Finally, in a brief Coda, I reverse the interpretive lens used throughout the book in order to consider the effect that feminism’s allegorical association with temporal problematics has had on the perception of feminist politics rather than on the perception of national time. Turning to backlash texts like Lauren Weisberger’s *The Devil Wears Prada* (2003), I demonstrate that they rely on the association between feminism and the breakdown of progressive time to suggest that feminism is locked in a losing battle against the clock; by turning women’s struggle for progress into the working woman’s futile struggle to meet the temporal demands placed on her, these novels insist that feminism has taken on a force it can never best—the passage of time itself. More generally, I consider the way in which feminist politics may have been shaped by feminism’s position close to the heart of the national imagination after the 1960s and by its displacement from this central position after 2001. If feminist politics drew some of its energy from the intense national cathexis to stories of women and static time after the 1960s, then it may be that the turn to different types of stories after the attacks on the World Trade Center has exerted a similar influence, in this case draining away the sense that feminist concerns are significant and vital in this transformed political milieu. Understanding the extent to which feminism’s allegorical function has caused feminism to acquire and lose urgency in different political climates may make it possible to denaturalize the contemporary sense that only certain types of stories now matter, enabling us to ask new questions not only about the role of feminism in the present political moment, but also about the stories we are currently using to make sense of our national landscape.

Chapter 1

The Problem of Static Time

Totalization, the End of History, and the End of the 1960s

In the 1980s and 1990s, the perception of failed futurity in America was registered by “end-of-history” discourses from across the political spectrum. In 1992, the neoconservative thinker Francis Fukuyama argued that, with the demise of communism, American-style capitalist democracy had finally triumphed and was gradually remaking the entire world in its own image. Despite the fact that he relished capital’s permeation, Fukuyama nevertheless found that this version of the end of history still resulted in empty and meaningless time: without the need or desire to improve upon this best of all possible worlds, humanity would inevitably become lost and aimless. Arguing from across the aisle, Wendy Brown suggested that the sensation of blocked futures on the part of the contemporary Left stemmed not only from a sense of lost Marxist unity but also from a failure to recognize the futurity inherent in new political forms—for example, identity-politics approaches that have often been perceived as a threat to Marxist analysis; without a Marxist conception of historical teleology, it seemed to such thinkers that history itself had ended. As both Brown’s and Fukuyama’s arguments imply, there can be something noticeably wishful about this perception that history has come to an end: Fukuyama predicts the total, permanent, and inevitable triumph of the politico-economic system he endorses, while Brown suggests that Marxists refuse to believe that Left history can continue if it abandons Marxist principles. In a similar vein, Lutz Niethammer argues that *posthistoire* discourses that conflate the end of history with the “end of Europe” must be read as expressions of dismay regarding the demise of white centrality, while Hazel Carby views contemporary American discourses of apocalyptic “national crisis” as an expression of the fear that white superiority is under threat. As Brown implies, what is at an end in many of these discourses is less history or
the world than the ascendency of the political body to which the group in question belongs. Brown's argument suggests that we may understand the ubiquity of end-of-history discourses as a sign of a shift in priorities such that those who no are no longer at the center of history feel that history itself has come to an end. Yet this argument cannot explain why groups positioned as the new protagonists of history find themselves equally plagued by this sense of failed futurity. As I argue at length in the remaining chapters, a perception of joint temporal and epistemological closure constituted one of the primary political inheritances of late twentieth-century popular American feminism—a movement usually associated with the desire to bring women into public history for the first time. If we read the sensation of blocked futurity as arising primarily from the resentment of those who feel themselves to have been dethroned from their former place at the center of history, it is difficult to comprehend why feminism would become party to such perceptions; after all, feminism was one of the key forms of the new identity politics that some Marxist theorists felt had staged a coup against traditional class analysis. Nor can we expect feminism to share in Fukuyama's triumphalist imagination of history's end, since the feminist movement certainly hasn't achieved the sort of world domination that would make any further striving beside the point. Instead, I argue that this perception of blocked futurity came to be shared across political movements because the internal logic of end-of-history discourse resonates with deep-seated ideas linking time, narrative totalization, and human agency that were in crisis in the American political imagination after the 1960s. On the one hand, the ubiquity of this logic meant that feminism inevitably became entangled in this crisis; on the other, feminism's tendency to position women as belated subjects of history gave it a means of negotiating this narrative logic that were not available to other political discourses.

In general, the elements that make up this logic can be isolated by attending to the shared features that characterize end-of-history theories, which describe a state in which the world outlasts the human capacity to transform it. Such theories depict the end of history as a temporal mode that transgresses the most basic and commonsensical perceptions of time: the conviction that with time comes change and that the future is more open and less fixed than the present or the past. Not only does significant change appear to cease after the end of history, resulting in a predetermined future, but also this temporal experience seems inevitably to be accompanied by a vision of the world as "crystallized" and "isomorphic" and the "last men" of history as bored and aimless—so devoid of heroic striving that their rote functioning is often compared to that of insects or animals. In part, the insistent repetition of these features of end-of-history discourses, even in seemingly positive visions of the end of history such as Fukuyama's, is self-explanatory: if the world will no longer change significantly, then human action will most likely appear foreclosed, or at least beside the point. Other aspects of this vision, however, seem less self-evident: philosophical hypotheses indicate that it is at least possible to imagine a world that is both frozen and variegated, but end-of-history theories seem instead to assume that stillness and sameness necessarily go hand in hand. The particular and unspoken logic of the end of history, in other words, creates an apparently inexorable concatenation of temporal stasis, epistemological uniformity, and the demise of human agency.

As myriad fictionalizations of nightmare totalitarian futures make clear, the association of a fully "administered" world with an increasingly uniform and stagnant population resonates far beyond theorists associated with the end of history, forming a persistent ideologeme within the Western cultural imagination at large. I use the term static time to refer to this temporal mode in its various contemporary manifestations, some of which may at first glance seem far removed from well-known end-of-history debates. While leaving aside the question of whether this delineation must in a strict philosophical interpretation be considered a contradiction in terms, my terminology attempts to encode the perception of negation that accompanies time in such totalized and permanent political landscapes. Static time refers less to a philosophical precept than to what Raymond Williams calls a structure of feeling; it gestures toward a set of perceptions and emotions that arises from the logic linking epistemological uniformity and temporal inertia.

