

## ARTICLE

### **Politicizing the Personal: Thinking about the Feminist Subject with Michel Foucault and John Dewey**

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**ABSTRACT:** While the varied theoretical frameworks of second wave feminism made possible critical interrogation of societal patterns of domination and oppression in view of the transformative goal of liberation, Michel Foucault's conceptualization of power shifts contemporary feminist thought away from this binary field of relations towards more fundamental questions about gender constitution. Indeed, from the perspective of popular culture it would seem that challenges to rigid gender roles were a thing of the past, to which freedom and certain kinds of gender malleability were intrinsically tied. In fact gender roles continue to be defined in strict opposition to each other and sexist attitudes and practices continue, although increasingly disguised and unacknowledged. If liberation from the strictures of patriarchy is nothing but a lost illusion from the second wave, is there nonetheless a need for a resurgent feminist consciousness today? In this paper, I argue that this is the case, and attempt to show that "the work of the intellect" described by Foucault, must first be catalyzed by an experiential disruption, leading to recognition of what pragmatist philosopher John Dewey described as the "problematic situation." While both Foucault and Dewey emphasize the necessity of problematization, Dewey's methodology includes focus on envisioning desired outcomes. Here, my aim is not to resurrect an old idea of unconditioned liberation, but merely to reconsider whether and how experiential disruption and subsequent consideration of the problem might lead to a shift in social and self-consciousness, and create the possibility for change.

**Keywords:** Dewey, Foucault, feminism, problematization, transformation.

If, in the words of Michel Foucault, "the work of the intellect is to show that what is, does not have to be, what it is," how does this work begin?<sup>1</sup> What is entailed by the seemingly paradoxical work of the intellect undermining ontological certitude—that what is, does not have to be? Who is implicated in this work and who is its subject, or, as Foucault asks, "What is this point towards which this reflexive activity, this reflected activity, which turns the

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<sup>1</sup> Michel Foucault, "How much Does it Cost to Tell the Truth," (233-256) an interview conducted by Gerard Raulet in *Foucault Live Semiotext(e)* (NY: Columbia University, 1989), 252.

individual back to himself, must be directed?"<sup>2</sup> Another question might be raised: What is the impetus for reflexive and reflective activity? What directs inquiry towards the self in such a way that 'what is' might be put into question in such a way that the self is transformed?

These questions have practical import with respect to my inquiry here: I am interested in exploring the impetus for reflection in the feminist subject, for whom self-reflexive activity turns in on the self, while directed towards the social world. This work of the intellect must be catalyzed by experience, for if what is, does not have to be what it is, then thinking must be moved—jolted, perhaps, into what was once referred to as feminist consciousness. This is a preliminary assertion.

Post-second wave feminism has pushed theoretical analyses far beyond the politics of identity and critique of socially instantiated gender norms, leaving questions regarding the social and political standing of women more open-ended, but also confused, given that the very category of 'woman' has been destabilized. This theoretical destabilization has been brought about, at least in part, by the work of Foucault, whose genealogical approach to sex and sexuality undermines the presumptive origin of gender as determined by biology or by the ostensibly fixed features of sex—the latter a notion central to Western thought, that women *qua* women are pinned to their sex in a way that Man (always only in the abstract) is not. In his words, "[Women] were told for centuries: 'You are nothing other than your sex... You are the sickness of man'."<sup>3</sup>

Foucault did not answer 'the woman question', but his analysis of sex and sexuality challenge the view that gender is destiny, to paraphrase the Freudian proscription. Thus contemporary feminists enthuse that, "reading Foucault provides a particularly auspicious opportunity to challenge our ways of thinking about the constitution of the fundamental concepts of gender and sexuality..."<sup>4</sup> These 'fundamental concepts' are themselves instantiations and effects of what Foucault names *power*, a word encompassing the complex and multitudinous networks of relations through which social realities are formed. That our ideas of gender, our presumptions of sex, might be formed and informed by and through a complex social nexus puts into question certitude about what it is to *be* a woman or man or what constitutes the natural comportment of sex. But theoretical analyses of historical and social instantiations of gender norms leave unanswered the ways in which still extant essentializing attitudes and practices might be challenged in contemporary society. As Shannon Sullivan observes, "...current categories of sex and gender are extremely rigid: each member of the binary pair is defined in sharp opposition to the other."<sup>5</sup>

If it is the case that sex and gender categories are strictly marked in contemporary society this fact is not so obvious to popular sensibility. Among current high school and col-

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<sup>2</sup> Michel Foucault, *The Hermeneutics of the Subject: Lectures at the College de France 1981-1982*, translated Graham Burchell (NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2001, 2005), 38.

