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1

Feminism and the
Subject of Politics*Amy Allen*

For at least the past twenty-five years, feminist theory has been obsessed with the so-called problem of the subject. This problem emerged in the 1980s as a result of the enormous influence of a particular strand of post-structuralist thought on feminism. Inspired by the work of Michel Foucault, in particular by his notion of subjection (*assujettissement*), a number of feminist theorists began conceptualizing gendered subjects as constituted through a process of subjection to power relations.¹ The idea that the gendered subject is constituted by subjection in the Foucaultian sense has proved to be quite fruitful but also quite controversial for feminist theory, raising as it does the concern that such subjects might be wholly determined by the power relations that constitute them: hence, the problem of the subject.² Seyla Benhabib poses the central question raised by the problem of the subject as follows:

can we think of political/moral/cultural agency only insofar as we retain a robust conception of the autonomous, rational, and accountable subject, or is a concept of the subject as fragmentary and riveted by heterogeneous forces more conducive to understanding varieties of resistance and cultural struggles of the present?³

However one answers this question, regardless of whether one envisions the subject as rational and autonomous or as constituted by heterogeneous power relations (or perhaps, as is most difficult but ultimately most productive, as simultaneously both), for the past twenty-five years feminist theorists have assumed that this is an important topic of debate.

As Christine di Stefano has argued, this concern with the relationship between the subject and power is not unique to feminist theory writ large, but is also a central concern of feminist political theory. As she puts the point: "Feminist political philosophy (a.k.a. feminist political theory) addresses and engages a myriad of issues concerning women's experiences and prospects as political beings; which is to say, as subjects of power."⁴ This

characterization of the task of feminist political theory clearly puts the relationship between the subject and power at the heart of that project.

Recently, however, this vision of feminist theory in general and feminist political theory in particular has been called into question. For instance, Linda Zerilli argues in her book *Feminism and the Abyss of Freedom* that debates over notions of subjectivity, subjection, agency, self-transformation, and autonomy are neither theoretically nor politically fruitful for feminism. Zerilli's critique of what she calls the subject-centered frame turns on her claim that it casts freedom "strictly as a subject question, while subject formation comes increasingly to be interpreted in terms of radical subjection to agencies outside the self..."⁵ Zerilli finds it difficult to see how this theoretical framework could ever envision or inspire a truly transformative, freedom-enabling politics.⁶ As she sees it, if we want to develop such a politics, feminists ought to shift our focus away from the Foucaultian and Butlerian drama of individual subjection and self-transformation and toward an Arendtian conception of freedom centered on plurality and action in the public space. We are better off, according to Zerilli, thinking of freedom as a world question than as a subject question. That is to say, freedom is, for Zerilli, a collective practice of world-building, not, or at least not primarily, an individual practice of or capacity for self-transformation. Indeed, Zerilli goes so far as to suggest that subjection and self-transformation are not properly *political* issues at all. Zerilli's critique of the subject-centered frame is both a conceptual and a political one. She argues both that it is not possible to solve the problem of the subject given the terms within which it has been framed and that feminists' focus on the issues of subjection and self-transformation is politically disabling. In Wittgensteinian fashion, she proposes that rather than trying to solve the problem of the subject, feminists should dissolve it, by dispensing with the subject-centered frame altogether and adopting instead a theoretical framework centered on the idea of freedom.⁷

It is not at all clear to me that Zerilli's attempt to displace the subject-centered frame actually dissolves the problems she aims to dissolve, nor does it avoid generating worrisome problems of its own.⁸ Be that as it may, her critique of the prominence of the problem of the subject in contemporary feminist theory raises a number of important issues that feminists would do well to consider. First and foremost is the issue of the importance – or lack thereof – and fruitfulness – or lack thereof – of the Foucaultian and Butlerian notion of subjection for feminist theory in general and feminist political theory in particular. In the background here is the deeper and more difficult question of how feminists ought to define and conceptualize the political. After all, whether or not the problem of the subject counts as a properly political issue obviously turns on the prior, though often implicit, issue of how one defines the political. Because the concept of the political is closely related to the notion of power – indeed, one might argue that power

is the subject matter of political theory – the question of how to define the political is inseparable from the question of how one understands power. In what follows, I take up these three issues – the importance of subjection, the concept of the political, and the definition of power – in turn. My argument is that understanding subjection is a crucial task for feminist theory in general and for feminist political theory in particular, but that by itself it is not enough. The feminist analysis and critique of subjection as an intrasubjective mechanism must be pursued in connection with an analysis of the collective and intersubjective dimensions of political engagement in the public sphere. Failure to theorize the connections between these two dimensions of the political leaves us unable to fully understand either one. Thus, the task for feminist political theory is to bring together into one theoretical framework a focus on both the intrasubjective and the intersubjective,⁹ to understand how the subject is both constituted by power but also at the same time capable of being autonomously self-constituting. Filling in all the details of such a framework is obviously beyond the scope of one paper; my main goal in what follows is to motivate this project and to sketch out its general contours.

Subjection in feminist political theory

The question of whether or not the notion of subjection is important or fruitful for feminist theory cannot be answered in a vacuum. A question such as this one can only be answered on the basis of a prior understanding – whether implicit or explicit – of the aims of feminist theory itself. Accordingly, let me begin by proposing the following as a programmatic account of the primary aims of feminist theory and practice: to understand, critique, and transform – both individually and collectively – relations of subordination based on gender as they interrelate with other axes of subordination, particularly those based on race, sexuality, and class.

