theories and methodologies

Three Unresolved Debates

CAROLINE LEVINE

IT IS SUCH AN HONOR TO HAVE *FORMS* CHOSEN FOR A SPECIAL FEATURE IN *PMLA*, AND I AM GRATEFUL FOR THE TIME AND ENERGY THESE scholars put into their thoughtful responses. Taken together, these contributions point to three core questions that divide us in the field today: *What is politics? How should we understand agency? And what is the value and purpose of literature and literary studies?*

What Is Politics?

For many years, leftist thinkers have understood politics as disruption. To be political is to churn, to unsettle, to resist. For Jacques Rancière, only the disturbance counts as "politics"; whatever order settles into place is "the police" (36).

Forms points to an alternative account. It defines politics as what gives shape to collective life. It suggests that there can be no polis without orders and arrangements. The analysis I began in *Forms* has led me to the conclusion that human beings cannot live together without configurations of space and time, organizations of power and resources, distributions and pathways and routines. Thus the goal of political life cannot be freedom from forms, and a working politics must involve not only smashing existing structures but also understanding, deploying, and designing orders and arrangements. Anahid Nersessian contends that a definition of politics as form is circular, but our long-standing embrace of such form-breaking values as liminality, openness, singularity, antinormativity, boundary crossing, and resistance shows that the field of literary and cultural studies largely continues to understand politics as disruption. And so, I believe, we have not yet reckoned fully with either the necessity or the promise of organizing forms.

In fact, paying attention to the ways that multiple forms work shows that power—the effective capacity to shape and impose forms of order—does not unfold in the ways many thinkers and activists have come to expect. My research suggests that even the most oppressive,

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dominant hierarchies can come unexpectedly undone. Some rearrangements have domino effects. Some encounters between forms have unintentional consequences. And most important, if we take stock of the dense overlaying of social forms, all operating at once but according to different organizing principles, we can see how hard it is to find meaningful openings for genuinely radical action.

Anything short of pulling this whole rotten society up by the roots looks to many of my interlocutors here like quietism, like complacency, like wishy-washy liberalism or, worse, sinister neoliberalism. A familiar binary logic structures political arguments for respondents in this feature, including Marijeta Bozovic and C. Namwali Serpell, and often for the field more generally: if you are not for the revolution, you are for the unjust status quo. This logic obscures crucial questions that I believe we could, and should, be addressing and debating: What does revolution look like? Is it one massive upheaval, or is it a long unfolding, à la Raymond Williams? Where and how does it begin? Could an effective politics be composed of multiple separable actions, or must it be coordinated? If it must be coordinated, how does a mass alignment happen?

One of the most controversial claims in *Forms* is the disavowal of any single root cause of injustice—capitalism or patriarchy or racism. I turn away from each of these systems at times, not because they are not powerful, terrifying, sometimes mutually reinforcing facts, but because none of them has seemed to be a deeper cause than the others, the one we would have to address first, the one that would bring all the rest down with it. If we got rid of capitalism, we would still be left with racism and patriarchy. If we took down patriarchy and capitalism, we would still have to feed and shelter our bodies. That is, all these forms of social life organize us but not in coordinated ways.

So I ask: What rearrangements will have the most important consequences? Could it be that even a small rearrangement could lead to large-scale structural shifts? If we cannot understand all forms as emerging out of a single root cause, then should we address them separately? Will rearranging one aspect of social life distract us from deeper injustices, or will rearrangement constitute the very work of revolution, the reordering of the conditions of all our lives?

How Should We Understand Agency?

A related debate that shapes many of the responses in this feature—and beyond—is a long-standing and unresolved debate about structure and agency. How much power should we ascribe to arrangements and systems and how much to individual or group intentions? The respondents gathered here disagree fundamentally over whether we should put our analytic and political emphases on the operations of structures or on the motivations and interests of the people who put them in place. For some respondents, including Sandra Macpherson and Hoyt Long, it is troubling to assume that people are free to change structures and arrangements. For others, including Bozovic and Serpell, overemphasizing impersonal agency absolves powerful people of their unjust intentions and actions.

Forms makes the case that our agency is dramatically constrained by shapes and arrangements—from built spaces to racial hierarchies to our body's rhythms. We cannot work outside these arrangements, and we struggle even to recognize the many forms operating on us at any one time. But that does not mean that agency is altogether foreclosed. *Forms* is particularly interested in how people can wield agency within and by way of constraining forms. The book tracks the ways that people have unsettled hierarchies and interrupted routines—surprisingly, often, by introducing other forms. I do believe there is agency, too, in the designing and building

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of orders. People can make, unmake, and remake forms. But my work in *Forms* focused on how difficult this is: we move within an extraordinarily complicated landscape of so many different ordering principles that, as *The Wire* suggests, it is almost impossible to find openings for genuine social change.

And so Serpell asks, "[W]hy not try to change the structure?" That is certainly the most pressing problem facing us. And yet we can see how this formulation of the question only returns us to familiar questions about structure and agency: Who are the "we" who can make changes to "the structure"? What if there is no "we" apart from and outside the structure? What if the structure changes us? And is political power really so singular and monolithic as invoking "the structure" would suggest? These are precisely the problems I took up in *Forms*.

