no simple resumption of a modernizing narrative temporarily interrupted by fascism, post-World War II Balkanization, and forty-three years of state communism. This collapse of expectations resulted not only from the wars in the former Yugoslavia and in Chechnya, not only from the rise of racism, ethnic conflict, and anti-Semitism across Europe in the wake of 1989. It resulted as well from the obvious impossibility of postcommunist states' participating in the wealth enjoyed by First World nations, from intensely corrupt political formations such as the Mafeeya in Russia, from the

devastating consequences for the majority of the population (and especially women) of dismantling the welfare state institutions and employment guarantees of the communist period, and from the limits of “liberalization” or “democratization” in redressing any of these developments.

Like its counterparts felt by politicians and the public at large, contemporary academic doubt about the modernist narrative of progress issues from a variety of points on the political spectrum. While some hold that history’s long march has come to an end as liberalism has triumphed around the globe, others argue that this march was always a fiction, and still others insist that something called “postmodernism” heralded the end of progress, totality, and coherence even if history had unfolded progressively up until that point.⁶ The tension among these views leads to a question about the nature of the relation between an erosion of the progress narrative in life and in thought. Certainly the relation is not straightforwardly causal, in either direction, but neither is it wholly contingent. Yet it is clear at the very least that recent changes in the character of world history—including all that travels under the rubric of globalization, the emergence of significant nonstate national and international actors, the end of a bipolar international order, and the ambiguous development of identity-based political formations—have catalyzed popular and intellectual historical consciousness. One could also say this: the common instigators of the intellectual and political challenges to progress are certain concrete historical phenomena that include, *inter alia*, the contemporary character of capitalism and the contemporary character of liberalism. Various recent studies in political economy suggest that capitalism in the last quarter of the twentieth century, while displaying certain continuities with earlier forms (e.g., the drive for profit and the ceaseless spawning of new commodities and social effects), nonetheless has taken a qualitatively different turn. Included in the shift from “organized” to “disorganized” capitalism are a national deconcentration of capital and a dispersal rather than concentration of production; a decline in the importance of cartels, unions, and collective bargaining; a growing separation of banks from industry; a decline in the absolute and relative size of the working class (defined as manual workers in manufacturing and extraction); a decline in average plant size; a de-

cline in the importance of individual wealth-holders; and a decline in industrial cities and industry-centered wealth.⁷ None of this suggests the diminished dominance of capital; to the contrary, the phenomenon loosely termed “globalization” signifies the ubiquity of capitalist social relations across the globe and the penetration of capital into nearly every crevice of every culture. But the steady geographic and demographic concentrations of wealth, capital, finance, and production that have characterized capitalism for the past two hundred years appear to have given way to more fragmented, dispersed, intricate, transient, and even somewhat ephemeral formations. Thus, Marx’s most important condition for the development of the contradiction that would finally break capitalism—relations of production that would “simplify class antagonisms . . . [such that] society as a whole is more and more splitting up into two great hostile camps, into two great classes directly facing each other”⁸—now seems as empirically remote as it is metaphysically alien.

Liberalism has undergone a parallel transformation, from a political order in which the universal rights of man were the unquestioned premise of social justice and social change to one in which both the standing of universalism and the relationship of rights to freedom have been widely challenged. How the disruption of the status of the universal in liberalism undermines the progress narrative is captured in a general questioning (if not outright rejection) of assimilationist and integrationist formulations of social change and the adoption of identity-based justice claims and local nationalisms.⁹ Moreover, perceived stratifications and exclusions in liberal orders along lines of race, class, gender, and sexuality not only challenge egalitarian civil and political enfranchisement as the primary criteria of justice; they also expose the formal equality promised by liberalism as severely compromised by the character of a (white, bourgeois, male, heterosexual) hegemonic subject. An understanding of liberal universalism as not simply containing a history of excluded others but as having a specific normative content—heterosexual and patriarchal families, capital, and “property in whiteness”—erodes the credibility of its classic story of progressively widening its scope of freedom and equality, extending the goods of enfranchisement and abstract personhood to more and more of the world’s populations. In short, liberalism’s sharp encounter in

recent decades with its constitutive outside and constitutive others disturbs its universalist premises and promises—and disturbs as well the story of emancipatory and egalitarian progress on which much of liberalism’s legitimacy is pinned.