Obviously any general account of the aims of feminism is likely to be controversial. Although I cannot offer a full defense of my account here,¹⁰ a few words in its favor are in order. First, by linking the intellectual projects of diagnosing and critiquing gender subordination to the practical-political goal of progressive transformation, this account highlights the relationship between theory and practice that has been as central to feminism as an intellectual movement. To paraphrase Marx, the point of feminist theory is not only to understand the world as structured by gender subordination, but also to change it.¹¹ Second, framing the aims of feminist theory in terms of the category of gender subordination (and its relations to other modes of subordination) as opposed to the category of woman enables us to sidestep the fraught debates over the essentializing and exclusionary nature of the latter term.¹² A third, and related, benefit of this account is that because it does not define the aims of feminism in terms of the interests of women as

a group, it enables us to thematize the intersectional and cross-cutting nature of power relations based on gender, race, class, and sexuality. Finally, this account is open to both micro-level analyses of how subordination is reproduced and maintained through everyday practices and interactions and macro-level accounts of how mechanisms of subordination are rooted in broader institutional contexts, cultural forms, and social, economic, and political structures. Inasmuch as both micro- and macro-level analyses offer important insights into our understanding of gender subordination, its interrelations with racial, sexual, and class-based subordination, and the possibilities for its progressive transformation, both are important avenues for feminist inquiry.

If you'll grant me that this account of the aims of feminism is plausible, then it seems fairly obvious that analyzing and critiquing contemporary gender subordination – and its complicated interrelations with racial, sexual, and class-based subordination – in all its depth and complexity is a crucial task for feminists. Although this certainly does not exhaust the project of feminism, without this kind of analysis, feminist theory would be radically incomplete. In my view, Foucault's analyses of power and subjection provide a useful framework for accomplishing this task. As I have argued in more detail elsewhere, Foucault's relational conception of power is fruitful for understanding intersecting and cross-cutting relations of power, his microphysics of power resonates with second-wave feminists' emphasis on the personal as political, and his account of normalizing, disciplinary power has inspired brilliant feminist critiques of normative femininity.¹³ To my mind, however, the most important insight of Foucault's analysis of power is its emphasis on in the interplay between constraint and enablement that is central to his account of subjection. Foucault uses the term subjection (*assujettissement*) to refer to our "constitution as subjects in both senses of the word."¹⁴ On Foucault's view, we in the late modern West are constituted as subjects who are capable of thought and action in and through a process of subjection to disciplinary and normalizing power relations. The individual subject, for Foucault, is not a pre-given entity on which power acts or against which it is applied; rather, the individual subject is an effect of power, enabled to be a subject in and through the operation of normalizing, disciplinary constraints.¹⁵ By theorizing the interplay between constraint and enablement at the heart of Foucault's notion of subjection, feminists are able to highlight both the complicated intertwining of gender, power, and identity that is a constitutive part of our personhood, and the ways in which our own efforts at a progressive self-transformation of our gender identity are shaped and informed and to some extent circumscribed by those gendered power relations that are encoded in our language, family structure, cultural meanings, social practices, political institutions, and modes of subjectivity.¹⁶

To be sure, as many of his critics have argued, it may seem as if Foucault highlights the intertwining of power and subjectivity a bit *too* well, so well that if one accepts his analysis of power it becomes difficult if not impossible to envision agency, autonomy or resistance. But this criticism is based on a truncated reading of Foucault's account of subjection. Foucault's notion of subjection is Janus-faced: subjection involves being subjected to power relations but this process produces subjects who are capable of action and even of autonomy.¹⁷ But free action and autonomy are always conditioned and inflected by power relations. This does not mean that critical reflection and/or progressive self-transformation are impossible, but it does mean that we have no choice but to start from where we are, as beings profoundly shaped by the intertwining of power and gender. Thus, self-transformation will be a question of how we can, as Judith Butler has put it, "work the power relations by which we are worked, and in what direction?"¹⁸ This does not, however, entail the overly pessimistic and one-sidedly negative conclusion, often erroneously attributed to Foucault, that the subject is wholly determined by power.

A central problem for all theories of subordination is explaining how and why subordinated individuals fail to resist their condition or, worse, are co-opted into reproducing and maintaining their own subordinated position.¹⁹ To some extent, Foucault's account of subjection addresses this problem: subordinated individuals are co-opted into reproducing their own subordination through the mechanism of subjection. But, as Butler argues, this answer seems curiously hollow inasmuch as it fails to address the question of why anyone would be motivated to capitulate to this process of subjection. Foucault's lack of interest in the interiority of the subject and his suspicion of depth psychology are no doubt to blame for this limitation of his account. Butler's psychoanalytic twist on Foucault's account of subjection, by contrast, offers a compelling explanation for this problem. Butler argues that if our recognition as social beings is dependent on our capitulation to subordinating norms, then we will have a powerful motivation to capitulate. Disciplinary regimes exploit this basic desire for recognition, and subordinated individuals all too easily become attached to and invested in their own subordination, which motivates them to reproduce and maintain it, even after such modes of subordination have been subjected to rational critique.²⁰ Butler's account of subjection, then, provides a framework for understanding why and how those who are subject to gender subordination often engage in, uphold and/or reinforce practices, institutions, and modes of subjectivity that they themselves recognize as oppressive or subordinating.

