THE ART OF THE POSSIBLE

Patchen Markell

University of Chicago

(forthcoming in Political Theory)


1.

“Politics,” Bismarck said, is the “art of the possible.”1 Although the phrase may suggest a pragmatic acquiescence to circumstance, it takes on a more radical cast in the light of these thoughtful, engaging new books. For Wendy Brown and Jane Bennett, “possibility” is less a constraint than a rich field of prospects that opens up before us, if we know where to look. Brown looks for possibility in the vertiginousness of late modernity. She begins with a familiar refrain—our “constitutive narratives” are breaking down (3)—but she neither despairs at nor celebrates this development. Instead, resisting
counterproductive retreats into defensive righteousness, she works to convert the experience of “profound political disorientation” into a sober hopefulness about, and exploration of, the “uncharted potential” of the present (3, 5). Bennett looks for possibility in the inspiring but uncanny experience she calls “enchantment.” Questioning the conventional characterization of modernity as an era devoid of wonders, she argues that enchantment persists whenever we are “struck and shaken by the extraordinary that lives amid the familiar and the everyday” (4), from intransigent parrots to animate khakis. Such moments of enchantment teach us that the world is shot through with surprise, and the energy these moments generate can help motivate ethical engagement with that world and its possibilities.

These books have much in common. Brown and Bennett are both concerned with the question of how to orient and motivate action in a world ungoverned by divine providence or its secular successors. Both pursue this question in part through critical engagements with overlapping rosters of other theorists, including (for Brown) Freud, Nietzsche, Marx, Foucault, Derrida, and Benjamin, and (for Bennett) Epicurus, Kant, Deleuze, Schiller, Foucault, Flathman, Marx, Thoreau, Weber, Horkheimer and Adorno, Kafka, Critchley, Blumenberg, and White. And—the temptation to position Brown as a theorist of disenchantment notwithstanding—both decisively deny that a world without a telos must also be dead or abyssal. Yet in other respects these are strikingly different books. This is partly a matter of style. Politics Out of History, like the Klee watercolor on its cover, sharpens its position via abstraction; The Enchantment of Modern Life, like the Magritte oil on its cover, achieves its effects in part through the provocative juxtaposition of particulars. But it is also a matter of substance. At stake is the question
of how to make theory relevant to political life without subordinating politics, conceived as action in a field of possibilities, to the determination of authoritative philosophical prescriptions.

2. 

*Politics Out of History* begins with two diagnostic chapters, “Moralism as Anti-Politics” and “The Desire to be Punished,” which revisit a key argument from Brown’s 1995 *States of Injury*. There, Brown used Nietzsche’s account of *ressentiment* to understand the limits of those forms of contemporary politics that make suffering into an object of identification, abandoning the pursuit of political freedom in favor of the reactive pleasures of blame, revaluation, and revenge. Here, Brown offers a subtly different diagnosis of “moralism”—meaning, roughly, punitive righteousness—in part via a difficult but compelling engagement with Freud’s “A Child Is Being Beaten.” (While the Freud chapter struck me on a first reading as somewhat disconnected from the rest of the book, I subsequently came to think of it as one of the keys to Brown’s argument.) For Nietzsche, moralism arises out of the experience of suffering under conditions of impotence, which foreclose the possibility of an immediate, active response to one’s injury. On Brown’s Freudian account, by contrast, moralism is animated by the thwarting of a certain kind of *love*—the love of those ideas, movements, or institutions, from Western liberal democracy to Marxian visions of the emancipatory trajectory of history, around which many of our deepest social and political aspirations have been organized. When such love is rendered “illicit” by some crisis in our constitutive narratives (52), the loss of these animating investments can precipitate a retreat into a
“relatively closed economy of guilt and punishment,” in which “freedom, as a wish or practice, is nowhere to be found” (61).

This turn to the notion of “love” constitutes an important transformation in Brown’s already justly influential critique of contemporary political life. This move lets Brown acknowledge that the political movements she criticizes are not merely reactive but also affirmative, even if political circumstances render their objects of aspiration problematic. More importantly, by detaching moralism from any necessary connection to socially imposed impotence or suffering, this turn to love also lets Brown broaden her target beyond left identity politics to include many other sorts of political moralism, including those forms of opposition to left identity politics that hold it responsible for the loss of a “universal progressive political aim,” as well as those critiques of poststructuralist theory that accuse it of failing to tell us what to do (29). Dominant loves and ideals can be thwarted too.

