

COMPTEs RENDUS/BOOK REVIEWS

The Politics of Our Selves: Power, Autonomy, and Gender in Contemporary Critical Theory

Amy Allen

New York: Columbia University Press, 2007; 230 pages.

There is no outside to power. The gulf between this Foucaultian thesis and the critical theory of Habermas is generally perceived to be unbridgeable. How, it is said, is one able to articulate a sufficiently robust conception of autonomy once one accepts that the self—that bastion of critique—is constituted by power? Amy Allen's *The Politics of Our Selves* is a valiant, though ultimately lacking, attempt to navigate these difficult waters. Her strategy is to offer original re-readings of Foucault and Habermas such that they end up closer than commentators have often thought. Running beneath and parallel to this analysis is the Butler-Benhabib debate on gender and the construction of identity. This makes sense, given Allen's conviction that a viable social theory must incorporate contextual factors. The book concludes by offering a theory of social critique that is thoroughly pragmatic and contextual, but remains faithful to Foucaultian constraints.

Chapters 2 and 3 offer an insightful reinterpretation of Foucault. Many commentators have chastised Foucault for his adherence to the death of the subject thesis; Allen hotly contests this reading. Moreover, she offers textual evidence to support her claim that there is no great divide between his early and late work. Critics, including Habermas, have argued that Foucault's late emphasis on the subject is inherently divergent from his earlier call for the end of man. As Allen effectively demonstrates, Foucault's call is best understood as the end of the Kantian transcendental-phenomenological subject and not as a rejection of the subject *tout court*. Inasmuch as Foucault emphasises the historically conditioned empirical conception of the subject, he is "engaged in a radicalisation from within the Kantian critical project." (41) Indeed, Allen traces Foucault's relationship to Kant such that the seeds of the Foucaultian transformation of the subject are already present in Kant's late work—*Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View*. Foucault's notion of governmentality is the bridge between his analysis of power and his concep-

tion of the subject. Defined as the art of government, it includes both bottom-up and top-down processes. Subjects who adequately govern themselves and their families are permitted to rise to state power while the government itself is concerned with cultivating well-governed subjects and families. Thus, governmentality simultaneously individualises and totalises. The result is that making demands on the government for recognition of individuality actually consolidates and entrenches the scope of governmental control.

That Foucault retains a conception of the subject does not (yet) imply that he has carved out a space for autonomy. Since Foucault repeatedly characterises power as involving strategic relations, he is unable to offer, according to Allen, an account of social interaction that includes reciprocity and mutual recognition. This conclusion emerges from his analysis of governmentality and is paradoxically stated in a late interview: "The farthest I would go is to say that perhaps one must not be for consensuality, but one must be against nonconsensuality." (70)

Next, Allen analyzes Butler's *The Psychic Form of Life*, which is an attempt to extend Foucault's account of power to include will and desire. It is intended to explain cases where subordinated subjects are fervently attached to their continued subordination even after it has been made explicit. Gender subordination is the exemplary case. But much like Foucault, Allen claims that Butler conflates dependency with subordination. All subjectivation is subordinating. Clearly, this is fruitless from a critical theoretical perspective.

Enter Habermas and his theory of discourse ethics, which reformulates the Kantian conception of autonomy such that it is structured intersubjectively. Nancy Fraser has criticised Habermas for confining power relations to system contexts (administrative and bureaucratic contexts) whilst depicting the lifeworld (culture and society) as devoid of power relations. Indeed, the role of power in Habermas' position is largely ambiguous yet it simultaneously threatens his entire emancipatory project. Initially, Habermas offered two ways in which power figured into the lifeworld. First, there was the colonisation thesis, which states that power emanating from system contexts encroaches on the lifeworld. But this still situates power exclusively in system contexts. Second, Habermas dealt with systematically distorted communication. This occurs when there is a concealed strategic element to communicative action. The result is a fundamental inability to distinguish between

genuinely communicative and strategic action. Unsurprisingly, Habermas abandoned discussion of this by the late 1970s. Allen identifies a third, as yet under-theorised, way in which power infiltrates the lifeworld, namely, Habermas' thesis of individuation through socialisation. Habermas argues that reciprocal recognition is necessary for subjects to constitute themselves, but this runs counter to, for instance, the fundamental asymmetry of the parent/child relationship. Whereas Butler's investigation reveals the psychic costs of socialisation, Habermas regularly downplays its subordinating potential. The extent to which this recognition problematises Habermas' context-transcending-validity-claims is explored in the second last chapter.

The context-transcendence-of-validity-claims is a site of major contention amongst critics. According to Allen, social theorists can be divided into two camps: radical contextualists like Rorty and context-transcending theorists like Habermas. While both camps accept some version of situated critique, the former are exclusively internal to socio-cultural contexts while the latter permit some form of critique that transcends the context. It is generally claimed that radical contextualists are deficient in two senses. First, they are unable to offer cross-cultural critique and second, they lack a sufficiently robust normativity that would enable them to rationally reflect on their own intuitions and beliefs. By contrast, it is *prima facie* unclear how context-transcending theorists can fully admit that critique is situated. Furthermore, Allen quotes Maeve Cooke in asserting that context-transcending theorists suffer from an "authoritarian residue." (140) What is desirable then is a more principled contextualism, one that retains the normative force of context-transcending validity claims, but contextualises the notion of context transcendence itself.

Of course, a sympathetic Rortyan might object here that Allen's principled contextualism is precisely what the neo-pragmatist defends. Indeed, in a footnote to this section, Allen does assent that Rorty's "frank ethnocentrism and cosmopolitan liberalism" (205) offer plausible responses to his critics. Since Rorty gives up truth in favour of the social nature of justification, he is able to accommodate disputes cross-culturally.

In the final chapter, Allen criticises Benhabib for her overly rationalist conception of an un-gendered core to the self. Benhabib's narrative conception of the self is impoverished in that she claims that the un-

gendered core self is able to provisionally choose what gender narrative to ratify. With recourse to Butler's performative conception of the self and empirical data from developmental psychology, Allen argues that the construction of identity, from the outset, is contingent on gender norms. For instance, it has been shown that parents tend to interact differently with their child according to the child's initially attributed gender. This "rationalist residue" (153) echoes Allen's critique of Habermas.

The book offers a stimulating, highly evocative discussion of two major philosophers. Teasing out their similarities and the way in which autonomy can be negotiated with power is no small feat. One might think that Benhabib and Butler have sufficiently refined the positions of their intellectual heirs, but Allen's critical engagement reveals important flaws. As a helpful corrective to unjust interpretations still prevalent in the literature, I heartily recommend it. Yet, for someone who offers such textured interpretations, one remains unconvinced by the distinction between radical contextualists of the Rortyan sort and Allen's proposal of a principled contextualism. Given Rorty's rejection of truth as a goal of inquiry (a rejection Allen explicitly cites), it is simply incorrect to later state that we ought not "accept a radically contextualist form of *relativism*." (180, emphasis added) The difference between the two, if there is one, needs to be more fully explicated. This is a missed opportunity on Allen's part and affects the persuasiveness and focus of her conclusion.

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Merleau-Ponty's Phenomenology: The Problem of Ideal Objects

Kirk M. Besmer

London and New York: Continuum, 2007; 160 pages.

Merleau-Ponty and Modern Politics After Anti-Humanism

Diana Coole

Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2007; 271 pages.

2008 marks the centenary of Merleau-Ponty's birth, and we are in the midst of a surge of new English-language books dealing with his work. Larry Hass' *Merleau-Ponty's Philosophy* has impressively inaugurated a