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On pausing and refusing: reflections on Janet Halley's *Split Decisions: How and Why to Take a Break from Feminism*

Review by Patrick Hanafin
Professor, Birkbeck Law School, University of London
E-mail: p.hanafin@bbk.ac.uk
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Janet Halley's confessional account of her loss of faith in feminism and, in particular, cultural feminism, recounts her discovery of her bad faith and lack of authenticity. She is now, the book recounts, on her way to recovering her own authentic self, which, ironically, seems far from authentic, that of a 'sex-positive postmodernist, only rarely and intermittently feminist, a skeptic about identity politics, with a strong attraction to "queer" revelations of the strangeness and unknowability of social and sexual life, and a deep distrust of slave –moralistic pretensions to identity-political "powerlessness"' (p. 15). In other words, Halley is deeply sceptical about the ability of law to accommodate difference and of the ability of feminism in governance mode to undo this state of affairs. Halley needs a break (in her case from cultural feminism) to rediscover herself and think clearly without the need to conform to a particular party line (p. 60). This account of a none too happy break-up is filled with 'shame' and 'embarrassment' (p. 59) on the part of the author when she remembers the cultural feminist she was.

At times, Halley's work seems like an overreaction to particular strands of American feminism rather than a positive rethinking of the political praxis which is, after all, what feminism in its many modes is. The overreaction comes from Halley's attempt to do down the movement of which she was part in berating her younger self. It is a curious kind of self-accusation which blames the environment (cultural feminism) for a lot of the bad times in her life (p. 60). Halley wilfully refuses to see that there is a way of looking at feminist thought other than via the categories of the feminist types which she catalogues. The use of the term 'taking a break' is an unfortunate choice in this regard. Rather, what is at stake here, in interrogating feminist practices, is the development of a critical mode of thinking which can be simultaneously a *thinking with* which does not necessarily exclude a dialogue with feminism. One can think feminism differently without necessarily being co-opted by the hegemonic governance feminism which so disturbs Halley. One can be both a feminist thinker and critical thinker without contradiction or without allowing one strand of one's thinking to take over the other. Such a praxis involves a refusal to accept certain modes of thinking which block critical or imaginative thought. This should not entail putting feminism per se in the dock. What is called for here is not a taking a break from but a *pausing*. In this moment of pausing one provokes the self in order to engage. This is a creative gesture, not a retreat. It is a mode of doing, an approach, not a breaking away from. A refusal to accept a certain interpretation does not for me imply 'taking a break'. It would be more productive to say that one is taking a position on and in feminism(s).

There are other modes of doing feminist work with which Halley does not engage but which would address many of the qualms she has with the feminist models which she proffers. Thus, sexual difference theory as conceived by authors such as Adriana Cavarero (2000; 2002; 2003) allows us to rethink the political without having to engage in the kind of break that Halley thinks necessary. In the praxis of sexual difference theory, what is at stake is thought itself and the political order in which it is organised. Cavarero carves out a theory of relational subjectivity which moves from the traditional construction of the subject as a what, a societal construct, a universal disembodied (yet always somehow male) figure, to a notion of politics built on the *who*, the individual who relates and interacts with other individuals. This is an 'embodied uniqueness of the existing being as he or she appears to the reciprocal sight of others. The *who*... has a face, a name, and a story' (Cavarero, 2002, p. 99). There is a sense in Cavarero's writing of both a withdrawal from praxis in the traditional liberal sense but also of a reworking of the very terms of the theory/praxis relationship. This thinking leads us to take a different

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approach to the issue of politics and difference, one which does not break with, but rather names, a taking place of the political (see Cavarero, 2003).