This account of subjection offers a compelling – though perhaps disturbing – analysis of the depth and complexity of gender subordination. However, by itself it certainly does not meet all of the aims of feminist theory that I sketched out above (nor do I think Butler or Foucault

would claim that it does!). What seems most obviously lacking is an analysis of the possibilities for collective negotiation and transformation of gender subordination. This is an important oversight not only because collective social movements such as the feminist movement, civil rights movements, labor movements, and gay liberation movements have been important forces for progressive and transformative social and political change over the past century. Although this is no doubt true, this way of putting the point formulates the problem in terms that are largely external to Foucault and Butler's views. Perhaps they could simply respond that they are not interested in theorizing collective social movements. After all, no one theorist can reasonably be expected to talk about everything. But their lack of attention to the collective dimension of power and political engagement also generates a problem that is *internal* to their accounts of subjection. The important point here is that collective political engagement in the public sphere provides an important site of and crucial resources for the negotiation, deconstruction, and reconstruction of social identity. For example, as both Nancy Fraser and Jane Mansbridge have argued, feminists working collectively in subaltern counterpublic spaces have been able to generate new language for describing social reality – including sexism, male chauvinism, sexual harassment, date rape, the double shift, and so on – language that has enabled many people (not just women, and not just feminists) to recast their identities and to resist and transform power relations in their daily lives.²¹ Thus, the relationship between the subject and power cannot be understood solely from the intrasubjective point of view offered by the Foucaultian and Butlerian account of subjection, but must also be understood in light of collective, intersubjective engagements in the public sphere.

This is the kernel of truth in Zerilli's critique of the problem of the subject. She rightly points out that even individual self-transformation cannot be properly understood absent an account of the intersubjective social and political conditions that make it possible and that these conditions are a function of collective engagements in the public sphere.²² But it is, I believe, a mistake to suggest, as Zerilli does, that the problem of the subject and the issue of self-transformation are therefore not properly political issues, and that only collective, public sphere engagements count as genuinely political. To show why this is a mistake, I turn now to the question: how should feminists conceptualize the political?

Feminism and "The Political"

Implicit in the preceding discussion about whether subjection is an important notion for feminist political theory is a deeper and more difficult question about how to define the political. When Zerilli suggests that subjection and individual self-transformation are not properly political

issues, she does so on the basis of an Arendtian conception of politics as collective action in the public space. For Arendt, the public space and collective action are intimately connected with her conception of power, for power, according to Arendt, "is what keeps the public realm, the potential space of appearance between acting and speaking men, in existence,"²³ and is famously defined by her as "the human ability not just to act but to act in concert."²⁴ Power "springs up between men when they act together and vanishes the moment they disperse."²⁵ For Arendt, power, and therefore politics itself, is necessarily tied to collective action in the public space. This link to collective action makes politics an inherently messy and unpredictable activity; when we act in public we have neither foreknowledge of nor control over how our actions will be taken up and acted upon by others. Arendt's beliefs about the unpredictability and irreversibility of political action explain why the notions of promising and forgiveness, respectively, are so important to her political thought.²⁶

As far as I know neither Foucault nor Butler ever offers an explicit definition of the political (and perhaps they, unlike Arendt, would object to the attempt to do so, for reasons I will come back to in a moment). Still, one can infer from their work an understanding of the political that, like Arendt's, is defined in terms of power, but that, unlike Arendt's, presupposes a less rosy – though, it is important to emphasize, not entirely negative – view of power. As Foucault puts it in a late interview, power relations are "the strategies by which individuals try to direct and control the conduct of others."²⁷ However, as is clear from the preceding discussion of subjection, Foucault does not define power exclusively in terms of constraint; also central to the phenomenon of subjection is the interrelated notion of empowerment. As he puts it, "power is exercised only over free subjects, and only insofar as they are free."²⁸ In a similar vein, Butler writes: "As a subject *of* power (where 'of' connotes both 'belonging to' and 'wielding'), the subject eclipses the conditions of its own emergence; it eclipses power with power."²⁹ This eclipsing of power with power is the site of empowerment and agency and, thus, resistance to subordination. However, since this agency is made possible by subjection to power in the first place, it is an inherently ambivalent form of agency. Thus, Butler understands the subject as "*neither* fully determined by power *nor* fully determining of power (but significantly and partially both)."³⁰ Similarly, Foucault argues,

Maybe the problem of the self is not to discover what it is in its positivity, maybe the problem is not to discover a positive self or the positive foundation of the self. Maybe our problem is now to discover that the self is nothing else than the historical correlation of the technology built in our history. Maybe the problem is to change those technologies. And in this case, one of the main political problems would be nowadays, in the strict sense of the word, the politics of ourselves.³¹

Implicit in this notion of the politics of our selves is not only a certain view of the self – namely that it is both the site of inscription of contemporary power relations and the locus of potential transformation of such power relations – but also a certain view of *politics*, according to which politics (what Foucault also calls government) concerns precisely the intersection of technologies of domination – basically, relations of power over others – and technologies of the self – ways in which the subject acts on itself, takes up those technologies of domination, and transforms them.