Questions surrounding intention and agency are not limited to this feature, and they have serious implications in our political moment. Blaming the original groups who put political forms in place is a popular political move right now. I believe it is wrong for three reasons. The first is that blame often locates agency in the wrong place: it is an analytic mistake. While there are certainly instances where it is appropriate to blame a person who is acting unjustly, blame too often personalizes structural problems. It ascribes too much control to people and not enough to preexisting orders and arrangements. Power over the social world does not happen primarily through the original installation of forms. Most of the time, instead, we inherit orders and arrangements, and we work within and around them. Like other readers of Michel Foucault, I think groups of powerful people do not exert intentional control over all the structures. Even the wealthiest depend on long-established forms that precede them—such as inheritance laws, gerrymandering, the racial segregation of neighborhoods and schools, and police patrols—to gain and keep their wealth. *The Wire* shows us not only how painfully constraining it is to be poor and black in Baltimore but also how limited the power of the wealthiest and most powerful players is to reshape a world organized by many contending forms.

The second reason not to overemphasize blame is that it can prevent us from recognizing how forms sometimes work against even the most deliberate and explicit intentions. I have always found the New Critics persuasive in their claim that we do not have to understand original intentions to understand what forms *do*. That is in part because it is almost impossible to know intentions. But it is also because intentions are not as important to understand as the effects forms have in the world.

The third reason not to focus our attention on blaming powerful groups is strategic. Many forms have far outlasted the world of their original intenders, and looking backward to malevolent intentions is easier than rearranging the formal landscape that shapes and arranges us going forward. Blame often makes the blamer feel virtuous, while it produces defensiveness and reactive withdrawal on the part of potential allies. The denunciation often fractures and distances, making coalitions, solidarity, and strong alliances even harder than they need to be. Blame is not only a misreading of the way power works, then, but also a counterproductive political strategy.

If the focus on individual agency and intention runs deep in politics, it is also a long tradition in the literary field. Many of the respondents in this feature read *Forms* as an effect of its author's intentions, ascribing a whole array of desires to me personally: an urge to solve problems without making sacrifices, a fantasy of empowerment in the context of the neoliberal university, an unthinking set of attachments to my training in anglophone literary studies, an almost authoritarian delight in my tautological thinking, an incapacity to tolerate homogeneity, and an antipathy

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to "literary ideas." While I do not recognize myself in these accounts, what's important is not whether these readers are right or wrong about my intentions but whether the search for intentions is the best way to read books in the first place. I am always more inclined to pose a more public, more formalist, and more future-oriented question—not, Who wrote this book and in what conditions? but rather, What can we do or make with the theories of the world it proposes? What thoughts and actions does this book afford—what does it make possible, and what does it foreclose?

What Is the Value and Purpose of Literature and Literary Studies?

For many readers of *PMLA*, both the debate about political strategy and the struggles over structure and agency are beside the important point, which is what any of this has to do with literature. For a number of respondents in this feature, including Langdon Hammer and Michael Clune, literary critics do their best work when they keep to literary business.

There is a long tradition of arguing that the aesthetic matters because it remains apart from the political, resisting instrumentality and offering a freedom and pleasure too often threatened with extinction by the bleak forces of politics and economics. In *Provoking Democracy*, a book I wrote before *Forms*, I argued that this claim is paradoxical: anti-instrumentality turns out to be art's most instrumental purpose and value in modern democracies (73–102). That is, even if we grant that aesthetic autonomy and anti-instrumentality are the appropriate ends of art, even if we understand art as that which resists dominant institutions and refuses to serve powerful agents, even in this precise capacity, art is still doing political work. Because freedom from ends is nothing if not political.

Forms is not primarily about freedom. In this respect it departs from the most powerful and long-standing tradition in aesthetic thinking about the value of artistic autonomy. More than anything, *Forms* is about the opposite problem: constraint. And constraint, as any critic knows well, is a problem that art constantly engages: from the limits of the medium to the rules set by publishers and lawmakers. Poets know a great deal about constraints, as do novelists and painters and composers and dancers and filmmakers and, yes, academic writers. All of us struggle to craft understanding and meaning within and by way of forms. My argument about constraint has little to do with aesthetic pleasure. It has to do with knowledge. I contend that literary writers and critics know a tremendous amount about the workings of multiple and overlapping constraints and that this understanding is necessary for grasping the workings of existing social worlds.

Long argues strenuously here against this claim, maintaining that sociologists know much more than literary scholars about institutions and intersectionality and that if we want to understand how societies work, we ought to pay close attention to empirical research in sociology. When I set out on this project, I expected to agree with this argument. But two sociologists, Anmol Chaddha and William Julius Wilson, started me on a different path. They held up *The Wire* as a better account of social relations than most sociological studies because it set into motion many more than the usual number of organizing principles (166). They suggested that the empiricist tendency to isolate a form or two leads to a flattening of the interconnected factors that structure social experience. This suggestion seemed right. Intricately patterned artworks like Elizabeth Barrett Browning's "The Young Queen" and Sophocles's *Antigone* know something about how overlapping constraints work in ways that social scientists, precisely because of their methods, do not. That this knowledge might emerge out of literary and cultural studies was surprising but, as I kept working, increasingly persuasive to me.

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And so I remain a formalist literary critic with my eyes on political transformation. It is true that even if you know how forms work, you can still end up with a bullet in your head, especially if you are a queer, black stick-up man in Baltimore. Understanding how the world works is only the first step. The next involves figuring out how to intervene to make it better. *Forms* strove to develop a method of analysis that would account for the workings of social worlds. The book I am writing now, to be called "Reading for the Common Good," builds on that analytic first step to articulate paths to action. I am working to understand how we might use formalist methods to design and enact effective political and aesthetic strategies and how we might successfully build social forms that afford better, fairer, more sustainable models of collective life than those that organize us now.

No task feels more urgent to me than this. The violence and injustice roiling our world are intolerable, and climate catastrophe is coming ever closer. In this context, putting our heads together to figure out how we might craft a more just world still seems like the only work worth doing.

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