In what follows, I argue that this sense of static time has had crucial links to received wisdom regarding the trajectory of 1960s radicalism since the end of that decade. While the actual foreclosure of American possibilities arguably has everything to do with the sort of economic shifts that Williams associates with changes in a dominant structure of feeling, one of the central ways of understanding this sense of stasis in American culture has been through readings of the last moment when teleological history seemed to be a given in the United States: the 1960s. From Right arguments that America lost its way in the late 1960s to the Left perception that 1960s revolutionary aspirations came to a dead end, the story of 1960s radicalism has served as a kind of cautionary tale across the political spectrum. In general, for the last three decades of the twentieth century, national conceptions regarding the pleasures and dangers of American progress were given shape by the most commonplace
reading of the politics of the 1960s, which in turn has been structured by the logic of time and totalization I have been describing.12

As I will suggest, the moral of this story has usually been understood to be this: the revolutionary impulse both cannot and should not animate American politics. Because this interpretation rests on deeply held ideas of how political time operates, it often seems an inarguable, indelible one. While the meaning of this realization is certainly dire for the Left, it has crucial effects on the Right's imagination of political change as well, as Fukuyama's ambivalent description of history's end implies. While the defeat of 1960s radicalism is, from an economic perspective, not the determinant cause of this sense of stasis, my point is that it has served as an explanation of and an alibi for certain perceptions in American culture—a means of describing why large-scale attempts at instituting political progress will and even should fail.13 In this sense, the inexorable logic of time and totalization that shapes the narrative of the 1960s serves as a means of registering the seemingly inexorable demise of positive American futurity in ways that greatly undermine the conviction that something might be done about that demise. In general, this book argues that the understanding of static time inscribed in these narratives of 1960s radicalism becomes configured and reconfigured through popular feminist discourse, which then functions as a key means of attempting to retrieve access to positive political transformation.

In order to uncover these relationships, I analyze the way in which the logic of static time has undergirded what historians have referred to as the declension narrative of American 1960s radicalism, which influenced most historical scholarship on the decade through the end of the twentieth century.14 In historian Van Gosse's words, "In this scenario, the Sixties failed in their millenarian purpose and now Americans have stepped outside their own history, lost their groove, and forgotten what Todd Gitlin called their 'common dreams.'"15 Put more generally, this narrative falls into a basic three-act structure: the good (or at least less bad) middle years of the 1960s, symbolized by the civil rights movement and the early Students for a Democratic Society (SDS), come to be supplanted by the bad Black Power movement and the bad late SDS, and this transformation then leads to the futility, despair, and stasis with which our story ends. While there are many stories one could tell about the 1960s from many perspectives, the story of American 1960s radicalism was most frequently organized and judged according to this particular narrative structure through the end of the 1990s.16 For example, in 1989 Maurice Isserman noted that "what one might have expected to be the 'Dark and Bloody ground' of the historiography on the 1960s remains thus far remarkably uncontested terrain," resulting in "near unanimity" among histories of 1960s radicalism.17 Not only did historians often present a very similar negative trajectory for 1960s radicalism but also this narrative mirrored popular readings of the decade that began to circulate almost immediately upon its conclusion: as Kevin Boyle has argued, most histories of the decade reflect the same "powerful narrative" sketched out in the Time-Life volume on the 1960s published in 1970.18

While the sense of inevitable failure that marks the declension narrative is even clearer in Right narratives that vilify 1960s radicalism and suggest that efforts at transformation should never have been made in the first place, I draw instead on less critical Left, liberal, and centrist general histories of the decade to show how even the most positive accounts of the 1960s find themselves caught up in a logic of tragic inevitability that appears to lead unswervingly to static time.19 In so doing, my goal is not to dispute the events exploited by historiography of 1960s radicalism or to provide an alternate explanation of those events.20 The task of documenting the tendentious nature of the declension narrative is being undertaken by an increasing number of historians of the 1960s. Rather, my focus is on isolating the temporal operations of the three-phase structure of 1960s radicalism, as it has been most often described, in order to show how the sense of possibility that characterizes much of the 1960s became bound to the logic of static time, such that the perception of positive futurity transformed into its polar opposite by the narrative's conclusion.

In order to elucidate this operation in the declension narrative of the 1960s, I first offer an account of this temporal logic in its abstract form, laying out the steps by which a temporal progression toward freedom seems inevitably to collapse into a narrative of totalized epistemological and temporal closure. While such an account necessarily touches on the approaches to political time embedded in various disciplines, particularly philosophy and political theory, my goal here is not to provide a philosophical genealogy of static time but rather to attempt to make explicit our apparent conception of how static time works—and why it works the same way over and over again. I thus approach static time as a component of what Charles Taylor has called the "social imaginary" of Western modernity and postmodernity.21 Unlike political philosophy, which "is often the possession of a small minority," the social imaginary contains unspoken, axiomatic beliefs shared by large social groups, "something much broader and deeper than the intellectual schemes people may entertain when they think about social reality in a disengaged mode."22 Yet, as Taylor points out, "[i]t often happens that what start off as theories held by a few people come to infiltrate the social imaginary, first of elites, perhaps, and then of the whole society."23 Thus, while the work of key thinkers in the philosophy of history
such as Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel and Alexandre Kojève undergirds some of the logics I uncover, what concerns me here is not the original philosophies in all their subtlety but rather the particular and even bastardized versions of key concepts that forged the operation of static time in the twentieth-century social imaginary.

Charting this logic involves a level of abstraction that has, in recent decades, been almost entirely the purview of “theory” or certain strains of late twentieth-century continental philosophy. However, theory tends to write against the social imaginary, challenging rather than charting our most commonplace ways of thinking about gender, sexuality, time, representation, and so on. My goal is to track the logic that underlies those accepted ways of thinking, the often unspoken but pervasive truisms that structure the linked imagination of time, totalization, and agency. More importantly, as I will argue at the conclusion of this chapter, contemporary theory takes shape in a period of profound reaction against the logic of static time and functions more as an attempt to thwart static time than as a description of the way static time operates. Therefore, with a few exceptions, I draw on narrative and political theory that largely predates poststructuralism but still provides usefully schematic and generalized accounts of the concepts linked to static time. My point is not that the work of the thinkers to whom I do turn—for example, Karl Mannheim, Hannah Arendt, and Frank Kermode—is somehow innocent of or removed from this logic of time and totalization in a way that theory is not. In fact, Kermode’s The Sense of an Ending, published in 1967, could be read as a primary as well as a secondary text within my argument, given that it exemplifies as well as elucidates the perception of static time that accompanied the late 1960s. Yet that is precisely its utility: these thinkers inscribe the logic of static time rather than seek its fissures and failures in the way I suggest poststructuralism does, and they are thus essential to tracing its parameters. Having offered a way to think through static time, I then trace the way this logic shapes the imagination of the end of the 1960s, particularly the trajectory that has been most commonly assigned to 1960s radicalism.

