



States of Injury: Power and Freedom in Late Modernity

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Whether in characterizing Catharine MacKinnon's theory of gender as itself pornographic or in identifying liberalism as unable to make good on its promises, Wendy Brown pursues a central question: how does a sense of woundedness become the basis for a sense of identity? Brown argues that efforts to outlaw hate speech and pornography powerfully legitimize the state: such apparently well-intentioned attempts harm victims further by portraying them as so helpless as to be in continuing need of governmental protection. "Whether one is dealing with the state, the Mafia, parents, pimps, police, or husbands," writes Brown, "the heavy price of institutionalized protection is always a measure of dependence and agreement to abide by the protector's rules." True democracy, she insists, requires sharing power, not regulation by it; freedom, not protection. Refusing any facile identification with one political position or another, Brown applies her argument to a panoply of topics, from the basis of litigiousness in political life to the appearance on the academic Left of themes of revenge and a thwarted will to power. These and other provocations in contemporary political thought and political life provide an occasion for rethinking the value of several of the last two centuries' most compelling theoretical critiques of modern political life, including the positions of Nietzsche, Marx, Weber, and Foucault.

States of Injury: Power and Freedom in Late Modernity Details

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Katherine says

I always raise an eyebrow to people who say, "This book changed my life" -- especially about political theory!! -- but this book truly did. This is probably the first book I read where I really got into the argument, the way it was structured, the words and metaphors used to describe it. I am always a captive reader of Brown, and although I am usually not like this (i.e., acolyte), I eagerly await everything Brown publishes. Aside from the sheer quality and power of her arguments, she is a very thoughtful and clever (and many times, witty) writer as well. She is especially sharp in questioning the law's reach into our lives, our desire for equality over and against what she sees as a stifled desire for freedom (see Catharine MacKinnon), and in her creative descriptions of identity-based fights for rights. I wish I had it with me so I could re-read it right now.

Alexander says

No one does biting, lefty political critique quite like Wendy Brown. With an impeccable critical pedigree (i.e. Marx, Foucault, Weber, feminist political theory) and a dazzling analytic ability to match, these essays are simply some of the finest pieces of modern political theory around. Questioning, in particular, the way in which freedom has increasingly been framed in terms of both rights and the state (as in: "to be free is to have the right to X", or, "The role of the state is to guarantee my freedom by means of..."), Brown's table-turning operation works to ask if these very 'instruments of freedom' are not themselves constitutive of an 'unfreedom' all the more insidious on account of their freedom affirming rhetoric. Taking seriously the Foucaultian insight into the way in which regulatory apparatuses do not merely 'regulate' but equally *produce* the very subjects they bear upon, Brown explores the ways in which legalist conceptions of freedom also end up engendering the very 'wounded' subjects they are designed to protect.

Targeted in particular are liberal conceptions of the state, which, by treating it as a kind of neutral arbiter or protector of already-existing interests, ends up not only 'naturalizing' very particular constellations of societal power (in contrast to liberal pretensions to impartiality), but also 'depoliticizes' them too: that is, places them 'out of running' to be contested in a political way at all. It's this double move - the massive exercise of power on the one hand and its depoliticization on the other - that is everywhere tracked by Brown in her marvellously cutting assessments of the thinkers and discourses here engaged with. Attendant too, to the gendered dimension of all political theorizing, there's a kind of magic in watching Brown more or less run through - as she does in one of the chapters here - almost every major liberal concept (equality, autonomy, liberty, etc) in order to expose them for the gender-saturated ideas that they are. In the wake of reading Brown, it'd simply be impossible to remain blind to the operations of either power or gender at work in political theory.

Thus while it's true that many of the essays here are 'critical' in the negative, 'undoing' sense of the term (Brown herself admits that her essays "develop no political or even theoretical program"), the very lenses through which Brown approaches her subjects are themselves instructive. Indeed, in the last analysis, it's the impulse to a kind of (radical?) democratic vision that properly drives the essays collected herein, each of which ultimately serves as a bulwark against political complacency - any (institutional) 'guarantee' of freedom is more than likely exactly the sort of thing that would undermine it. A final thing to note is Brown's unapologetically High-Theory infused style: in bringing the work of critical theory into political philosophy, Brown holds nothing back by way of either vocabulary and speed - her writing pops and zags with the

roughness of both expediency and mastery, and while it's possible to find this daunting, to me - and to anyone who has ever wondered how 'Theory' can be made politically relevant - this is simply a work of electrifying reading.

Vicky "phenkos" says

Read chapter 4, a critique of Catharine MacKinnon's *Toward a Feminist Theory of the State*. I'm inclined to side with Brown on this on account of the victimisation of women that marks MacKinnon's thought. The chapter also includes an interesting critique of Marx, premised on Baudrillard. In a nutshell, Brown argues that MacKinnon adopts the more problematic aspects of Marx's thought and leaves out the more promising ones. Defo tbc!