The Emergence of the Sovereign Subject and Rights-Based Freedom. The fiction of the autonomous, willing, reasoning, rights-bearing subject convened by modernity is articulated in liberal democratic constitutions and a host of other liberal institutions. Liberalism presumes sovereign individuals and states, both as units of analysis and as sites of agency. Individuals are cast as sovereign insofar as they devise their own aims and direct and are accountable for their actions. The sovereign state, similarly, is one presumed capable of managing its collective internal affairs and asserting its interests in the external world; these capacities are what justify the state technically and legitimize it politically in an order in which “the people” are said to rule.

Both state and individual sovereignty require fixed boundaries, clearly identifiable interests and identities, and power conceived as generated and directed from within the entity itself. In late modernity, none of these requirements is met easily, given a globalized economic order, unprecedented migrations of peoples across national borders, and relatively new forms of social power that increasingly undermine the notion of the self-made and self-directed individual or state subject. As the global economy grows ever more complex and integrated, both the state and the individual are increasingly frustrated in their sovereign intentions by forces beyond their control and often beyond their comprehension as well.¹⁰ Faced with a plethora of transnational economic actors, forces, and movements, in the late twentieth century the idea of a unified, pursuable national economic interest became largely comic, despite the fact (and vastly complicating the fact) that national economies remain politically and economically significant. And migrations of peoples have reached such proportions that the strenuous legal and political efforts to distinguish, for example, “true Americans” or “native Hawaiians” from alien others can only be read as a symptom of this disintegration of sovereignty, this erosion of inside-outside boundaries around a state or people presumed cohesive, unified, and sovereign.¹¹

Sovereignty is especially troubled by ever more intricate yet disseminated forms of social power—what Michel Foucault identified as the proliferation of disciplinary and regulatory discourses in our time. Amid the variety and complexity of speech and institutional practices that not only position but form us, the self-made, autonomously willing, sovereign subject all but vanishes. How is it possible to sustain the conviction that we devise and pursue our own ends when we are so patently the effects of such powers? How, too, does the figure of a unified, coherent, and agentic state appear severely compromised by the distinctive military, counterintelligence, bureaucratic, welfare, and market forces that assault it? How is this figure of the state even undone by the historically unparalleled density and relative autonomy of what is often regarded as *the* state discourse, the law?

Within liberal discourse, the usual alternative to a belief in sovereign subjects is a systems framework in which power is conceived as operating according to certain logics and laws that produce and locate subjects, whether they be states or individuals. There are many versions of this narrative: Marxist, Parsonian, and Habermasian theory, international balance of power theory, psychoanalysis, and so on. However, like the sovereign models, system-based formulations of power, which presume lawlike behaviors and analytic totality, have come under attack on numerous fronts. Foucaultian genealogies, philosophical antifoundationalists, theories of post-Fordist capitalism, and recent challenges to both orthodox international relations theory and psychoanalysis—each contests the fiction of the totality and the axiomatic laws of movement on which both the principles and the particular content of such systems are premised.

When sovereignty is eroded, can the rights rooted in the presupposition of sovereign entities—ranging from subjectivity to statehood—remain intact? What stable, bounded source confers them? What stable, bounded, self-identical subject employs them? What independent, emancipatory force can they continue to claim? From the French Revolution onward, the liberty promised by liberal doctrine has essentially been defined through rights, and the expansion of the quantity and purview of rights is equated with the expansion of freedom. The presumably universal reach of rights in liberal constitutional orders has also implied historically that a quantitative increase in rights generates

a quantitative increase in equality. These equations have been disrupted from at least three directions. First, the proliferation of rights in liberal democracies in the second half of the twentieth century has been figured by many, across the political spectrum, as a development less of freedom than of an increasingly administered society—a civil society of bureaucratic agencies and a civic currency of proceduralism and litigiousness. Second, the anti-statist, libertarian Right has, of late, claimed for itself the freedom-as-rights discourse, as have those reacting against what they claim to be special rights or protections afforded to disenfranchised minorities. Both kinds of claims make it extremely difficult for liberals and leftists to argue that rights unequivocally pave the road to enhanced freedom and egalitarianism. Third, liberals have developed an increasing appreciation of an aspect of rights that was formerly considered primarily by Marxist legal scholars: the acontextual formalism of rights means that rights, though universally distributed, often yield *greater* inequalities in societies in which individuals are unequally situated. In some cases they are as likely to entrench existing powers as to redistribute power.¹² Thus, not only the ontological and epistemological basis of rights but also their concrete function in promoting freedom and equality has been significantly challenged in the last quarter century.

