



Symposium on Linda Zerilli's "Feminism and the Abyss of Freedom"

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Symposium on Linda Zerilli's *Feminism and the Abyss of Freedom*

Linda M. G. Zerilli. 2005. *Feminism and the Abyss of Freedom*.

Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Linda Zerilli's *Feminism and the Abyss of Freedom* seeks to restore feminism's "lost treasure": the foundational and radical claim to political freedom. Zerilli proceeds from a vision of political actors that allows for the shaping power of their individual and collective imagination. People, she argues, can create forms or figures that are not already present in sensible experience or existing conceptual languages. They can interrupt or alter the system of representation, in judgment and debate, and as feminists, they can do so in the creative and conflictual heat of world-building. Zerilli explores the implications of this shift of vision through generous readings of other thinkers and political activists, including Hannah Arendt, Monique Wittig, Judith Butler, and the Milan Women's Bookstore Collective, as well as an address to the contemporary feminist movement.

Feminism and the Abyss of Freedom is a work of political theory, written primarily with an audience of fellow theorists and academic feminists in mind. Yet, the book should be of great interest to sociologists. Zerilli is responding to two problems, or characteristic reductions, that have also troubled our discipline: the persistent assumption that political identity and action follow from and can be read off of demographic characteristics, and the rendering of the political as the mere realization of social determinants or the instantiation of state institutions. Sociologists are often inclined, by disciplinary reflex, toward enumerating pre- and nonpolitical causes that they then take to explain political actions or outcomes. When carried to the extreme, this tendency eradicates the place of politics itself. Zerilli's is one text that can help us develop better ways to think about politics as practices of world-building that are not exhaustively determined in advance. We should welcome the potential applications to social science and history as well as to political theory and politics itself.

That does not mean, of course, that sociologists do not have extensions, criticisms, and alternatives to offer. This symposium is an expanded version of an Author Meets Critics panel organized by Ann Shola Orloff for an annual conference of the American Sociological Association. In it, three sociologists—Myra Marx Ferree, Andreas Glaeser, and George Steinmetz—summarize, assess, and react to Zerilli's text, and their very different responses are followed by the author's rejoinder. *Feminism and the Abyss of Freedom* is many things, including a startling break with both socially determined notions of gender politics and the more recent tradition of feminist identity politics, but we foreground it here as a productive challenge to—and dialogue with—sociological theory.

The Editors