How Freedom Becomes Unfreedom: The Logical Juggernaut of Static Time

Elucidations of the end of history commonly begin with Hegel, or at least with an assumed version or heir of Hegel—though such readings are often more symptomatic than faithful. In his review of the various “ends” of history, Perry Anderson argues that, contrary to commonly held notions, Hegel referred to history’s end only in the sense of its aim or target, not in the sense of its conclusion, since in German no single word carries the dual meanings of terminus and goal in the way the English word “end” does. Thus, while Hegel did posit freedom as the goal of human history, he did not necessarily equate the achievement of this aim with the cessation of history. Yet, as Peter Osborne, suggests, the “internal relations between the ideas of temporalization, totalization, and narrativity” make this conflation inevitable once history becomes conceived of as a narrative with an overriding, distant goal. On its most basic level, narrative time—that is, the temporal slice defined by the interior stretch between the beginning and end of the story—concludes when the goal of the narrative has been reached or, in the case of the unhappy ending, when it becomes clear that it will not be reached. When history comes to be defined as a narrative whose goal is freedom, history as a narrative will conclude when its goal is reached; if it does not, this narrative-based definition of history would be retroactively nullified, since it is the coalescence of goal and conclusion that creates the temporal form of narrative. Thus, the narrative time of history must cease when we reach the goal of that narrative. Once we arrive at that goal, we are no longer within the temporal organization that defines the parameters of the story that is history; time may continue, but history has concluded. To the extent that we accept a narrative definition of history as a story with a stated and achievable goal, the conflation of the two meanings of “end” indeed appears inevitable.

As Kermode famously described in The Sense of an Ending, this doubling of end and aim creates a pattern that unifies the whole, creating coherence between the parts of the narrative. The “sense of an ending,” the perception that the narrative will conclude, “bundl[es] together perception of the present, memory of the past and expectation of the future, in a common organization.” Through this bundling activity, narrative “bestow[s] upon the whole duration and meaning.” According to Kermode’s narrative theory, then, narrative executes two crucial and coincident functions: it performs an act of “temporal integration” that unifies a segment of time, and it provides that segment of time with meaning bestowed by the end. Structurally, narrative resolution creates an epistemologically determining force that runs back along the narrative chain, aligning all of its constituent events with the meaning established by the arrival of the end. Not only, then, does this process create a totality or unit out of the narrative itself but it also totalizes the narrative, in the sense of making an epistemologically fused and coherent mass out of the narrative’s formerly discordant parts.

While this process may be innocent enough within the realms of fiction, Kermode argues that it is a dangerous error to apply this narrative
logic to the world at large, since it tends to generate a partial, structured, and uniform view of what would otherwise be an organic and chaotic whole. Thus, for Kermode, even narratives of justice become suspect if we attempt to reorder human reality in their shape: “[r]eality is . . . the sense we have of a world irreducible to human plot and human desire for order; justice is the human order we impose upon it.”4 If we lose our sense of the difference between plot and reality, if we attempt to remake the world in the shape of justice, Kermode warns, “we are yielding to irrationalism; we are committing an error against which the intellectual history of our century should certainly have warned us. Its ideological expression is fascism; its practical consequence the Final Solution.”42 The widespread conviction that there is a short and precipitous path from narrative consonance to genocide, from totality to totalitarianism, is a familiar characteristic of the cold war intellectual culture in which Kermode was writing. Such arguments tend to promote the salutary chaos of human life (read: capitalism) over and against the unification and control associated with social planning (read: communism). Although the political valences were different, a similar argument about the connection between conceptual and social uniformity became a flashpoint both among Marxists and between Marxists and poststructuralists in the 1980s and 1990s. In particular, Marxists tended to argue that there was a difference between a benign, speculative, conceptual unity required for political thought and a uniformity produced through “power and control,” while poststructuralists tended to see no difference between the two.32

While I will discuss the relationship of static time to these debates below, for now I want to point out that, however historically bounded or ideologically fraught the conflation of unity and uniformity may be, it does unfold with a seemingly inexorable logic for those within its grasp. For thinkers who accept the above assumptions regarding the epistemological function of narrative temporality, terminus, unity, and uniformity will indeed appear to arrive hand in hand; completion will equal totality, which in turn will equal totalization. Furthermore, if we accept that such functions apply to the narrativization of history, we must also assume that as time passes, we are drawn ever closer to the narrative end of freedom, and that this freedom will itself produce a totalization of meaning. In the terms of this logic, society may be free in terms of having reached its ideal goal, but its meanings will be totalized and uniformly rendered in the shape of freedom. From this perspective, it is difficult for any sort of progressive imagination to present its discourse as epistemologically free (in the sense of neutral, open, and unstrained) no matter how politically free a society it envisions and attempts to produce. As in Kermode’s warning about imposing the “plot” of justice on human reality, the narrative of freedom will result in a society whose meanings are inevitably totalized and rendered unfree precisely by their rote, unvarying reflection of an idea of “freedom.”

Such perceptions are familiar from arguments against utopian thinking, which often assume that utopia is merely a code word for totalitarianism. From this perspective, the achievement of utopia through the achievement of freedom would lead directly to the creation of dystopia, or the achievement of freedom as the single, determinate meaning of society; in fact, there is almost no difference between utopia and dystopia.33 This perspective is reflected in the countless fictions that depict the horrific result of utopian designs for human society, which seem inevitably to result in a rigid, regimented society in which the release from want has required the rejection of independent thought. That is, the attempt to produce an experience of justice and freedom has led inescapably to epistemological closure. For those in the grip of such logic, Raymond Williams’s argument that a successful socialist society would require tremendous complexity rather than brute uniformity appears ludicrous, since the narrative logic of progressive discourse will always seem to lead to forcible homogeneity.34 According to this logic, both utopia and dystopia engender the joint experience of temporal and epistemological closure that I term static time.

This threat of closure is both mirrored in and intensified by the temporalization of freedom in liberal discourse. According to Mannheim, for liberalism the idea of freedom possesses a specific (anti)temporal valence associated with eternity: it is characterized by the “remoteness from space and time of what is merely rationally correct and valid.”35 The distance from the social realm that characterizes freedom is a distance from the very time and space in which the social realm exists—something like the gap between a mathematical formula and a building constructed by virtue of that formula. According to this logic, the Enlightenment idea of freedom must be understood as by nature unachievable, since freedom exists within a zone of principle at which the social realm cannot actually arrive. Within the concrete realm of human chronology, then, we may create solid effects in the world; however, because freedom is by definition opposed to that realm, the one effect we are not able to create is that of freedom. Freedom is our goal to action and the one thing we cannot enact, the goal our narrative can never reach. In that sense, freedom and human agency are fundamentally opposed to each other in this schema: where one exists, the other may not.