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The troubling of narratives of progress, sovereignty, and freedom and equality secured by rights disturbs the constitutive premises of liberalism from within. But there has also been a disturbance in liberalism's constitutive outside, in the external terms that define and legitimate it. For most of the twentieth century, liberal legitimacy has been secured not only by various elements of social contract discourse but also by differentiation from the imagined opposites to liberalism. It has taken its identity in relation to the naturalized inequalities of feudalism at its historical rear, the intolerable repressions of state communism at its twentieth-century side, and even the utopian dream of a perfected liberal order ahead. In recent decades, however, the remnants of feudal order in the present have shown through more clearly: individual (and hence popular) sovereignty turns out to be a heady

conceit; the contemporary state appears less and less autonomous of the market it claimed to set free; and perhaps most important, the ostensible universality of the state and of liberal civic-political culture has been exposed not only as bourgeois but as relentlessly raced, gendered, and sexed—as shot through with stratifying and subject-producing social powers. This exposure makes even liberalism’s promise of abstract personhood problematic, insofar as the aim of treating individuals in abstraction from their social attributes appears both ambiguous with regard to the powers constitutive of subordination and impossible to achieve. There is thus a blurring of the radical break that liberalism heralded between itself and feudalism, putatively achieved in the former’s abolition of ideologically naturalized stratifications among ideologically naturalized social groups.

Communism’s global collapse in the late 1980s eliminated another crucial touchstone for liberalism’s identity, literally removing the opposition against which contemporary liberal freedom could be figured. But in a second, more subtle way during the past quarter century, liberalism lost its moorings in anticommunism. Many of the least defensible elements of twentieth-century communist states, leaving aside overt and routinized political repression, have lately made their appearance in ours: overgrown state size, power, and reach; groaning apparatuses of administration intermixed with a labyrinthine legal machinery; expensive and extensive welfare systems that routinely fail their client populations; inefficient and uncontrolled economies; lack of felt sovereign individuality; and chronic urban housing shortages. I do not mean to deny the important differences between market and state economies, nor between one-party rule and constitutional democracies. But the stark *opposition* between communism and liberalism has been attenuated in recent years, an attenuation whose causes are not limited to the recent collapse of communist regimes.

What is the effect on liberalism of these transformations in its historical and global location and historical self-understanding? What happens to liberalism’s organizing terms and legitimacy when its boundary terms change—when its constitutive past and future, as well as its constitutive others, lose their definitive difference from liberalism’s present and identity? What is (nineteenth-century) liberal justice without a narrative of progress that situates it between an inegalitarian and

unemancipated ancien régime and the fulfilled promise of universal personhood and rights-based freedom and equality? What is (twentieth-century) liberal democracy without communism as its dark opposite? What is liberalism out of these histories, indeed out of history as we have known it, which is to say, out of a history marked by the periodicity of this particular past–present–future and by the temporality of progressivism?

This predicament is too recent and our acquaintance with it too new for thoroughgoing answers to such questions. Here, *Politics Out of History* works primarily in a diagnostic vein. If the legitimacy of liberal democracy depends on certain narratives and foundational presuppositions, including progress, rights, and sovereignty, what happens when these narratives and assumptions are challenged, or indeed simply exposed in their legitimating function? What kinds of political cultures are produced by this destabilization of founding narratives and signal terms? What kinds of politics do these narratives produce in their destabilized or broken form? How does their disintegration affect left and liberal political aims, possibilities, sentiments, and discourse? How do we live in these broken narratives, when nothing has taken their place? And how do we conjure an emancipatory future within a liberalism out of history? If the fabric of (universal) justice premised on the (universal) man of the liberal dream is in tatters, on what do we pin our hopes for a more just society? And without the belief in progressive history carrying liberalism toward whatever this reformulated aim might be, what is the engine of historical movement that would realize these hopes?