But Brown’s turn to love also provokes questions. In what sense, for instance, are the sorts of love that concern Brown “illicit” or “prohibited”? It often seems that for Brown, what makes certain political desires problematic is that they aim at objects that are rendered impossible by the basic conditions of political life. The politics of abstract principles, for example, runs up against the irreducible messiness of political life (27); likewise, as Brown argues at length in chapter 4, conventional Marxist politics, which aims to master power (and, ultimately, to overcome it altogether) by grasping its “logic,” is undermined by the unruly, atelic, and ineliminable character of power, which Marx himself, in his less orthodox moments, recognizes. Yet Brown’s use of Freud points in a different direction. In “A Child is Being Beaten,” after all, the illicit love that lies behind
fantasies of suffering and punishment is Oedipal, which means, among other things, that it is an *all-too-possible* love, whose prohibition is partly constitutive of a regime of “normal” sexual subjectivity, gender identification, and kinship relations. For Freud, in other words, prohibitions are human achievements, not just impossibilities or ontological conditions, and their announcement and enforcement have powerful normalizing effects.

Brown’s insistence on the unpredictability and complexity of politics, and on the unruliness of power, are welcome—but are the problematic desires embodied in our now-fouling constitutive narratives best understood by analogy to impossible fantasies of omnipotent agency, or by analogy to prohibited Oedipal love? What happens when we present the ontological conditions of unpredictability, complexity, and unruliness in the language of prohibition and illicitness? What regime of subjectivity, what roles and identities, does Brown herself enforce in her welcome effort to combat moralism?

Answers to these questions may be found in Brown’s provocative treatment of the triangular relationship among theory, politics, and democracy. For Brown, the point of theory is not to issue political prescriptions. Indeed, the demand that theory prove its relevance by telling us what to do is itself a species of reactive moralism, the symptom of a frustrated longing for impossible certitude; and this demand does no favor either to theory or to politics, for it collapses them both into a technocratic middle. Instead, theory’s distinctive contribution to politics arises precisely from the difference, and distance, between them. Politics involves “fixing” or “arresting” meaning, while theory’s very different task is (in Stuart Hall’s words) to “make meaning slide,” exposing, defamiliarizing, and questioning the terms that frame political life (41, cf. 122–23). This approach to theory is exemplified here by Nietzschean and Foucauldian practices of
genealogy. By revealing our present situation to be the product of an unsystematic accretion of contingencies, transected by “politically exploitable fissures and fractures” (113), theory as genealogy frees us to perceive, imagine, and pursue political possibilities that do not even show up as options within existing political discourses.

Brown’s defense of theory as defamiliarizing critique is compelling and inspiring; and other readers with debts not only to Nietzsche and Foucault but also to Wittgenstein, Arendt, Socrates, and others will probably find much to agree with here. Still, reading these later chapters in the shadow of Freud, I also wonder whether the roles to which Brown assigns theory and (especially) politics could turn out to be straitjackets. What do we lose when we insist that theory makes meaning slide while politics fixes it, and that the right kind of relationship between them depends upon each hewing to its difference? Even in Brown’s text, theory already seems to do slightly more than just “unsettle” or “undo” existing discourses: genealogy’s unsettling stories are also alternative interpretations of who we are and how we have gotten here, which “expand” the political possibilities of the present (117), bringing some newly broadened range of alternatives to our attention. Between genealogy’s negative, ground-clearing moment and the political moments of decision, advocacy, and action lies the crucial task of imagining futures—of making possibilities vivid and exploring their implications—and this task does not fit neatly on one side or the other of Brown’s distinction between theory and politics, for while it involves a certain sort of fixation of meaning, it does not yet involve issuing prescriptions: it’s more about what we might do than what we shall do or ought to do.