However, if freedom is categorically out of reach, part of an eternal realm that is opposed to the mundane temporality of human affairs, our agency as the subjects of history is fundamentally attenuated, unfolding
in and through a temporal medium that can never lead to our goal. As Giorgio Agamben argues, "Eternity, the regime of divinity, with its static circle, tends to negate the human experience of time. The discrete, fleeting instant becomes the point where time intercepts the wheel of eternity." In comparison with the static perfection of eternity, the realm of principle and idea, the human experience of time becomes "negated," as Agamben puts it—signified by its nonpresence, ephemerality, and deficiency. Each "fleeting instant" of this linear continuum contains our struggle against that deficiency or lack, our attempt to approach and enter the eternal time of freedom from which we are split. In this paradigm, chronological distance mirrors the asymptotic temporality of desire familiar from psychoanalysis; it serves as and signifies our social lack and our continuing (impossible) attempt to overcome that lack, to accomplish the "negation of negation," in Agamben's words. Conversely, our ability to create the effects that we desire appears fundamentally counteracted in this schema by the inadequacy of time itself, the medium in which we act, much as Lacanian psychoanalysis argues that both meaning and desire are deflected through the medium of the signifying chain. If the impossible approach of progress to freedom resembles the structure of deferral and desire described by psychoanalysis, then the supposedly concrete, quantifiable, chronological time of the social, the vehicle through which progress operates, functions as a sort of channel for our social lack—and hence our social desire; it acts as a marker of the distance between our political aim and our political effects—between what we can actually create and what we aim to achieve. In order to have our desires fulfilled, we must find a way to thwart this deferral: we must supersede the time that separates us from our goals, our words from their meanings, and our actions from their desired effects.

Crucially, when the subject believes that she or he is approaching the end of the narrative of history, this sort of immediacy appears increasingly possible. If a political group such as the 1960s Left thinks it is drawing closer to the goal of freedom, its members will perceive themselves to gain an increase in their ability to control events as well. Because chronological temporality is the vehicle through which our actions seem to be diffused, this diffusion will decrease as temporal distance between the social realm and the goal of freedom decreases, making the relationship between aim and effect increasingly immediate. When our desire becomes potentially fulfilled through the approach of freedom into the temporal realm, we will experience ourselves as possessing an increasing ability to render our actions more directly, to eradicate the distance and deflection that customarily affects our words and meanings. Thus, the closer we are to the end of history, the more able we will feel to achieve that end. While the last men wind up with no agency at all, the second-to-last men seem to have rather more than the usual share.

This joint movement toward totalization and immediacy is complicated by their mutual influence on one another, which only grows as the end of history appears to near. On the one hand, as the goal of freedom approaches and the conclusion of the narrative draws closer, meanings become increasingly unified and rendered indistinguishable from one another, producing a growing perception of totalization and closure. On the other hand, however, the approach of freedom to the present tends to lead to an increase in human agency, as the temporal distance of desire decreases, the deflection of human effect through time lessens as well, thereby increasing our power over both action and meaning. As Arendt's description of this process suggests, the interaction between the vectors of freedom and immediacy in this second phase creates a self-accelerating process:

Truth [as conceived by Vico and Hegel was] revealed to the contemplative, backward-directed glance of the historian, who [is] able to see the process as a whole... Marx, on the other hand, combined this notion of history with... teleological political philosophies... so that in his thought the "higher aims"—which according to the philosophers of history revealed themselves only to the backward glance of the historian and philosopher—could become the intended aims of political action... By the same token, the age-old identification of action with making and fabricating was supplemented and perfected, as it were, through identifying the contemplative gaze of the historian with the contemplation of the model... that guides the craftsman and precedes all making... The danger of transforming the unknown and unknowable "higher aims" into planned and willed intentions was that meaning and meaningfulness were transformed into ends—which is what happened when Marx took the Hegelian meaning of all history—the progressive unfolding and actualization of the idea of Freedom—to be an end of human action, and when he furthermore, in accordance with tradition, viewed this ultimate "end" as the end-product of a manufacturing process.

In Arendt's analysis, Marx transforms the retroactive narrator's totalization associated with the moment of narrative closure into a future-oriented, proactive drive toward the creation of this desired end. Yet, because freedom is a goal of the narrative of history, understanding freedom as a product of human action also makes the achievement of
narrative totalization, or meaning itself, an end or outcome of human action. In Arendt’s formulation, immediacy now creates both action without deflection and totalized meaning without discrepancy. Moreover, to the extent that the outcome created by immediacy is narrative totalization, these processes have a dizzyingly synergistic effect: totalization creates an end that retroactively creates the meaning of actions, but those actions are also taken in order to create the end. And since the decrease of temporal distance from the object of desire increases immediacy, these mutually reinforcing effects will only be intensified with the passage of time.

While this process might seem at first to promise a welcome increase in human agency, there is a darker side to this relationship between totalization and immediacy, which Arendt also highlights. Since the meaning of events in the narrative is ultimately bestowed by the arrival of narrative closure, each event has an underlying meaning that is not evident at the time of its unfolding. In other words, the actions of men must in this view be prophetically determined by the underlying, imperceptible drive to narrative totalization: as Arendt argues, “the very idea of history as a process suggests that in their actions men are led by something of which they are not necessarily conscious and which finds no direct expression in the action itself.”41 Similarly, in a much more recent version of this observation, Sylvianne Agacinski points out that Hegelian universal history eliminates “contingency in human affairs [since] the final end of the world gives meanings to this history of which men themselves are not yet conscious but toward which they advance.”42 This perception of underlying totalization further elucidates the counterintuitive tendency to associate the arrival of the narrative end of freedom with the eradication of the human will: through the joint operations of totalization and immediacy, we gain an increasing ability to produce effects in the world as the narrative unfolds, but those effects will necessarily be in keeping with the ultimate meaning of the narrative end. During this process, we can direct events to an unusual degree, but we will also perceive that this ability is part and parcel of an underlying narrative trajectory, which directs our action.

In conclusion, then, the logic structuring temporal forms associated with the end of history can be summarized as follows: as the end of the narrative of history approaches, both totalization and immediacy increase in a synergistic fashion, each producing and intensifying the other. Because of the epistemological determination associated with this process, the end moment is perceived as one in which freedom understood as lack of determination is replaced by freedom as an end that totalizes and determines the time process and ourselves as beings trapped within it. The perceived increase in immediacy and effectivity that accompanies the final moments in such narratives thus only gives us more and more of an ability to create our own subsequent unfreedom. While we need not adopt this logic, it is crucial to note that, to the extent that political forms equate the distance of freedom with a temporal remove from a satisfaction that is also a narrative endpoint, they become vulnerable to interpolation in the logical juggernaut I have been describing. And, read through the logic that links totalization, immediacy, and temporalization, such political forms will appear to place us on a metanarrative path in which our own drive to produce freedom appears eventually and inexorably to render us unfree, trapped in a homogeneous world at odds with both change and human agency. The road to freedom, it seems, arrives inevitably at static time.

