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## REVIEW

**Amy Allen, *The Politics of Our Selves: Power, Autonomy, and Gender in Contemporary Critical Theory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008) ISBN: 9780231136228.**

Feminist critical theory needs both an account of domination that reflects the reality of women's subordination in societies pervasively structured by gender asymmetry, and a theory that provides the possibility for resistance to this domination and resources for social transformation. In her new book, *The Politics of Our Selves*, Amy Allen aims to provide just such an account. She attempts this ambitious project by demonstrating that the differences in the critical projects of Foucault and Habermas have been sharply overdrawn, and she carves out a middle ground between them. She argues that Foucault's insights on power as an ineliminable part of human social life are indispensable for feminist theory. But admitting the pervasiveness of power appears to compromise the autonomy necessary to critically reflect upon and resist social norms. Allen does not completely agree with this common criticism of Foucault, and emphasizes his discussions of autonomy in his later work. But she argues that he fails to provide an adequate account of social life, one that includes mutual recognition and reciprocity. For this, she turns to Habermas whose discourse ethics is based upon a non-instrumental mutuality. She looks to Habermas for a more robust conception of autonomy. However, in order to reconcile Habermas's ideas with Foucault's insights on power, one has to rethink Habermas's distinction between validity and power and recognize the entanglement of power and validity. Ultimately, she concludes that feminists should take the best insights from the work of both Foucault and Habermas to craft a feminist critical theory capable of explaining both the ways in which subjectivity is constituted through relations of power (including gender, race and sexual subordination) and of resisting and transforming those power relations.

In chapter one, Allen sets out the parameters of her project. Foucault's politics of the self has two aspects: it is constituted through power relations, and is capable of critical reflection and self-transformation (characteristic features of autonomy). Yet these two aspects of the politics of the self are usually seen as incompatible; the task of Allen's book is to demonstrate that they are not. The Foucault-Habermas de-

bate has cast Foucault as anti-Enlightenment and Habermas as continuing the Enlightenment project of rational critique. This polarization construes Foucault as rejecting reason, subjectivity and norms which critics argue leaves him few, if any, resources for social transformation. Critical social theorists such as Habermas, on the other hand, overemphasize the power and purity of rationality. This debate continues in the positions of Judith Butler and Seyla Benhabib, with Benhabib claiming that emancipation requires a regulative principle, and Butler invoking Foucault's claim that there is no outside to power.<sup>1</sup> Amy Allen takes up the task set out by Nancy Fraser of integrating "the Foucaultian account of subjection with the Habermasian account of autonomy."<sup>2</sup> Allen believes, however, that the two accounts cannot simply be integrated, but need to be substantially re-worked. Through her meticulous and insightful readings, she mines the best insights of Foucault, Butler, Habermas and Benhabib, and provides a promising new account of subjectivity, one that accounts for both power and autonomy.

After introducing her overall project in chapter one, Allen provides a reading of Foucault in chapters two and three that emphasizes his engagement with Kant and with the critical project of Modernity. Chapter two reassesses Foucault's relationship to Kant. Allen addresses the criticism raised by feminists and critical theorists that in his early work Foucault argues for the death of the subject. A closer look at Foucault's early work reveals that his criticisms of the subject are directed toward the dominant philosophical notions of subjectivity, Kant's transcendental subject and the subsequent phenomenological-existential notion of subjectivity. By carefully examining Foucault's engagement with Kant from his early work (his "*thèse complémentaire*") on Kant's *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View*) through his latest work, Allen provides a reading of Foucault as a "continuation through transformation of the Kantian critical project."<sup>3</sup> Having established that Foucault does not abandon the subject in his early work, in chapter three Allen turns to Foucault's later work on autonomy and technologies of the self. Foucault's analysis of power and subjection seems to undermine autonomy, but this is only true if one conceives of power and autonomy as diametrically opposed. However, "Foucault conceives of autonomy—both in the sense of the capacity for critical reflection and in the sense of the capacity for deliberate self-transformation—as always bound up with power."<sup>4</sup> Accepting the interrelatedness of autonomy and power means we must transform Kant's notion of autonomy. Foucault inverts the relationship between necessity and freedom. Rather than viewing freedom as resulting from the necessity of giving one self the moral law as Kant does, Foucault urges us to call "into question that which is

<sup>1</sup> See Seyla Benhabib, Judith Butler, Drucilla Cornell and Nancy Fraser, *Feminist Contentions: A Philosophical Exchange* (New York: Routledge, 1995).

<sup>2</sup> Allen, *The Politics of Our Selves*, 8.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 44.

<sup>4</sup> Allen, *The Politics of Our Selves*, 47.

presented to us as necessary, thus opening up the space for possible transgression of those limits that turn out to be both contingent and linked to objectionable forms of constraint.”<sup>5</sup> Allen carefully articulates a Foucaultian notion of the subject that retains autonomy even while constituted through power relations, but in the end she concludes that Foucault’s work does not provide the resources necessary for an account of autonomy capable of resistance and self-transformation. What is needed for a stronger conception of autonomy, she claims, is a broader conception of the social, specifically a conception of social life that includes non-strategic social relations such as reciprocity and mutual recognition. For this she turns to Habermas in chapters five and six.