By the same token, casting politics as a relentless fixer of meanings is also to overlook the ways in which politics, too, makes things slide. This issue becomes
especially important when we turn with Brown to the theme of democracy. For Brown, the unsettling force of theory is an especially important counterbalance to *democratic* politics because of the paradoxical tendency of democracies to embrace antidemocratic ideas and practices. Drawing here on Tocqueville and Spinoza (read through Balibar), Brown characterizes democracy as lacking the delimiting and unifying principle that would give it shape as a regime; this lack, she observes, tends to be filled by some other “historically available” principle, such as “nationalism, racism, xenophobia, cultural chauvinism, market values, Christianity, imperialism, individualism, [or] rights as ends” (124). Luckily, theory’s critiques and genealogies can “interrupt democracy’s relatively automatic cathexis onto undemocratic principles” (125). This does not exactly make theory *into* democracy, for democracy is politics and theory is theory; besides, theory is an elite enterprise and thus bound to be mistrusted by democrats (122–23). But of all the non- or antidemocratic enterprises with which democracy might engage itself, theory is the one with “homeopathic” powers (126), the one that can call democracy back to itself, even if only momentarily, when it becomes too deeply and unreflectively entrenched in other, potentially problematic alliances.

I think Brown is right about democracy’s lack. But why privilege theory as the instrument by which the “refounding” or “recovering” of democracy is to be provoked? While Brown adopts the characterization of democracy as a politics that cannot quite make itself into a determinate regime, she also talks about “democracy” and “democracies” as though they *were* regimes—insecure and fragile regimes that need to supplement themselves with nondemocratic principles, but regimes nonetheless. This fits with Brown’s claim that politics is about fixing—but, read slightly differently, Balibar’s
Spinoza might point in another direction. What if democracy cannot quite make itself into a determinate regime because it is a politics that is not only about arresting meaning, but also about the unpredictable activity of a “multitude,” a multitude that is itself defined entirely negatively, as “one too many” (in Jacques Rancière’s words) with respect to various criteria of delimitation, such as wealth, virtue, race, or territoriality? From this perspective, the political activity of citizens is not only a source of fixation: it also has the power to unsettle or call into question a polity’s terms of identity, with or without the assistance of theory. Such a view fits better with Brown’s own account of the unruliness of power and the unpredictability of human activity than does her functional differentiation, and straight romance, between theory and politics. It is also a view that finds support in Brown’s elegant use of Benjamin and Derrida in the final chapter. What are we to call the character who adopts Benjamin’s preferred stance, invoking fragments of the past (or, in Derrida’s terms, “conjuring” them [151]) in order at once to “blast open” a hegemonic historical narrative and to provoke the exploration of some newly visible possibility in the present? In Brown’s own words, he or she is neither a theorist nor a politician but a third thing: a “thinker-activist” (170).

3.

Jane Bennett doesn’t think we need theory to make meaning slide. In The Enchantment of Modern Life, meaning (and much else besides) is always already sliding—or, better, swerving, a term Bennett takes from Epicurean philosophy to name the unpredictable and nonteleological mobility at the heart of all things. Drawing on an appropriately eclectic range of resources, Bennett assembles an ontological picture that she hopes can serve as an alternative to the widespread view of modernity as, for better or
worse, disenchanted. Disenchantment stories, Bennett argues, presume that only a teleologically organized cosmos could captivate us, and so they conclude that modern rationalization, secularization, and scientization must also shatter our affective connections to the world. Yet “a world capable of enchanting need not be designed, or predisposed toward human happiness, or expressive of intrinsic purpose or meaning” (11). We can also be enchanted—transfixed in a simultaneously pleasurable and uncanny state of wonder—by the surprises that crop up in a nonpurposive world that is nevertheless teeming with intersecting movements and flows. Part of Bennett’s aim is simply to recover this experience from beneath the stifling weight of disenchantment stories. But Bennett also argues that the experience of enchantment she describes can be “valuable for ethical life” (3), because it can supplement, though not replace, an otherwise insufficient code-based approach to ethics, providing it with a motivational basis and a spirit of generosity that moral rules cannot generate on their own.