Cara G says

This took me ages because I had this rule that I wasn't allowed to read political theory before bed but that's actually when I get most reading done so I gave up. I really enjoyed this book. I love her writing and the way she does theory is so bloody good.

Quin Rich says

Good, but clearly dated. Oddly, the best/most compelling essays were not those for which this book is most famous (eg "Wounded Attachments), which I found to be overly abstract and lacking contemporary relevance, but rather those where Brown most directly engages in explicitly feminist theorizing (eg "The Mirror of Pornography" and "Finding the Man in the State").

As an aside, it's interesting, having now read this book, to note how it circulates in current debates over trigger warnings, the neoliberal university, and related topics. Those who invoke it don't really seem to be engaging with the substance or nuance of Brown's original arguments, but are instead invoking a quasi-libertarian view of politics, the state, and the subject.

Sara Salem says

One of the most interesting and stimulating books I've read recently. So much to think about!

Leonardo says

...para el marxismo de lo que se trata es precisamente de que en la propia realidad hay una ruptura estructuralmente necesaria de la distinción: no solo el poder político es en última instancia un poder (un monopolio del poder) para aplicar la violencia, sino que él mismo está basado en la violencia (en la amenaza de la violencia). Hay que vincular este punto débil a la omisión que hace Arendt de la economía, de la esfera de la producción, de la política propiamente dicha: lo que pasa por alto es la perspectiva clave de Marx sobre

cómo la lucha política es un espectáculo, para poder ser descifrado, tiene que ser referido a la esfera de la economía. Citando a Wendy Brown: «Si el marxismo tenía algún valor analítico para la teoría política, estaba en la insistencia en que el problema de la libertad se hallaba contenido en las relaciones sociales implícitamente declaradas “apolíticas” –es decir, naturalizadas– en el discurso liberal» (Pág.14).

Viviendo en el Final de los Tiempos Pág.398-399

Karli says

Wendy Brown brilliantly upends the ways in which we typically think of freedom and political identity. With a keen eye to the ways in which dominant structures have indoctrinated the discourse of freedom and political rights, Brown asks us to rethink our political goals. The chapter which stuck with me most is "Wounded Attachments," in which Brown questions the white middle-class heteronormative referent for sameness and normalization, and pushes us to change our language from "I am" to "I want this for us."

Laura says

Yay!!!! I am FINALLY finished reading this book. This was probably one of the most painful things I have ever had to read. The language made it very difficult to understand. Everyone once in a while i would start to understand what was going on, and I was able to find some real gems, but boy did I have to work for it. I wouldn't recommend this to the faint of heart or those with a limited vocabulary.

Oren Whightsel says

this is an amazing book...her chapter "wounded attachments" is mind boggling and a must for anyone interested in political theory and identity politics.

Peter N. says

I'm so happy to have come across this book! Finally, a feminist post-Marxist/Foucauldian critique of the state and of state-oriented activism that points out something which should be obvious but is always sidestepped in just about all leftist theory, namely - wait for it! - *the state is an apparatus of domination*. It doesn't just represent some "interests" to the exclusion of others, as though it would cease to dominate if it only started including more interests, because it is fundamentally premised on that exclusion. She offers a stunning series of meditations on the state-centredness of a number of contemporary feminist theorists (particularly Catherine MacKinnon, but also Patricia Williams and Nancy Hartsock), and the ways that their theories work to supplant male domination with "protection" and interference from the state, the very institution which has been - historically and discursively - essential to the development of patriarchy in late modernity. Brown argues instead for reinvigorating desires for radical freedom, freedom disentangled from its masculinist liberal connotations of "freedom against" the will of others (other male individuals) or "freedom from" social constraints (the family, reproductive obligations, sexual availability). But this isn't a simplistic anarcho-purist rejection of all "reformist politics" - she just wants to move from efforts to utilise state power to protect socially-subordinated groups, which only end up producing subjects that fall in line

with state disciplinary regimes of subordination, to a politics of manipulating and undermining state power, sometimes accepting its concessions for strategic purposes, as part of a radically democratic project of building the future together. It's intricately argued, clearly written, and packs dynamite on every page - even the footnotes. Solid gold.

Jay Z says

This is the first book on my goodreads page that I can't even rate because I HAVE NO FUCKING IDEA WHAT IT ENDED UP BEING ABOUT. Which is a tragedy because I looked forward to reading it for months and the topic is so up my alley. *Sniffle*

Thomas says

Most interesting thought from this rather dated book now -- that forms of political resistance end up reifying the very structures and identities they oppose.

Emma says

so incredibly satisfying

Andrew Nolan says

I wish I had given this a first reading ten years ago. Immensely detailed analysis of political identities and notions of freedom. Quite breath taking and will require multiple reads for me to even get half of what Brown is driving at.