The Declension Narrative and the End of the 1960s

In the first phase of the declension narrative of 1960s historiography, the movement toward freedom is depicted as occurring in tandem with an increase in immediacy in the way I have just related. From direct action to participatory democracy, the early civil rights movement and SDS are depicted as attempting to do away with the distance between political desire and political enactment. These “figurative” political actions, as Wini Breines has termed them, usually appear as a way of finding a shortcut to the future, of acting out the hoped-for new society in the present.43 For example, the Beloved Community associated with the civil rights movement both represented and enacted in miniature the society the movement wanted to create in the nation at large: “sit-ins and other assaults on segregation were not merely a means to an end. . . . They were at once means and end: the instant that black and white demonstrators sat together at a lunch counter, the counter was integrated.”44 When 1960s radicals are presented as uniting the moment of political vision with the future moment when that vision might be fulfilled, they proceed as if the temporal distance placed between those two instants on the linear timeline of modernity either had no meaning or did not exist at all—as if time might be folded or pleated to unite those two distant moments.45

As we have seen, this perceived erasure of the futurity of desire will necessarily be accompanied by a perceived increase in effective and epistemological immediacy. Indeed, these two effects are so fused to each other in these accounts that each generates the other in a chicken-and-egg confusion of causality: radicals’ ability to eradicate temporal distance appears to be a sign of their unusual degree of effective immediacy, but
the eradication of temporal distance also seems to be what leads to that immediacy. For example, David Burner mirrors such a doubled perception when he states that “[t]he movement seemed to prove the efficacy of interjecting conscience directly into the public realm without the usual political bargains and compromises.” Burner’s account suggests how the first phase of 1960s radicalism blends temporal and effective immediacy: if the realization of desire can be made instant through an act of prefiguration, there will appear to be no degradation of the signal during the time it takes for transmission—no lag enforcing the distance and difference between vision and object, aim and effect.

Given the synergistic relationship between chronological advancement, immediacy, and totalization, it is only a matter of time—in every sense—before this story of freedom takes possession of the radicals rather than the other way around. As the force of narrative totalization comes to the fore, radicals’ celebrated ability to create immediate meanings seemingly transforms into a dangerous tendency to be led by an underlying, determining process in a fashion reminiscent of Arendt’s account. As their immediacy draws them ever nearer to the end of freedom, this end appears to guide them retroactively, rendering their actions inevitable and hence no longer under their control. At first, the declension narrative of the 1960s represents this subterranean pattern as intoxicating rather than imprisoning: in Paul Berman’s account, “the tide swept forward, unstoppable, all-powerful. It was the new society coming into being. That was the source of our exhilaration.” However, as the declension narrative enters its second phase, this sense of inevitability swiftly becomes colored by the perception of totalization and determination. Rather than radicals being swept forward on a tide of unstoppable positive change, they are depicted as in thrall to an inexorably increasing extremism and militancy: Gitlin argues that “in all the excitement, the rush of events, the multiple paranoia and hysteria, the mad overlap of millenarian hopes, profound tensions were obscured. . . . There are moments in history when the sense of extremity takes on a life of its own.” This sense of overriding, unstoppable motion has so characterized 1960s histories that one reviewer has described them as possessing a “sense of causality that borders on predestination.” From this perspective, it seems, radicals are making history because history is making them.

Because it is associated with ideological closure and political conformity, revolutionary militancy offers a perfect symptom of the growing influence of underlying totalization. Demonstrating the way immediacy and totalization become synergistically intertwined, radicals are depicted as becoming increasingly impatient and committed to violent intervention at the same time as they are shown to be ever more devoted to an inflexible and single-minded revolutionary rhetoric: transformation must be immediate and total, and its effects must be unified to fit a predetermined revolutionary vision. As the positive experience of freedom gives way to its negative incarnation as narrative totalization, radicals likewise appear to be displacing a “free,” neutral, and unorganized reality in favor of a univocal and universalizing “extreme” and “militant” discourse. This approach is even more apparent in descriptions of the turn to Black Power—for instance, Burner’s chapter on the shift from the civil rights to the Black Power phase of African American radicalism, tellingly entitled “Killers of the Dream,” carries the unabashedly moralizing headnote “Sin is Separation.” While this horror of separation or partiality appears at odds with the horror of a universalizing and forced conformity, the epistemological problem of fanaticism can in fact be seen to undergird both of these fears: black “totalitarian radicalism,” to borrow Burner’s phrasing, substitutes what liberals perceive as a false, totalized black community for the true, whole, uninflected and unorganized “reality” of liberal universals.

As they seemingly fall prey to fanaticism, both black and white radicals are depicted as “los[ing] their grip on the political, social and global realities,” isolated from the “everyday realities” of the masses in whose name they acted. In order to describe the disjunction between this totalized revolutionary rhetoric and the reality of America, the declension narrative relies on apocalyptic discourse. Historians condemn the “apocalyptic” actions of the Weather Underground and the “millenarian visions” of the Black Power movement, and in general they deploy the rhetoric of apocalypse to describe these final years: according to Isserman, “people felt that history was accelerating, time was running out, great issues were reaching a point of final decision.” While historical transmission of the apocalyptic framework is usually blamed for its continued reproduction in moments of social transformation, I want to suggest that the conflation of revolutionary and apocalyptic discourse arises because both draw on the logic of narrative advancement I have been describing—and the conviction that the narrative in question is reaching its end. In particular, apocalyptic discourse enables the perception that narrative totalization is imminent even when the surface meaning of events is at odds with the predicted end. Through symbolic interpretation, even events that seem to be drawing us away from the desired narrative telos can be seen as having an underlying meaning in keeping with the arrival of the end. Located within an apocalyptic story line, then, we work to establish concordance between the underlying apocalyptic narrative
and the mundane reality around us, locating signs of the former hidden in the latter. 

Because it locates fulfillment in the narrative key rather than the mundane world we inhabit, apocalyptic narrative produces a deep division between the experiences in our fallen present and those that unfold within the underlying narrative. Moreover, as the sense grows that narrative closure is looming, the perception of underlying totalization increases, widening the split between "superficial" events that make up reality and the underlying import of the narrative key: as each narrative register draws closer to the final, defining moment, it will as a result appear increasingly totalized, boundaried, unified in its own right. For that reason, the time of apocalypse is first and foremost the time of the cataclysm and the watershed, the crisis moment when the apocalyptic narrative of ultimate fulfillment completely eradicates and replaces the mundane narrative of everyday experience. What Norman Cohn calls the "central fantasy of revolutionary eschatology" arises from this conception of an underlying binary split between narrative levels: like many historians of apocalyptic discourse, Cohn argues that apocalyptic narrative is characterized by the idea that "tyranny ... will become more and more outrageous and sufferings ... more and more intolerable—until suddenly the hour will strike" when it can be overthrown and replaced by its own paradisiacal mirror opposite. 

In depictions of 1960s radicals, this polarization creates a world divided into absolute oppression and absolute resistance—what Howard Brick describes as a "Manichaean vision" of a "culture of life against a culture of death." America comes to be perceived as a seething hell of racism, poverty, and soulless exploitation, a locus of total domination from which nothing can or should be saved—and for which total, apocalyptic transformation is the only solution. 

As Gitlin puts it, "By the late Sixties many of us had concluded the problem wasn't simply bad policy, but a wrongheaded social system, even a civilization. The weight of decades, or centuries, even millennia had to be thrown off overnight—because it was necessary." 