This is an extremely rich book, bustling with examples and punctuated by subtle engagements with an impressively wide range of other thinkers. Bennett’s own writing, playful yet precise, often captures the “mood of fullness, plenitude, or liveliness” that she says enchantment produces (5). This is especially true of Bennett’s explorations of the phenomenology and ontology of enchantment, including chapter 2, which stages a series of encounters with various hybrid and/or metamorphing creatures (does that curious crossing, the “thinker-activist,” belong here too?) and chapter 5, which deals with modes of physical and social complexity that might inspire enchantment. These chapters recall Brown’s characterizations of politics as unpredictable and of power as unruly, but they also radicalize that picture, not least because Bennett insistently and effectively draws the
reader’s attention to *nonhuman* loci of power and agency (a longstanding concern of hers). Other parts of the book are more argumentative in approach: chapter 3 criticizes those thinkers like Paracelsus and Kant who try to yoke enchantment to cosmic purposiveness; chapter 4 takes on the “disenchantment tales” of Weber, Blumenberg, and Critchley. All this would already be quite a lot, but the crux of the book comes in the later chapters, which constitute Bennett’s most sustained argument about the ethical and political potential of the experience of enchantment.

Bennett does not make things easy on herself, for she begins with the difficult question of the relationship between enchantment and commodification. Can the “laudable effects” of enchantment, she asks in chapter 6, “also issue from animations designed to make you purchase something” (113)? No, say Marx’s account of commodity fetishism and Horkheimer and Adorno’s critique of the culture industry. Maybe, says Bennett. For Bennett, the 1998 GAP ad called “Khakis Swing” exemplifies the ethical possibilities of the commodity-form. With its image of khaki-clad kids swinging joyously to Louis Prima’s “Jump, Jive, and Wail”—an image rendered uncanny by the use of freeze-and-pan camera techniques—“Khakis Swing” is irreducible to (though it participates in) the sort of commodity culture Marxian critical theory laments. For Marx, animate commodities are symptoms of the perversion of capitalism, where “things are empowered and persons are deadened” (117). For Horkheimer and Adorno, advertising—even stimulating and pleasurable advertising—is merely an instrument of manipulation through which we are at once deprived of the capacity for critical thought and “enlisted in our own commercialization” (124). For Bennett, by contrast, the swinging khakis “also emerge from an underground cultural sense of nature as alive, as
never having been disenchanted” (118), a view with which Marx flirted in his youthful engagement with Epicurus but which he subsequently abandoned, translating the Epicurean “swerve” into a feature of specifically human agency. Enchanting ads like “Khakis Swing” are thus also more uncertain phenomena than Horkheimer and Adorno allow, more alive with possibilities—possibilities that include “pressing people to submit to the call to consume, distracting them from attending to the unjust social relations embodied in the product, reminding them that they share the world with nonhuman modes of agency, drawing them to the wonders of material existence, and opening them to unlikely ecological connections and political alliances” (126–27).

Bennett’s theoretical point here is well taken—the energy generated by an aesthetic experience need not result inevitably in the mere reproduction of the conditions that give rise to it. At the same time, a more detailed exploration of these possibilities would have been welcome. What would it mean to consume the GAP ad, to channel its energy, in a way that did not merely reproduce the culture industry and its hold over us, not to mention the garment industry and its hold over others? Is it a matter of storing up the generosity of spirit inspired by the dance so that you can use it later, elsewhere? Is it a matter of redeploying that image in ways that might cause it to “swerve” away from the purposes of its corporate sponsors? (You might imagine a slightly different ad, circulating as an unauthorized parody on the internet, perhaps, or projected on the exterior wall of a shopping mall during a demonstration, in which a cluster of khaki-clad Asian garment workers swing joyously around their sewing machines until they’re interrupted by their boss and his rifle-wielding guards: “Khakis Sting.”)
Indeed, Bennett’s most ambitious suggestion is that commodity enchantment (like enchantment found in non-commodified things) can be placed in the service of political criticism and activism: “without enchantment, you might lack the impetus to act against the very injustices you discern” (128). Bennett develops this thought at length in chapter 7, “Ethical Energetics,” which works through the question of the motivational basis of ethical action in Kant, Schiller, and Foucault. These three theorists recognized (even if only covertly, in Kant’s case) the problematic dependence of ethics on forms of affective energy like enchantment that are themselves ethically indeterminate, but responded to this problem in different ways: sometimes by seeking to purify ethics of this dangerous element (the “official” Kant), sometimes by seeking to isolate a form of aesthetic experience that will be safely and predictably ethical in its effects (Schiller), and sometimes by treating the alliance between affect and ethics as an experimental, irreducibly risky, but nevertheless necessary undertaking (Foucault).

