

### **Seminar Abstract Instructions**

*Each Member in the School will give a presentation at the weekly School Seminar. While we do not ask for your paper or any readings to be submitted in advance, we do require a one-page abstract of your talk for our School's archive. Below is an example; please follow this formatting and submit to Munirah Bishop (mbishop@ias.edu), prior to or immediately following your presentation.*

## **"What is Left of Freedom?"**

**Wendy Brown**

Our current global conjuncture features three major crises. There is the crisis of the "Great Acceleration"—rapidly increasing climate change and declining biodiversity, along with a host of social, political, and economic entailments. There is the crisis of constitutional democracy, identified above all with the ethnonationalist, authoritarian or neofascist political formations taking hold in many established as well as newer liberal democratic nations worldwide. And there is the crisis of equality, expressed in unprecedented extremes of wealth and poverty, and in pitched battles over the present and future of racial stratification and imperial right, within and between nations and hemispheres.

These crises in turn implicate orders and arrangements of power that have, in various iterations, governed the world through much of modernity: capitalism, Euro-Atlantic political and economic hegemony, a modernist humanism bound to normative white masculinity, and an orientation to the planet eschewing its fragile, interconnected life forms.

This project refracts these three crises through the problematic of *freedom*. It does not argue that freedom is either causal or the only lens through which these crises may be known and thought. Rather the aim is to discover whether close scrutiny of the play of freedom in each might reveal something important about the crises themselves and about the glaring predicaments of freedom in our time, especially the ways in which it has become an anti-social and anti-democratic instrument of the Right.

What are the nuances and implications of a Western tradition of freedom that signifies independence, sovereignty, autonomy, choice, and sometimes emancipation and democracy yet has also historically served to legitimate social and ecological subjugation and plunder? What of freedom's historical identification with human mastery or domination of "nature," both our own and that we imagine to be "external"? What of freedom's long historical imbrication with, indeed legitimation of, slavery, colonialism and imperialism, and its ideological identification with unregulated capitalism? What are the costs of modern and especially liberal freedom's identification with individual as opposed to collective social and political practices? This project presumes that study and theorization of these legacies, along with freedom's current iterations in right wing politics, may help illuminate our contemporary condition—its predicaments, perils, and possibilities. It also examines whether or how freedom might be recuperated to mobilize passions and a framework for a sustainable, democratic, and egalitarian future, and asks whether and where such recuperation might be immanent to existing relations of power.