Thus, the absolute, binary split created by the imminence of underlying narrative totalization produces a world that can only exist in two mutually exclusive versions: lack and fulfillment, dystopia and utopia, sin and salvation, election and damnation. The moment of the cataclysm operates as a form of binary repolarization, a moment when all the ones and zeroes are reversed. In apocalyptic narratives of radical politics, this division means that there is no middle ground in which freedom is partially or intermittently felt in the present. Our fallen world can offer signs of impending fulfillment but not incremental experiences of that fulfillment, since fulfillment belongs to the moment of narrative telos alone. Apocalyptic discourse is thus perfectly suited to describe the perception that total freedom is just around the corner when by most indicators freedom is not increasing in the least. Believers are able to perceive through signs that they are drawing ever nearer to fulfillment, even when their lot doesn't improve day by day to reflect that imminence. 

At any moment, apocalyptic rhetoric insists, the narrative end will arrive and the force of epistemological determination will run back along the narrative chain, revealing the true meaning of various details and excising all others from the story. And, in anticipation of this creation of consonance, the dissonant can be preemptively disregarded. 

This sense of an absolute split between underlying narrative and lived historical detail haunts depictions of the second phase of 1960s radicalism, in which radicals are described as gradually adopting means and espousing beliefs that, to most historians, seem bewilderingly counterproductive. Radicals are depicted as increasingly convinced the revolution is inevitable and imminent, even as the majority of the country is turning against militancy and radical violence. In contrasting what seem to be obviously unfounded revolutionary hopes with the actual state of America in the late 1960s, such accounts depict late 1960s militants as possessed by the specific interpretive mode encouraged by apocalyptic discourse. In particular, Kermode points out the "extraordinary resilience" of the historical prophecies associated with the apocalyptic form, which "can be disconfirmed without being discredited." Although the passage of time may render a predication untrue from the perspective of the nonbeliever, for those inside the group, "a mistaken prediction can be attributed to an error of calculation, either in arithmetic or allegory." The prophecy remains true, and a new consonance is produced from the surrounding world whenever the expected events fail to come to pass; the horsemen of the apocalypse can always be located around the next bend in the road. In this sense, the danger of apocalyptic discourse is not so much that it espouses a story that is not true, but that it espouses a story that is so very difficult to disprove. 

While 1960s radicals are described as initially buoyed by this interpretive power, they are eventually portrayed as falling prey to problems produced by the apocalyptic conception of agency. In general, one of the primary comforts of apocalyptic discourse is that the moment of binary transformation is fundamentally out of our hands: as Cohn points out, apocalyptic discourse is by definition "miraculous, in the sense that it is to be accomplished by, or with the help of, supernatural agents." In contrast, revolutionaries may seek signs and symbols of the
impending transformation of society in the fashion of apocalyptics, but revolutionary narratives do not suggest that the radical’s only role is to await the revolution in the way that the faithful may await God’s will. Rather, in the words of a Leftist slogan that was popular during the late 1960s, “the duty of the revolutionary is to make the revolution.”20 As I have argued, progressive narratives of history produce a sense of increased human agency that makes this duty seem within revolutionaries’ grasp; however, the fulfillment of social desire in apocalyptic discourse is sudden and complete, preceded by no synergistic halfway measures that intensify human potency and power in this fashion. Revolutionaries feel they must facilitate the approach of the end-time, but they have not experienced any increase in agency that would allow them to achieve this goal. For this reason, the usually reassuring perception that agency resides on the level of the apocalyptic narrative backfires when applied to revolutionary discourse, placing the advancement of freedom out of reach, in the inaccessible realm of the narrative key.

The problem of locating agency in such a system structures the confused assessment of the street violence and antistate militarism adopted by some late 1960s radicals. While some historians attempt to characterize late-1960s violence as part of a movement from prefigurative to “strategic” or “instrumental” politics, others insistently point out the counterproductive nature of such violence, given that it alienated the general population without having discernible positive effect.21 The conflation of means and ends here, the inability to decide whether the violence of 1960s radicals was too direct or not direct enough, draws upon the peculiar positioning of agency associated with the split between narrative registers that occur in apocalyptic discourse. If violent street battles presage the revolution, then taking part in those battles can be interpreted as a means of accelerating the signs of revolution, even if that provocation is not a strategic act in the sense of winning people to the cause or disempowering the enemy. Radicals can be depicted as attempting to achieve control over the arrival of the narrative end by accelerating the consumption of the narrative as a whole, struggling to bring the predefined events between themselves and freedom raining down ever more quickly.22 Yet the declension narrative’s emphasis on the historical events that contradicted these efforts makes the turn to violence appear ever more misguided and groundless—a fevered and ultimately fruitless attempt to make the revolution pull itself up by its own bootstraps.

As the narrative of the 1960s arcs toward its implosive conclusion, this problem of agency comes to dominate the story. The split between underlying revolutionary destiny and the surrounding incongruent details grows, leaving radicals no choice but to experience a grim awakening to their true lack of agency over the shape of society. In this story, the 1960s conclude not so much when radicals are defeated as when they finally perceive their defeat—when they realize that the future promised in the narrative key can no longer be located around the next corner. The underlying narrative level becomes, as it were, falsified by the failure of historical detail to achieve consonance, by the dissonance between the promised future and the one which came to pass.23 Most importantly, this narrative of defeat and disappointment straddles Left radicals in a realm that, from their perspective, contains all the drawbacks and none of the virtues of totalization. The apocalyptic perception of a (t)otalized war between the culture of life and the culture of death could be galvanizing when revolutionary destiny still seemed assured: the all-encompassing, (t)otalized dominance of “the system” appeared only temporary, soon to be swept away by an equally (t)otal transformation of society. However, such visions of (t)otal oppression and (t)otal transformation take on a new, troubling cast once revolutionary expectations have died. For example, Herbert Marcuse’s depiction of postwar America as a state of “(t)otal administration” only functions as a cry to arms if the “Great Refusal” he described seems capable of displacing that state; if not, his vision of sweeping, ubiquitous domination appears not a goal to but a nullification of resistance.24

Without the equal and opposing force of underlying revolutionary destiny, there is no lever with which to shift this perception of overriding determination. Given this static future, the revolutionary phase of 1960s radical narrative associated with the Black Power movement and SDS simply has nowhere left to go. James Miller, for example, concludes the final chapter of his history of SDS, focalized in large part through Tom Hayden, with an image of Hayden simply fading into silence and from sight: “Putting down the Bullhorn, he stole back into the night. He had nothing more to say.”25 In keeping with the higher costs for black militancy, accounts of the Black Power movement end with leaders’ eradication rather than their self-erasure: in an even more convincing portrayal of the criminal nature of America, these narratives peter out with leaders almost uniformly jailed or killed by their own government. Perhaps most crucially, the failure of revolutionary transformation reveals totalization to be a weapon of the enemy, not of the Left: the positive totalization of revolution destiny has failed, but the negative totalization of oppression remains intact, placing this powerful weapon in the hands of “the system” itself. Although history has not reached its “end” in terms of either its goal or its conclusion in this version, it grind to a halt nonetheless: time may pass, but, from a Left perspective, meaningful change cannot
occur—from whence would it come? A binary system does not allow for halfway measures, and, in any case, where in this totalized mass of domination could such incremental resistance be lodged? For those in the grip of such perceptions, temporality still unfolds, but without palpable difference it becomes static: a time without change leading to a future where things cannot be otherwise. Instead of the anticipated imminent totalization associated with narrative fulfillment, post-1960s radicalism inherits the extended piligoue-space of static time, a realm of imminent totalization and perpetual unfreedom.78