To be sure, these two conceptions of the political do not exhaust the available options. One could also define the political in terms of friend/enemy relations,³² or in terms of the justness of the basic structure of society,³³ or in terms of the use of public reason to discuss constitutional essentials,³⁴ or more narrowly in terms of governmental institutions, public policies, and voting behavior.³⁵ But the two conceptions sketched above – the Arendtian conception that defines the political in terms of collective power (or power-with) and the Foucaultian/Butlerian one that defines it in terms of the interplay between domination (a pernicious form of power-over) and individual empowerment (power-to) – represent two of the more influential conceptions in contemporary political theory, at least of that wing of political theory that looks to the continental European tradition for its inspiration. These two conceptions have also been particularly influential for feminist theory. The question then becomes: which of these conceptions of the political should feminists favor? Or should we feel compelled to choose between them at all?

This question in turn leads to a still deeper question: (how) should feminists decide between these competing conceptions? It is not at all obvious how best to go about adjudicating these different understandings of the political. By what criteria do we evaluate competing conceptions of the political anyway? Must we even assume that there is only one true or correct definition of the political? Is “the political” some metaphysically or ontologically distinct space or realm whose features can be teased out either phenomenologically or through a priori reflection or whose necessary and sufficient conditions can be established through analytical argument? Or is the political itself a contested concept, perhaps even an essentially contested concept? Might our conception of the political not be constituted or at least influenced in some fundamental way by the interests that we bring to the study of politics in the first place? Might not the claim that something is or is not properly political itself be understood as a political move, in the sense of an attempt to de-authorize or even silence a view that one disagrees with or finds distasteful?

The assumption that it is possible to define the political once and for all is questionable for at least two reasons. First, it rests on the further assumption that we as theorists are capable of transcending our embodied and situated forms of life and of producing theoretical conceptions that are independent

of our particular interests and points of view. A huge body of philosophical scholarship – including the work of post-Kantian continental philosophers, American pragmatists, and feminist theorists – has called this assumption into question.³⁶ To the contrary, this work suggests that reason – and the concepts that are the products of rational reflection – is inherently impure, embodied, and embedded in social, historical, and cultural context and thus inflected by relations of power.³⁷ Second, this assumption is especially problematic from a feminist point of view, as it fails to acknowledge one of the key lessons of the second wave of feminist activism: namely, that it is possible to re-draw the boundaries between private and public, personal and political, precisely through a process of political contestation. The success that second-wave feminists had in politicizing issues such as domestic violence, date and marital rape, and sexual harassment provides ample evidence for this lesson. Through struggle and activism, feminists were able to establish these not as private matters that affected only individuals but as matters of concern to all because of their role in upholding and reinforcing the structural subordination of women. As di Stefano puts the point, “the question of what ought to count as properly political cannot be settled pre-politically.”³⁸ Our conception of the political is itself open to change as the result of new, ongoing, open-ended processes of politicization.

So, to figure out how feminists should conceptualize the political, we need to think about the interests that feminists bring to the study of politics in the first place. To address this issue, I refer back to the account I gave earlier of the aims of feminist theory and practice. If we assume that among the principle aims of feminist theory and practice are the goals of understanding, critiquing, and transforming – both individually and collectively – relations of subordination based on gender as they interrelate with relations of subordination based on race, sexuality, and class, we can then ask which conception of the political sketched above, the Arendtian or the Foucaultian one, best enables us to meet these aims? Or, to prefigure my argument, are they mutually exclusive? Must we choose between them? Or might it not be possible to sketch out an expanded conception of the political and of power that encompasses both Arendtian and Foucaultian insights?

Let’s start with the Foucaultian conception of politics. Since I have already discussed the usefulness of Foucault’s account in some detail, I can be brief. I have argued that Foucault’s and Butler’s notions of subjection provide useful ways of illuminating gender subordination in all its depth and complexity. Moreover, as Foucault indicates with the phrase the politics of ourselves, his account highlights the interplay between the technologies of domination that are constitutive of individual subjectivity and the technologies of the self whereby individuals take up such power-relations in self-constituting and potentially transformative ways. This notion of the politics of our selves enables feminists to make sense of the ways in which

subordination and empowerment are intertwined, thus, helping us to avoid the twin dangers of, on the one hand, viewing women as passive victims of gender subordination or, on the other hand, valorizing the qualities and characteristics of powerlessness in the name of championing women's empowerment. However, as important as it is for feminist theory, the Foucaultian account of power and the political is not wholly satisfactory. It can and should be faulted for its lack of sufficient attention to the collective and intersubjective dimensions of power and the political. This lacuna in Foucault's analysis of power has the effect of blinding him to the positive and transformative possibilities of collective action, and to the extent to which individual projects of self-transformation are dependent on such collective engagements. In part this was a principled blindness. Foucault was suspicious of the notion of consensuality that seemed to him to ground this Arendtian conception of the political.³⁹ In a thinly veiled swipe at Arendt, Foucault insisted that power "is not a function of consent"⁴⁰ and, although it "can be the result of a prior or permanent consent, ... it is not by nature the manifestation of a consensus."⁴¹ When asked in a late interview whether he would be willing to endorse the norm of consensus found in the work of Arendt and also of Habermas, Foucault replied, "the farthest I would go is to say that perhaps one must not be for consensuality, but one must be against nonconsensuality."⁴² Foucault's hesitance here most likely stems from his apparent discomfort with any and all normative notions, which raises the question of whether his account of normalizing power is compatible with any sort of normative analysis of power whatsoever. I shall return to this question below.

