



Left Legalism/Left Critique

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In recent decades, left political projects in the United States have taken a strong legalistic turn. From affirmative action to protection against sexual harassment, from indigenous peoples' rights to gay marriage, the struggle to eliminate subordination or exclusion and to achieve substantive equality has been waged through courts and legislation. At the same time, critiques of legalism have generally come to be regarded by liberal and left reformers as politically irrelevant at best, politically disunifying and disorienting at worst. This conjunction of a turn toward left legalism with a turn away from critique has hardened an intellectually defensive, brittle, and unreflective left sensibility at a moment when precisely the opposite is needed. Certainly, the left can engage strategically with the law, but if it does not also track the effects of this engagement—effects that often exceed or even rebound against its explicit aims—it will unwittingly foster political institutions and doctrines strikingly at odds with its own values.

Brown and Halley have assembled essays from diverse contributors—law professors, philosophers, political theorists, and literary critics—united chiefly by their willingness to think critically *from the left about* left legal projects. The essays themselves vary by topic, by theoretical approach, and by conclusion. While some contributors attempt to rework particular left legal projects, others insist upon abandoning or replacing those projects. Still others leave open the question of what is to be done as they devote their critical attention to understanding what we are doing. Above all, *Left Legalism/Left Critique* is a rare contemporary argument and model for the intellectually exhilarating and politically enriching dimensions of left critique—dimensions that persist even, and perhaps especially, when critique is unsure of the intellectual and political possibilities it may produce.

Contributors: Lauren Berlant, Wendy Brown, Judith Butler, Drucilla Cornell, Richard T. Ford, Katherine M. Franke, Janet Halley, Mark Kelman, David Kennedy, Duncan Kennedy, Gillian Lester, Michael Warner

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