Static Time and the Post-1960s Ends of History

The narrative of 1960s radicalism thus ends in a place that is profoundly static: not only did the narrative push to freedom fail to produce genuine revolutionary agency, but it also left radicals in a world defined by totalized forces of control. And, because totalization failed as a revolutionary mechanism but succeeded as a means of oppression, it became a suspect weapon in its own right. Having learned from the narrative of the 1960s that grand plans make grand inquisitors, radicals were left in a totalized world of unopposed American capitalism much like that with which they began; the major difference was that now radicals had their own reasons for adopting a discourse of the “end of utopia,” to borrow Andreas Huyssen’s phrase.77

The legacies of this narrative conclusion persist in the central strains of the post-1960s political imagination of the academic Left, most obviously in American adoption of discourses of French poststructuralism. Given that French thinkers on the Left were profoundly influenced by France’s own experience of 1960s revolutionary impasse after the events associated with May 1968, poststructuralism’s connection to the declension narrative is not surprising. In a particularly negative account of this connection, Marshall Berman argues that it is this congruence that made French poststructuralism so attractive to America Left academics: “[Michel] Foucault offers a generation of refugees from the 1960s a world-historical alibi for the sense of passivity and helplessness that gripped so many of us in the 1970s. There is no point in trying to resist the oppressions and injustices of modern life, since even our dreams of freedom only add more links to our chains; however, once we grasp the total futility of it all, at least we can relax.”79 Berman reasons that the post-1960s sense of futility and stasis offers an escape-hatch from the difficult business of political action, which both Foucault and his American counterparts required. Although it is easy to refute the more polemic aspects of Berman’s assertions—certainly Foucault’s political engagement and activism are well known—his statement does highlight the way in which some aspects of poststructuralism mirror the sense of closure and impasse associated with the end of the 1960s. In a similar if less dismissive reading of L’après-Mai, the long intellectual fall-out of 1960s radicalism in France, Peter Starr argues that French theory has been haunted by what he calls “logics of failed revolt,” a set of propositions that insist that revolutionary efforts are necessarily doomed.80 What binds these different logics together is the conviction that revolutions inevitably recreate that which they oppose, so that every such effort ends in establishing yet another totalizing system, replacing one Master with another.81 In a fashion reminiscent of Niethammer, Starr argues that such readings “served as argumentative pretexts, allowing [Roland] Barthes, [Julia] Kristeva, [Hélène] Cixous, and others to construct the existing political field as an impasse in order to justify significant displacements of political energies (including a politicization of the literary text).”81

For Starr, the “tactical usefulness of [this] revolutionary double-bind” lies in its ability to absorb the thinker of engaging in political action rather than literary study.81

Yet the very existence of this link between contemporary theory and the experience of static time I have been tracing indicates that the adoption of logics of failed revolt may not be as voluntarist as arguments like Starr’s and Berman’s would suggest. As I have suggested, the narrative process linking time, totalization and immediacy straitjackets the trajectory of 1960s radicalism. This narrative offers a vision of political action that leads inexorably to a final battle that, against all expectations, was lost, leaving radicals trapped in a world in which domination is total and there seems to be no adequate ground for resistance. Moreover, as radicals find themselves facing a world in which every meaning is totalized in the shape of inescapable domination, the centrality of narrative and totalization to revolutionary politics becomes a problem in its own right: at issue is not simply that the revolution failed to come to pass but also that revolutionary discourse shares rather too many characteristics with the totalized landscape of oppression around us. Even if the revolutionaries won, their own reliance on the narrative logic of history seems a sign that they would only have replaced one totalized system with another. From this perspective, the only hope lies in finding a way to imagine political action and resistance that does not inevitably reproduce the narrative juggernaut connecting temporal progression, totalization and immediacy. And, for this reason, all the elements that contribute to the narrative logic I have been describing—totality,
immediacy, narrative itself—not surprisingly come to seem treacherous concepts to be avoided in their own right.

Given this reading, the post-1960s ascendancy of theories of pervasive oppression and revolutionary impasse might be understood to arise less from the need for to excuse political apathy than from the seemingly watertight and inescapable logic of time and totalization itself. Moreover, for those in the grip of this logic, attempts to shift us past the impasse that Berman and Starr describe will only appear perilously and willfully naïve. Although from this vantage point we may not be able to imagine a lever that could shift the totalized world we have inherited, to pretend that this is not our world, or that revolutionary narratives can offer a better one, would require closing one’s eyes to the true extent of the problem—a potentially disastrous act of cowardice and complicity. Images of a world of total domination may not be appealing, but from this perspective such images at least provide the small consolation that one has done the ethical thing in facing the grim truth. The narrative legacies of the 1960s for the Left thus include not only the story of static time but also a deep suspicion of every story but that one.

For critics in the grip of this suspicion, the sense that we have arrived at “politics out of history,” in Wendy Brown’s phrase, is a conclusion to be welcomed, even if this realization also places us in a disorienting and confusing space. Yet even attempts to locate the radical in the aporias of totalizing systems still belong to the ideological grouping that links temporal development, totalization and immediacy. That is, such theories don’t dispute that totalization, temporalization and immediacy operate according to the synergistic logic I have described—quite the contrary: they foreground the dangers that accompany that logic, in particular its inexorable push toward epistemological and temporal closure. Such approaches resist adopting any totalizing structures because the logic structuring temporal development, totalization, and immediacy seems so seductive, potent and ubiquitous. The attempt to thwart epistemological and temporal closure, to privilege the unconceptualized event over the diachronic determination of narrative, indicates a desire to escape or confound the logic of narrative totalization rather than the belief that such logic is illusory, impotent, or inconsequential.