This brings us to the importance of the Arendtian account. For, feminists need not only to analyze domination in all its depth and complexity, but also to theorize the possibilities for both individual and collective transformation and empowerment. Clearly we cannot understand collective transformation without some notion of collective action or power-with, which neither Foucault nor Butler provides. In addition, as I argued above, we cannot even adequately understand individual self-transformation without some account of collective engagement in the public sphere, for these are intricately interrelated. For these purposes, the Arendtian conception of politics as collective action in the public sphere is no doubt invaluable. If we want to understand how we can best work to overcome and/or transform existing relations of gender subordination, then it is not sufficient (though it is, I think, necessary) to get our theory of the subject right. We will also have to think about how feminists can collectively press for change on a broader cultural, social, and political level, and how these collective engagements are interconnected with individual projects of self-transformation.

However, the Arendtian understanding of politics is likewise open to criticism. Defining the political solely in terms of a normative conception of collective action in the public sphere runs the risk of obscuring the forces of

domination and subordination that shape political actors before they take the stage. This conceptual exclusion leads to at least two kinds of problems. The first is that, as Wendy Brown has forcefully argued, whereas collective political engagement may be a freedom-enabling practice that allows subordinated individuals collectively to deconstruct and reconstruct their ascribed identities in more emancipatory directions, it may also be a way of acting out the pain of subordination through a kind of wounded attachment to that identity.⁴³ The problem here is the normative assumption embedded in the Arendtian conception of politics, the assumption that power is an end in itself and thus, by definition, normatively legitimate.⁴⁴ As many of Arendt's critics have pointed out, this assumption is highly dubious.⁴⁵ The question for feminist theorists, then, is this: what makes a collective exercise of power liberatory, emancipatory, or feminist? If we reject the idea that collective power generates its own legitimacy, then by what normative criteria are we to make such judgments? The problem of the normative framework for our conception of power thus emerges again, this time from the opposite direction.

The second, and related, problem with the exclusion of subjection from our conception of the political is that such an exclusion overlooks the basic Marxist point that social equality is a necessary precondition for political democracy. As Nancy Fraser puts the point, "we should question whether it is possible even in principle for interlocutors to deliberate as if they were social peers in specially designated discursive arenas, when these discursive arenas are situated in a larger societal context that is pervaded by structural relations of dominance and subordination."⁴⁶ In other words, although collective action in public or counterpublic spheres may well be a useful site for the negotiation and transformation of identity, we do not come to such action as blank slates but instead with styles of speech and comportment, bodily habitus, and psychic attachments that are all structured by relations of subordination and subjection. Social subordination can and all too often does have deleterious effects on our abilities to engage in effective political dialogue and to act in concert with others. Excluding subjection from our understanding of the political shunts this problem off to the side and thus obscures the subordination relations that constitute us as political agents. To be sure, this way of putting the point raises the problem of the subject anew. But the key question for feminists is not *whether* to include subjection within our understanding of the political, but *how* to include it without undermining the possibility of political agency and autonomy altogether?

Therefore, it seems that neither the Foucaultian nor the Arendtian conception of power and politics is satisfactory on its own, and that what feminists need is an account of the political that integrates the insights of each. However, the discussion thus far has also revealed two kinds of challenges for such an integrative account: the first concerning the normative framework that underlies our conception of power, and the second

concerning the compatibility (or lack thereof) between the notion of subjection and other crucial political concepts such as agency and autonomy. In the next section, I shall sketch the contours of an integrative feminist conception of the political and also indicate how I think these two challenges can be met.

Normativity, autonomy and the subject of power

When I say that feminists need an integrative conception of the political, I have in mind two principal kinds of integration. First, the analysis thus far suggests that we need a broader conception of power than has been offered by either Foucault or Arendt, one that integrates the Foucaultian emphasis on the simultaneously constraining and enabling force of subjection at the intrasubjective level with the Arendtian emphasis on the exercise of power through collective, intersubjective interactions in the public sphere. But it is not enough simply to include both of these as aspects of one's definition of power. We also have to pay careful attention to how each of these modes of power is related to the others. As I argued above, we cannot really understand individual projects of resistance to subordination and progressive self-transformation without thinking about the collective social and political movements that generate the vocabularies of contestation, the normative frameworks, and the conceptual resources that enable such individual actions. Similarly, we cannot forget that collective social movements are made up of individuals whose identities have been structured by social relations of subordination, and that although collective political engagement can be a powerful vehicle for resistance and progressive transformation, it can also be a mechanism for reinscribing subordination.

To some extent, the integrative analysis of power that I am proposing draws inspiration from Habermas's reflections on power. In *Between Facts and Norms*, in the course of elaborating his model of deliberative democracy, Habermas offers a conception of politics that encompasses both strategic, social power – a basically Weberian conception defined as “a measure for the possibilities an actor has in social relationships to assert his own will and interests, even against the opposition of others”⁴⁷ – and communicative power – a notion that Habermas explicitly derives from Arendt and that he uses to capture the power that is generated through collective action in both informal and formal public spheres and translated, through the medium of law, into legitimate administrative power.⁴⁸ Habermas summarizes the relationship between administrative, communicative, and social power as follows:

[I] propose that we view law as the medium through which communicative power is translated into administrative power.... We can then interpret the idea of the constitutional state in general as the requirement that

the administrative system, which is steered through the power code, be tied to the lawmaking communicative power and kept free of illegitimate interventions of social power (i.e., of the factual strength of privileged interests to assert themselves).⁴⁹

One could view this model of the political as resting on a conception of power that usefully integrates core elements of the strategic and communicative conceptions of power proposed by Foucault and Arendt, respectively.