While vital and vibrant progressive political challenges to current practices of inequality or unfreedom *can* be built on the basis of partial rather than totalizing critiques and political aims, on the basis of provisional and strategic rather than millenarian and teleological political thinking, we currently live in the shadow and sometimes paralyzing disorientation of the historical and metaphysical losses thus far identified. Consequently, despite ubiquitous contemporary critiques and qualms about rights-based justice, most legal theorists and political activists cling to rights advocacy, less engaging with or refuting than simply refusing these challenges to their work. Similarly, most radical

and reformist actors remain wedded to progress, even when its credibility is in question, because they imagine all political hope to be invested in a progressive narrative. “Without a notion of progress,” my students invariably lament, “what is the point of working for a better world?” As the discussions below of Walter Benjamin, Michel Foucault, and Jacques Derrida will suggest, the equation of progress with political optimism, as well as the equation of a critique of progress with nihilism or despair, may be quite mistaken. Benjamin, in particular, works to sever a redemptive politics from progress, and Derrida’s Benjaminian streak moves him to seek political possibility in an order of space and time that is enchanted by spirits other than those of meta-history in general and progress in particular. Indeed, Benjamin and Derrida even suggest that attachment to progress results in a certain political conservatism (an identification with the historical victors who represent progress) and a certain failure to “break” with a current of history that does not contain all political possibility.

But I am getting ahead of my (nonprogressive) story about the condition and possibilities of our political time. Here is a more methodical précis of what follows. In chapter 2, “Moralism as Anti-Politics,” I probe one particularly acute symptom of our current predicament: the righteous moralism in so much contemporary political discourse, which I render as a symptom of the political disorientation and political impotence resulting from the troubled narratives identified above. The chapter also examines the anti-intellectualism that political moralism produces, arguing for a mutually vitalizing distinction between political and intellectual life. It is in this spirit of shamelessness about intellectual inquiry shaped by political concerns but unmoored from an obligation to specific political entailments that the remainder of the book proceeds. Chapter 3, “The Desire to Be Punished,” considers, through a reading of Freud’s theory of masochism, the problem of political desires in subjects whose identity is rooted in social injury, and who can no longer count on the magic of progress to redeem that injury. It queries how the desire for freedom, equality, and political participation can be shaped in subjects who are not only produced through subordination, suffering, and exclusion but are also politically identified with that production and, absent a faith in progress,

cannot imagine release from that identity. Chapter 4, “Power without Logic without Marx,” considers the problem of conceiving social and political power in terms other than sovereignty or systems. Through a close reading of selected works by Marx, this chapter asks what happens when the logics of scientism, dialectics, and laws of history are shed from Marx’s theorization of power, as it considers how power in a postfoundational materialist modality might be conceived without reliance on those logics. It also explores how a reconceptualization of temporal logics (in the form of a critique of progress) inevitably entails a reconceptualization of spatial ones (in the form of a critique of logical entailment and causality). This link is evident in Foucault’s overt effort to think about power in spatial rather than temporal terms, an effort that results in a focus on power in disciplinary and regulatory modalities; but it can be seen as well in the intertwining of spatial and temporal logics of power in Marx himself.

Chapter 5, “Politics without Banisters: Genealogical Politics in Nietzsche and Foucault,” makes use of the two philosophers to develop a genealogical alternative to progressive and teleological historiography as it is now embedded in contemporary democratic politics. Genealogy is treated not merely as a method of historical inquiry and political analysis, but as an intellectual orientation potentially generative of new political directions. Chapter 6, “Democracy against Itself,” begins by examining the fraught relation between theory and democracy and then revisits Nietzsche’s thought to consider the possibility of deploying his severe critique of democracy, and of politics generally, to enrich democratic practices. In considering what the singular relationship between critical theory and a democratic political form might be, this chapter speculates about strategies for working against the moralizing and anti-intellectual tendencies in contemporary democracies that are identified in the second chapter. Chapter 7, “Specters and Angels,” attempts to craft a fruitful form of historical-political consciousness from the post-Marxist critiques of progress advanced by Walter Benjamin and Jacques Derrida. It centers on the problem of conceiving futurity at “the end of history,” that is, in the wake of a progressive understanding of modernity.

None of these studies offers a full-fledged replacement for the waning terms and narratives of modernity. Rather, each examines a few

strands of the condition that this waning has produced, attempting to open thought and discern possibility where anxiety, paralysis, and reaction too often dwell. Each avows the mourning as well as the confusion that conditions our work as we attempt to mine potential from the losses of our time. Neither purely despairing nor purely hopeful, each study bears the mixture of heaviness and hope carried in a history that, in the wake of metaphysics and metanarratives, may finally become our own.