Jacques Derrida offers a particularly indicative version of this approach in Spectres of Marx and his follow-up essay, “Marx and Sons.” Derrida critiques what he terms Walter Benjamin’s messianism for falling into the trap of attributing a specific (religious) content to the promise of the messianic, predetermining its shape and thus diluting the justice the messianic might provide. Instead, Derrida privileges a messianic event that is “necessarily undetermined, empty, [and] abstract,” and “must exceed and surprise every determinant anticipation.” Whether or not Derrida’s messianic truly diverges from Benjamin’s “weak messianic power” can obviously be debated—and contradictory readings of Benjamin’s notoriously dense and illusive “Theses” certainly abound. However, Derrida’s critique is telling in itself in that it links temporalized epistemological indeterminacy with positive social transformation (“justice” and “revolution” in Derrida’s terminology). As its affiliation with “surprise” suggests, the Derridean messianic escapes the problem of narrative totalization associated with religious and revolutionary fulfillment by deleting the narrative altogether: if we don’t know what will happen or when, there can be no narrative leading up to that event, no chance for the coalescence of meaning that shapes narrative. Although the same might be said for Benjamin’s description, Derrida goes one step further by deleting foreknowledge not only of when the messianic will occur but also of what it will be. By rendering the event free from content, the Derridean messianic breaks completely the link between future event and epistemological closure on which narrative totalization relies. We cannot produce a totalizing narrative leading to a goal if we do not know the content of the goal, since there is no meaning available for the narrative to encode. Yet, in so doing, Derrida ratifies the logic of time and totalization that presents any attempt to achieve a future political aim as inevitably creating an epistemological determination equivalent to unfreedom: he tries to impede the working of this logic, but he does not dispute it.

This drive to resist totalizing universals has also been associated with the other major form of late twentieth-century political discourse on the academic Left—that of identity politics. Because the Hegelian model of history functions by engaging and subsuming differences into its own totalizing and teleological narrative, the production of identity politics operates as a key sign of the eradication of narrative totalization on the Left, resulting in a world in which “[d]ifference has turned against development,” as Osborne puts it. Such readings tend to position identity politics as a beneficiary and celebrant of the failure of totalization as a mode of Left politics, which in its Marxist variant is assumed to have erased other forms of difference in favor of a falsely universalizing class identity. From this perspective, the loss of the potential for totalizing transformation is not seen as a loss per se for radicals of color, who are assumed to have been always already aligned with the breakdown of such universals. As Madhu Dubey argues in her analysis of the role of African Americans in postmodern theory, minorities thus function as “prized carriers of
epistemological or cultural difference in a way that can overlook more complex forms of historical interpolation and political affiliation. In particular, such readings of minorities as symbols of an antitotalizing epistemology erase the affiliation of black radicals in the 1960s with universalizing discourses of revolutionary transformation. For example, while critiques of universals are certainly commonplace in Black Power discourse,98 they exist alongside more total desires for social change both during and after the 1960s. As Marianne DeKoven argues in her analysis of 1960s black radical writing,

For Fanon, as for theorists of Civil Rights and Black Power in the US context, the revolutionary decolonization movements of third world liberation would at once aim toward particular goals of the group... and also, at the same time, serve as harbinger or advance guard or agent of a universal, revolutionary, utopian transformation of all society worldwide. In the postmodern aftermath of these movements, the universal revolutionary agenda, taken for granted by everyone politically active in the sixties, either fell away or was repudiated as antithetical to each movement’s particularistic goals, defined by what has become identity politics, in which the metanarratives of universalism are revealed as inherently exclusionary, hierarchical, and founded on the interests of the white European male, and therefore hostile to the local, specific agendas of separate, distinct nonhegemonic groups.99

During the 1960s, black radicalism combined a particularist agenda with one for world transformation. However, after such avenues of total transformation are both foreclosed and rendered suspect by the implosive end of the 1960s, the new, universal world associated with the revolutionary future is erased as well, leaving only the local, discrete, and partial as an avenue of identification. To ignore the earlier investment in revolutionary totalization is to perceive black radicalism as somehow untouched by the declension narrative—an especially problematic assumption given that black radicals were narrated as constituting the frontline in both the hopes for total world transformation during in the 1960s and the violent eradication of those hopes by the decade’s end. To put it another way, when we read black radicalism in the 1960s solely as signaling the emergence of new post-1960s minority politics, we read it as epiphenomenal in the much the way Dubey critiques—as a byproduct of rather than a participant in the experience of revolutionary impasse associated with the end of the 1960s.

If instead we displace these assumptions, it becomes possible to discern the ways in which static time haunts the discourse of identity politics, perhaps most obviously in debates over the ideological signature of trauma and melancholia in the 1980s and 1990s. When identity is equated with a traumatic past of historical injustice, working through or eradicating that trauma can appear to reinforce teleological narratives of historical development that are perceived to be complicit in the production of the trauma in the first place.91 As Dominick LaCapra has argued in his reading of trauma studies, “what is not theorized in this frame of reference is the possibility of working-through [painful memories] in which totalization (as well as redemption—whether putatively successful or failed) is actively resisted.”92 In other words, such theories posit that there is no way to work through the trauma that is not also a means of acceding to a totalizing narrative of historical progression. Yet this approach makes the refusal of totalization dependent on the refusal to relinquish the trauma in question, requiring that the subject hold onto pain if he or she is to resist assimilation into a falsely homogeneous futurity. This logic inscribes a vicious circle at the heart of identity politics: if the identity is predicated on past injustices, then to be healed of the effects of those injustices is in a sense to be cured of the identity itself—to be reabsorbed into liberalism’s totalizing conception of abstract citizenship.93 Once again, narrative progression is both necessary for political transformation and ineradicably tainted by its totalizing operations, leaving radicals to choose between a false, imprisoning futurity and a present defined by oppression. And, as in Derrida’s response, the turn to trauma attempts to thwart but does not actually invalidate the narrative logic linking totalization, futurity, and domination—that is, the narrative logic that produces static time.

Locating a true horizon for static time—moving beyond the struggle between the narrative of freedom and the freedom from narrative—would require nullifying or supereeding at least one of the fundamental assumptions linking immediacy, totalization, and futurity: for example, the equation of epistemological closure and temporal proximity or the equation of epistemological uniformity and social unfreedom. Through their very circularity and contentiousness, Left academic struggles with these issues in the 1980s and 1990s demonstrated both the extreme difficulty of locating an escape from this logic and the high political stakes and intense investments that accompanied the attempt. As the chapters that follow argue in detail, feminism’s participation in and emergence from 1960s radicalism inevitably entangled it in these attempts. While historians have presented feminism as both the death knell and the primary successor of 1960s radicalism,94 I will suggest that the particular potency of feminist discourse lay in its ability to play both of these roles simultaneously: on the one hand, second-wave feminism was steeped in the logics of political progress I have been describing, while on the other, it offered a
new and compelling symbolic register and thus new opportunities for thinking through problems in the temporalization of politics. Despite the potency and popularity of this symbolic register, however, feminist discourse faced a Herculean task with regard to the reimagina­tion of politics after the 1960s: given its affiliations with 1960s radicalism, feminism inherited not only the imprisoning logic of time, totaliza­tion, and immediacy that structured the three phases of 1960s narratives but also the ethical imperative to face the seemingly true extent of totalized epistemological violence that accompanies the 1960s' conclusion. To the extent that feminist discourse wished to picture a world in which positive transformation could be imagined, it had to somehow escape this devil's choice between the apparent truth that the world could not be changed and the criminal blindness implied in simply ignoring that truth.