However, my conceptualization of power differs from Habermas's in one crucial respect. Although Habermas's conception of politics does incorporate a strategic understanding of power-over relations, it does not, in my view, do justice to the phenomenon of subjection in Foucault's sense. Indeed, although Habermas is at pains to insist that his notion of the lifeworld is not free of strategic relations of power, he does tend to present both the lifeworld in general and the socialization processes that form one of its core components as free of the phenomenon of subjection.⁵⁰ His more recent work, which aims more explicitly to address the relationship between social relations of dominance and the communicative power that emerges out of and structures the lifeworld, is nevertheless open to a related criticism. As William Scheuerman puts the point,

the idea of a free-wheeling deliberative democracy remains ideological as long as avoidable social inequalities undermine the deliberative capacities of the vast majority of humankind.... *Between Facts and Norms* has nothing adequately *systematic* in character to say about "social asymmetries of power", let alone how we might go about counteracting them.⁵¹

Although I would not dare to suggest that the Foucaultian notion of subjection provides us with a complete account of social inequality, it does provide a framework for understanding a crucial element of those stubbornly persistent inequalities that are grounded in gender, race, and sexuality in particular, a framework that Habermas's work lacks.⁵²

The second kind of integration that is called for by my analysis is an account of the subject that captures both the constraining and enabling force of subjection and the possibility of meaningful political agency and autonomy. As I argued above, the Foucaultian account of subjection is not incompatible with agency and autonomy, at least as long as these are properly understood. If we accept the basic Foucaultian insight that the subject is constituted by power, then we do have to give up on the idea of an Archimedean standpoint outside of power, from which we can impartially and objectively assess the power relations that make us who we are. But, as Foucault argued in his essay "What is Enlightenment?," this does not mean that critique is impossible, only that it is "always in the position of beginning

again.⁵³ It is possible to understand the capacity for autonomy – both in the sense critical reflexivity and progressive self-transformation – as rooted in the very power relations that constitute the subject. This does not mean that autonomy is a pernicious illusion, though it does mean that it is, as I discussed above, inherently ambivalent.

This point about the ambivalence of autonomy and of critique raises, once again, the issue of the normative framework for the integrative conception of power and subjection that I have sketched. Feminist theory needs to be able to distinguish between better and worse exercises of power on both the individual and collective levels and, for that matter, between “better and worse subjectivating practices,” to borrow Nancy Fraser’s phrase.⁵⁴ The question is, how is this possible, especially in light of the account I just offered of critique and autonomy as always inflected by power relations? Doesn’t this Foucaultian conception of critique ultimately collapse normative judgments into power plays of one kind or another? To frame the question in this way is problematically to assume that there exist only two options for the normative grounding of social and political critique: either we assert a strong claim of universality and context transcendence for our normative framework or we endorse a radical contextualism that is ultimately indistinguishable from relativism. All too often, especially in debates over the uses and abuses of postmodernism for political theory, these are assumed to exhaust the available options. There is, however, a third possibility. We can endorse certain normative ideals – for example, the ideas of normative reciprocity and egalitarian universalism that underpin the Habermasian project⁵⁵ – and rely on them in our normative judgments while at the same time acknowledging that these are ideals that are rooted in the context of late Western modernity. We may take these ideals to be universal and context-transcendent, as long as we realize that the very claim to context-transcendence is itself rooted in a particular context.⁵⁶ This realization does require us to be historically self-conscious and modest about the status of our normative principles, but it does not entail that we are incapable of making normative judgments in the light of such principles.

Conclusion

Let me conclude by briefly recapitulating my argument in this chapter. I have argued, first, that feminist political theorists ought not dispense with or dissolve the problem of the subject. The problem of the subject continues to be one that we must grapple with. In a way, this conclusion is nothing new. Throughout the history of political theory, from Plato through Hobbes, Locke, Rousseau, Marx, and Mill down to Rawls, Habermas, and Foucault, our understandings of the political have long relied on prior conceptions of what a person is.⁵⁷ Second, I have argued that beneath the question of whether subjection is an important notion for feminist political theory lies

the deeper and more difficult question about how to define the political. I have suggested that we ought to view the political not as an ontologically or metaphysically intact realm or space whose boundaries can be definitively delineated but as an essentially contested concept whose boundaries are continually debated and re-negotiated through ongoing processes of politicization. In keeping with this definition, I have proposed a conception of the political that is designed to cohere with the interests that feminists bring to the study of politics. Such a conception, I argue, must include the Foucaultian notion of the politics of our selves, though it ought not to be limited to such a notion. Feminists cannot do without thinking through the politics of our selves, even if it is true that this needs to be integrated with more collectivist account of the political along Arendtian lines. The challenge for feminists is to connect up the politics of our selves with the collective dimension of politics; to theorize the relationship between the intrasubjective and the intersubjective; and to understand the connections between relations of dominance and subordination on the one hand and the possibilities for individual and collective empowerment, on the other. The framework that I have offered here is designed to enable us to meet these challenges.

Notes

I am grateful to the participants in the Workshop on Gender and Sexual Difference at the University of Alberta in October 2007 – particularly Cressida Heyes, Marguerite Deslauriers, Alia al-Saji, Gail Weiss, and L. Crawford – and the editors of this volume for their insightful comments on an earlier version of this chapter.