Bennett herself seems to me to hesitate between the second and third responses. Most of the time, she explicitly aligns herself with the third approach. “There is no way to guarantee that an aesthetic disposition will produce or even incline toward goodness, generosity, or social justice. Affect can join narcissism, beauty can serve violence, and enchantment can foster cruelty” (148), but nevertheless, “the attempt to sever ethics from aesthetics because of the dangers carried by the latter spells the probable defeat of ethics” (149). At crucial moments, however, Bennett also seems to build ethical content into the definition of enchantment itself. “Enchantment,” she says in chapter 7, “is a feeling of being connected in an affirmative way to existence; it is to be under the momentary impression that the natural and cultural worlds offer gifts, and in so doing, remind us that
“it is good to be alive.” Gratitude for these gifts thus “encourages the finite human animal, in turn, to give away some of its own time and effort on behalf of other creatures” (156). Bennett goes on to say that “a sensibility attuned to moments of enchantment is no guarantee that this will happen” (156), but given the positive valence of this definition—curiously shorn of the uncanniness, and even fear, that Bennett earlier associated with enchantment (5)—it is hard to think of enchantment as “indifferent to the ends to which it is put” (148), as capable of fostering both generosity and cruelty. Enchantment’s indeterminacy now seems milder: a matter of whether it will be sufficiently strong to motivate good acts, not whether it will be put to good or evil uses in the first place.

This ambiguity has important consequences. If we think enchantment is inherently affirmative (however uncertain its strength) then we can read Bennett’s own phenomenology and ontology of enchantment as always already ethical, insofar as it intensifies our awareness of and susceptibility to this experience. But if we take seriously Bennett’s own claims about the more radical ethical indeterminacy of enchantment and other forms of affective-aesthetic energy, then we may be left with questions about how to deal with that indeterminacy, questions about which Bennett says too little. For example: if enchantment involves an encounter that is both pleasurable and uncanny—uncanny, particularly, in its disruption of our ordinary assumptions about the purposes and trajectories of things—then such encounters might provoke gratitude, or they might provoke the hostility that (as Brown teaches us) often grows from thwarted desire. What specific practices of self-fashioning might incline us to respond with generosity rather than hostility to the world’s uncanny pleasures? What broader social and political circumstances would make such practices more likely to succeed? Likewise, if attempts
to harness enchantment to ethical and political practices are not only uncertain (because the energy enchantment produces might not suffice to motivate a certain course of action) but downright risky (because the consequences such conjunctions are more radically unpredictable), then an ethics and politics of enchantment will inevitably be a site of loss—the loss of specific social and political goods, rather than the loss of ideals that were always already impossible—and these losses will call for some response. If Bennett provokes us to take the unruly and atelic character of the world as an incitement to theoretically informed practical experimentation, rather than as a prohibition that gives rise to a strict differentiation between theory and politics, Brown reminds us that the losses and injuries to which such practices give rise can easily become sources of resentment and moralism, especially if they go unacknowledged, and challenges us to articulate a conception of responsibility appropriate to a world that swerves.

____________

NOTES

AUTHOR’S NOTE: Thanks to Bonnie Honig for her comments on a draft of this essay.


2. It is important to stress that this captures only one part of Brown’s argument in States of Injury (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), which relies at different
times on quite different accounts of why the turn to the state for protection (particularly through the institutionalization of rights) is risky, including the aforementioned Nietzschean account as well as a somewhat different claim, rooted in a reading of Marx, about the depoliticizing effects of rights.


PATCHEN MARKELL is Assistant Professor of Political Science at the University of Chicago. His book, *Bound by Recognition*, will be published by Princeton University Press in 2003.