For Cavarero, the political is defined in Arendtian terms as the open space of interaction and communication between individuals. It is the 'relational space which occurs with the event of this communication, and which simultaneously, disappears' (Cavarero, 2003, p. 223). This refers not to *what* those who share this space are, but to *who* they are. This space then is the space of the *who*, the unique individual. It refers to a deconstruction of belonging, the marginalisation of qualities and the depoliticisation of the *what*. This is not, for Cavarero, a utopian political space, but is one which can be found in political praxis. The example she refers to is that of sexual difference politics in Italy. In this example, she sees an insistence on the relational matrix of the political, and on the desire for a symbolic existence which, in the practice of relations between women, every woman performs starting from herself. For Cavarero, the praxis of sexual difference thinking sees thinking as a practice of symbolic transformation. She has described the praxis of sexual difference theory as 'a plural and interactive space of exhibition that is the only space that deserves the name of politics' (Cavarero, 2000, p. 57). In Cavarero's view, the old binary between theory and practice is not operative. Rather, she sees sexual difference thinking as 'a concrete politics tied to the material context where language is generated' (Cavarero, 2000, p. 99). This is a thinking which does not differentiate between feminism and radical politics. It does not require that one take a break from one to engage in the other.

A reading of feminist praxis which usefully takes up the challenge of such a thinking is Linda Zerilli's recent work *Feminism and the Abyss of Freedom*, in which she observes:

> 'A freedom-centred feminism needs not more rallying cries to carry on the cause of past generations – well, it can use this too – but disturbing examples of feminist practices of political freedom: disturbing – if we will only pause and let them disturb us – because they resist being incorporated into the social – and subject-centred frames that shape most stories of feminism, frames in which freedom as action has mostly disappeared.' (Zerilli, 2005, p. 24).

Zerilli's reading of key moments in feminist intellectual history allows us to see the potential for transformative thinking within the context of feminism and politics more widely. As Zerilli asks, 'are there any other political visions and practises with which feminism might instead be partnered?' (Zerilli, 2005, p. 4). This would allow us instead to refuse the end of feminism and take up the project of affirming feminism anew. In looking at the problem of inscribing the thinking of sexual difference in law, Zerilli observes how rights are fetishised and, in the process, how their 'relation to practices of freedom' are forgotten (p. 120). She is concerned that when one falls into the trap of mistaking rights victories or legislative change for freedom, we lose the radical promise of rights as such. She argues that:

> 'When rights become institutionalized, we tend to forget their origin in a radical, ungrounded claim to freedom, to non-domination and to equal participation in public affairs. We tend to become invested in securing them as such, rather than in maintaining our investment in the sometimes less stable practices that created them in the first place.' (Zerilli, 2005, p. 120)

This is one of Halley's main bugbears, i.e. 'the seeming inability of most participants in [identity politics] to move beyond a . . . sentimental and moralistic view of law and legal action in which nothing short of complete and total moral vindication by the *Supreme* Court is legal power' (p. 14). However, Halley reacts in a different manner from Zerilli to the stories of feminism which she focuses on. Could we convince Halley not to take a break but to enter a different existential state, that of pausing to be disturbed? Indeed, Halley seems to leave this possibility open when she observes early in her book that she is 'promoting a left-of-center political consciousness that makes . . . commitment perpetually contingent on redecision at the level of theory . . . to indulge . . . in the hedonics of critique' (p. 9).

In his book *Why I Am Not a Secularist*, William Connolly speaks of how an individual in working out their position on controversial ethical and political issues is confronted with differing sympathies and values. Like Halley, such an individual, in coming to decide, is confronted with differing views both outside and within oneself. Connolly highlights the uncertainties and tension within the self after such an individual starts to weigh up the many competing interests involved. Indeed, having worked on the self:

> 'You continue to affirm . . . a . . . conception of nature in which . . . meaning . . . is set, but now you acknowledge how this judgment may be

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> more contestable than you had previously appreciated . . . What was heretofore nonnegotiable may now gradually become rethinkable.'
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> (Connolly, 1999, p. 147)

This praxis is referred to by Connolly as a *micropolitics* in which we engage in a rethinking of our relation to politics. In Halley's case, this process is not yet finished. Halley's break appears to be an un-thinking of feminism in governance or liberal mode rather than an actual re-thinking. This re-thinking is yet to come, and as such this book cannot be the last word. It is merely the prefatory stage of what Connolly terms 'an ambiguous *politics of becoming* by which a new entity is propelled into being out of injury, energy and difference (Connolly, 1999, p. 160).

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