1. For Foucault's account of subjection, see Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, volume 1: An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage, 1978); "Society Must be Defended": *Lectures at the Collège de France 1975–1976*, trans. David Macey (New York: Picador, 2003); and "Afterword: The Subject and Power," in Hubert Dreyfus and Paul Rabinow, *Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics*, 2nd edition (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983). The most important and influential feminist deployment of the Foucaultian notion of subjection is Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990), further elaborated and developed in Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1997).
2. See, for example, Seyla Benhabib, Judith Butler, Nancy Fraser, and Drucilla Cornell, *Feminist Contentions: A Philosophical Exchange* (New York: Routledge, 1995). This concern echoes a point frequently raised by critics of Foucault, particularly by those working in the tradition of Frankfurt school critical theory. See, for example: Jürgen Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity: Twelve Lectures*, trans. Frederick G. Lawrence (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1987); Axel Honneth, *The Critique of Power: Reflective Stages in a Critical Social Theory*, trans. Kenneth Baynes (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1991); Thomas McCarthy, "The Critique of Impure Reason: Foucault and the Frankfurt School," in *Ideals and Illusions: On Deconstruction and Reconstruction in Contemporary Critical Theory* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1991). As I see it, such critics collapse Foucault's distinctively bi-valent

- notion of subjection into a one-sided determinism. I argue for this claim briefly below, and in more detail in Allen, "The Anti-Subjective Hypothesis: Michel Foucault and the Death of the Subject," *Philosophical Forum* 31: 2 (Summer 2000): 113–30 and in chapters 2 and 3 of *The Politics of Our Selves: Power, Autonomy, and Gender in Contemporary Critical Theory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008).
3. Seyla Benhabib, "Sexual Difference and Collective Identities: The New Global Constellation," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 24: 2 (1999): 335–61, 338.
 4. Christine di Stefano, "Feminist Political Philosophy," *APA Newsletter on Feminism and Philosophy* 99: 2 (Spring 2000). Available on the web at: <http://www.apaonline.org/apa/publications/newsletters/v99n2/feminism/symposium-distefano.asp>. Accessed December 23, 2007.
 5. Linda Zerilli, *Feminism and the Abyss of Freedom* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), p. 11.
 6. *Ibid.*, p. 12.
 7. To be sure, there are important feminist accounts of the concept of freedom that, contra Zerilli, take the relationship between the subject and power to be of central importance. See, for example, Wendy Brown, *States of Injury: Power and Freedom in Late Modernity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995) and Nancy Hirschmann, *The Subject of Liberty: Toward a Feminist Theory of Freedom* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002).
 8. I discuss the problems that I see with Zerilli's argument in Allen, *The Politics of Our Selves*, chapter 1.
 9. I borrow the terms "intrasubjective" and "intersubjective" from Fraser, who uses the term intrasubjective to refer to processes of subject-constitution (including, but not limited to, the kinds of intrapsychic mechanisms that Butler's Freudian/Foucaultian account of subjection highlights), whereas intersubjective refers to the relations to one another of such subjects. See Fraser, "Pragmatism, Feminism, and the Linguistic Turn," in Benhabib et al. (eds.), *Feminist Contentions*, pp. 163–4.
 10. I offer a fuller discussion and defense of this account in Allen, *The Power of Feminist Theory: Domination, Resistance, Solidarity* (Boulder: Westview, 1999), chapter 1.
 11. Karl Marx, "Theses on Feuerbach," in David McLellan (ed.), *Karl Marx: Selected Writings* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977).
 12. On this point, see Butler, *Gender Trouble*; Elizabeth Spelman, *Inessential Woman: Problems of Exclusion in Feminist Thought* (Boston: Beacon, 1989); and Zerilli, *Feminism and the Abyss of Freedom*.
 13. See Allen, "Foucault on Power: A Theory of Feminists," in Susan Hekman (ed.), *Feminist Interpretations of Michel Foucault* (University Park, PA: Penn State Press, 1996), and Allen's *The Power of Feminist Theory*, chapter 2.
 14. Foucault, *History of Sexuality, volume 1*, p. 60.
 15. Foucault, "Society Must be Defended," pp. 29–30.
 16. For excellent feminist extensions of Foucault's analysis of subjection along these lines, see Cressida Heyes, *Self-Transformations: Foucault, Ethics, and Normalized Bodies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), and Ladelle McWhorter, *Bodies and Pleasures: Foucault and the Politics of Sexual Normalization* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1999).
 17. Where autonomy is understood in the sense of the capacities for critical reflection and deliberate self-transformation. For argument to this effect, see Allen, *The Politics of Our Selves*, chapter 3.

18. Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power*, p. 100.
19. On this point, see Ann Cudd, *Analyzing Oppression* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).
20. Butler's account of subjection is not without its problems, the most significant of which is that she seems to suggest that this dynamic is indicative of all subject-formation, not just pathological modes of subject-formation under conditions of oppression. For critical discussion of Butler's account, see Allen, "Dependency, Subordination, and Recognition: On Judith Butler's Theory of Subjection," *Continental Philosophy Review* 38 (2006): 199–222, and chapter 4 of Allen's *The Politics of Our Selves*.
21. On the public sphere as a site for the negotiation of identity, see Fraser (ed.), "Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy," in *Justice Interruptus: Critical Reflections on the "Postsocialist" Condition* (New York: Routledge, 1997), pp. 81–3. On the ways in which collective social movements generate conceptual and normative resources available for individuals who are resisting subordination, see Jane Mansbridge, "The Role of Discourse in the Feminist Movement," unpublished manuscript, on file with the author.
22. See, for example, Zerilli, *Feminism and the Abyss of Freedom*, p. 181.
23. Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), p. 200.
24. Arendt, *On Violence* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and Co, 1970), p. 44.
25. Arendt, *The Human Condition*, p. 200.
26. *Ibid.*, pp. 236–47.
27. Foucault, "The Ethics of Concern for the Self as a Practice of Freedom," in Paul Rabinow (ed.), *Ethics, Subjectivity, and Truth. Vol. 1 of The Essential Works of Michel Foucault*, (New York: The New Press, 1997), p. 298.
28. Foucault, "Afterword," p. 221.
29. Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power*, p. 14.
30. *Ibid.*, p. 17.
31. Foucault, "About the Beginnings of the Hermeneutics of the Self: Two Lectures at Dartmouth," *Political Theory* 21: 2 (1993): 198–227, 222–3.
32. Carl Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*, trans. George Schwab, "Foreword" by Tracy Strong (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996).
33. John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1971).
34. John Rawls, *Political Liberalism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996).
35. According to the American Political Science Association, "political science is the study of governments, public policies and political processes, systems, and political behavior." http://www.apsanet.org/section_517.cfm. Accessed January 9, 2008.
36. The literature here is vast. In the Continental tradition, one might start with Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, trans. Walter Kaufmann and R. J. Hollingdale (New York: Vintage, 1989); Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002); Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Pantheon, 1978); Jürgen Habermas, *Knowledge and Human Interests*, trans. Jeremy Shapiro (Boston: Beacon Press, 1971). In the pragmatist tradition, the paradigmatic text is Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981). In the feminist tradition, the *locus classicus* is Genevieve Lloyd, *The Man of Reason: "Male" and "Female" in Western Philosophy*, 2nd edition (New York: Routledge, 1993).

37. For helpful discussions of this theme in Horkheimer and Adorno, Foucault, and Habermas, see McCarthy, "The Critique of Impure Reason."
38. Di Stefano, "Feminist Political Philosophy". For related arguments, see Benhabib, "Models of Public Space: Hannah Arendt, the Liberal Tradition, and Jürgen Habermas," in *Situating the Self: Gender, Community, and Postmodernism in Contemporary Ethics* (New York: Routledge, 1992); and Fraser, "Rethinking the Public Sphere".
39. For Butler's hesitance about collective power, see her discussions of solidarity in Butler, *Gender Trouble*, pp. 14–15.
40. Foucault, "Afterword," pp. 219–20.
41. *Ibid.*, p. 220.
42. Foucault, "Politics and Ethics: An Interview," in Paul Rabinow (ed.), *The Foucault Reader*, (New York: Pantheon, 1984), p. 379.
43. See Brown, *States of Injury*.
44. See Arendt, *On Violence*, p. 51.
45. See, for example, Habermas, "Hannah Arendt's Communications Concept of Power," in Hinchman and Hinchman (eds.), *Hannah Arendt: Critical Essays* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1994), and George Kateb, *Hannah Arendt: Politics, Conscience, Evil* (Totowa, NJ: Rowman and Allenheld, 1983).
46. Fraser, "Rethinking the Public Sphere," p. 65.
47. Habermas, *Between Facts and Norms: Contributions to a Discourse Theory of Law and Democracy*, trans. William Rehg (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1996), p. 175.
48. For an interesting discussion of Habermas's notion of communicative power, see Jeffrey Flynn, "Communicative Power in Habermas's Theory of Democracy," *European Journal of Political Theory* 3 (4): 433–54.
49. *Ibid.*, p. 150.
50. I argue for this point in more detail in Allen, *The Politics of Our Selves*, chapter 5.
51. William Scheuerman, "Between Radicalism and Resignation: Democratic Theory in Habermas's *Between Facts and Norms*," in Peter Dews (ed.), *Habermas: A Critical Reader*, (London: Blackwell, 1999), p. 161.
52. On this point, see Thomas McCarthy, "Die politische Philosophie und das Problem der Rasse," in Lutz Wingert and Klaus Günther (eds.), *Die Öffentlichkeit der Vernunft und die Vernunft der Öffentlichkeit: Festschrift für Jürgen Habermas*, (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp Verlag, 2001).
53. Foucault, "What is Enlightenment?" in Paul Rabinow (ed.), *Ethics, Subjectivity, and Truth*, p. 317.
54. Fraser, "False Antitheses: A Response to Judith Butler and Seyla Benhabib," in Benhabib et al. *Feminist Contentions*, p. 69.
55. Here I borrow Benhabib's formulation of the core ideals of the Habermasian project. See Benhabib's "Introduction" to *Situating the Self*.
56. For insightful discussion of this point, see Benhabib, *Situating the Self: Gender, Community and Postmodernism in Contemporary Ethics* (New York: Routledge, 1992); Maeve Cooke, *Re-presenting the Good Society* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006); and McCarthy, *Ideals and Illusions*.
57. On this point, see Hanna Fenichel Pitkin, "Justice: On Relating Public and Private," *Political Theory* 9: 3 (1981): 327–52.

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