Before turning to Habermas, Allen examines Butler’s work to see how it extends and supplements Foucault’s account of subjection. Chapter four takes up a central question for feminists: How do women resist gender norms, given our ambivalent attachment to them? Butler offers an account of subjection that goes some way toward explaining why women become attached to normative gender roles in spite of the fact that they perpetuate women’s subordination. Because identity is constituted through recognition and attachment, painful attachment is better than no attachment at all. Allen argues that although Butler’s account of subjection rounds out Foucault’s theory by integrating psychoanalytic insights, it does not provide the resources to explain how resistance is possible, or how to ensure that a resignification transforms social norms, rather than simply reinscribing them. With her characteristically careful reading of texts, Allen points out that Butler conflates dependency and subordination, noting that we need an account of dependency that is not subordination for resistance to be possible. As Allen says, “whereas we might have good reasons for accepting the view that gender identity under current social and cultural conditions requires some individuals to become attached to their own subordination, there do not seem to be good reasons for accepting the view that becoming a subject necessarily involves such an attachment to subordination.” Butler moves towards a fuller and more positive account of social relations in her more recent work, *Giving An Account of Oneself* acknowledging that dependency and vulnerability are part of a “fundamental relationality that supports and nurtures us as physical (not to mention psychic) beings.”<sup>6</sup> While Allen agrees with Butler that recognition by others constitutes identity, she believes that recognition does not always involve subordination. Following Jessica Benjamin she believes in the possibility of mutual recognition (though dynamic and fleeting).

Chapters five, six and seven flesh out the Habermas side of the Foucault-Habermas debate. Chapter five takes a closer look at the ideas of power and autonomy in Habermas, and questions the distinction between power and validity. Allen

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 65.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 87.

does a remarkable job of synthesizing and explaining Habermas's wide-ranging corpus. She delineates three aspects of power in Habermas's work: the colonization of the lifeworld, systematically distorted communication, and individuation through socialization. While Habermas himself acknowledges the first two aspects of power, Allen develops the third as the most promising for explaining the role that power plays in the lifeworld, for instance, in structuring gender subordination. Because power is present in the lifeworld, including in familial relationships where identity and the capacity for autonomy are formed, Allen argues that Habermas cannot maintain the distinction between power and validity in light of his own acknowledgment of the important role that socialization plays in the formation of identity. Allen clearly demonstrates that power is a necessary condition for individuation through socialization. But does this undermine autonomy and the possibility of critique entirely?

As she argues in the following chapter, even though admitting power collapses the empirical/transcendental distinction that Habermas's wishes to maintain, it does not undermine his project entirely. The possibility of critique, and of appealing to a normative framework still exists. But instead of assuming that validity stands apart from power and socio-historical circumstances, we need a more modest position. Allen suggests that the pragmatic turn advocated by Thomas McCarthy and Maeve Cooke allows for a reconceptualized idea of validity, one that allows for the appeal to norms in light of the impurity of reason. A more contextualist and pragmatic critical theory would advocate a context transcending validity, rather than a context transcendent validity. This approach salvages the concern with norms so important to the Habermasian project, while acknowledging the ever-present role of power in the social world. Blending the best insights of Foucault and Habermas, Allen says we need to develop a "principled form of contextualism that emphasizes our need *both* to posit context-transcending ideals *and* to continually unmask their status as illusions rooted in interest and power-laden contexts."<sup>7</sup>

In chapter seven Allen takes up feminist critical theorist Seyla Benhabib's work. Benhabib's interactive universalism gives more credence to particularity than Habermas's communicative ethics, and this goes some way toward establishing a critical social theory that retains a strong notion of autonomy, and the ability to appeal to norms while adding sensitivity to cultural and historical particularity. However, in spite of Benhabib's own concerns about Habermas's excessive rationalism, Allen discovers a "rationalist residue" in Benhabib's account of the self. Namely, despite Benhabib's attention to gender in her work, she holds the "implausible view that there is an ungendered core to the self, and that gender is like clothes we can outgrow or shoes we can leave behind."<sup>8</sup> For Benhabib, gender is just one of the

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 148.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 159.

narratives that we weave into our narrative conception of the self. But Allen cites empirical evidence that gender identity precedes our ability to construct a narrative account of the self. And, of course, the formation of gender identity takes place within power relations. Allen's main criticism of Benhabib mirrors her earlier criticism of Habermas that power goes "all the way down," structuring not only our options, but also the very selves who choose.

In her conclusion she discusses the implications for feminism: How can women resist normative femininity given that our very selves are structured by it? Allen suggests two sources for such self-transformation, the conceptual and normative resources offered by social movements, such as the women's movement or queer movement. And new possibilities found in the social and cultural imaginary via literature, film and art. One might wish that she had developed these suggestions further: How do the alternatives to gender and sexuality norms already produced by these historic social movements play a role in individual self-transformation? Although Foucault shied away from prescriptive accounts of social and political change, in his later essays and interviews he discussed how the alternative social arrangements among gay men could inspire new possibilities for social relationships for everyone.

Allen's nuanced and careful readings of Foucault, Butler, Habermas and Benhabib demonstrate that both subjection and autonomy are necessary for an adequate theory of the self, and that the tension between Foucault's position and Habermas's has been exaggerated. She offers us a Kantian reading of Foucault, and a contextualized, historicized version of Habermas that brings their projects together in interesting and productive ways, illuminating both sides of the politics of ourselves, autonomy and subjection.

Margaret A. McLaren, Rollins College