<sup>3</sup> Michel Foucault, "End of the Monarchy of Sex," (137-156) an interview conducted by Bernard-Henri Levy in *Foucault Live Semiotext(e)* (NY: Columbia University, 1989), 144.

<sup>4</sup> E. L. McCallum in Hekman, "Technologies of Truth," (77-97) in *Feminist Interpretations of Michel Foucault*, edited by Susan Hekman (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1996), 78.

<sup>5</sup> Shannon Sullivan, *Living Across and Through Skins: Transactional Bodies, Pragmatism and Feminism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001), 89.

lege student populations there seems to be a strong belief that gender categories are more mutable than ever—that females, in particular, can cross what would have once been considered gender lines, but now barely challenge sexual stereotype. In the arenas of education, sports, politics, and work, not to mention comportment, it is generally believed that females have more choices than do males to express themselves in ways that do not compromise or threaten who they are *as* females.<sup>6</sup>

When these beliefs are interrogated, students—in this case, those in high school—admit to some qualifying amendments. For example: Although Title 9 has truly changed the face of sports participation on high school and college campuses, female athletes must find ways to look ‘feminine’ on and off the playing field, so as not to appear anything but female and, of course, heterosexual. Likewise, if intelligence and scholastic achievement are no longer social embarrassments, neither is anything more important than having a ‘good personality’. Additionally, although college attendance is expected and having professional goals the norm (at least among this group of high-achieving students), anticipated concerns like job mobility (in order to follow a husband’s career) and schedule flexibility (in order to be good mothers) seem to motivate students’ career choices more than any interest in a particular subject matter. This is the case despite a nearly unlimited field of options for women today. In matters of self-presentation and sexual expression, the former pretends to more freedom than the latter allows; sexual mores continue to reflect the classic double standard, although current norms seem to stigmatize sexual deficiency as well as excess.

Admittedly, feminism 101 is rarely part of the curriculum in secondary school and relatively few students choose to take a feminist philosophy course in college, but discursive traces of second wave feminism continue in abbreviated reiteration: equality, opportunity, rights, choice, freedom, strength, empowerment, et al, are terms of common exchange, as if patriarchal domination had been overturned without ever having been acknowledged. Tropes of equality veil gender binarism under the robe of sex.

Here, there is no question of being “tempted to treat femaleness or the feminine as an identity to be liberated,” as Judith Butler warns against, because femininity in popular imagination is perceived to be the liberated expression of the female sex.<sup>7</sup> This is perhaps not surprising, since power “works on sex more deeply than we can know, not only as an external constraint or repression but as the formative principle of its intelligibility.”<sup>8</sup> To put what is in question is to risk unintelligibility.

On the other hand, these same students, upon recognizing discrepancies between the freedoms they believed themselves to have *as* female and the constraints of femininity, express surprise and varying degrees of outrage. A way of thinking was disrupted. During feminism’s second wave this experiential jolt came to signify an incipient shift in consciousness,

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<sup>6</sup> This broad and summative statement is the result of many classroom conversations with high achieving high school juniors participating in the Kentucky Governor’s Scholars Program (Summer 2010), but it is also a view frequently expressed by college-age students, even those enrolled in feminist philosophy classes.

<sup>7</sup> Judith Butler, “Sexual Inversions,” in *Feminist Interpretations of Michel Foucault*, edited by Susan J. Hekman (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1996), 68.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 64.

and outrage took form as the demand for social change—hence, the personal became the political. This is a different era. The political *is* the personal—power is a regulatory regime.

The subordination of women entailed by “a sexual politics of domination much in evidence in the private spheres of the family, ordinary social life, and sexuality as in the traditionally public spheres of government and the economy,” as Sandra Bartky describes, is no longer apparent.<sup>9</sup> The hope of second-wave feminism—that liberation from patriarchal domination—would unshackle the psychological bonds of oppression and liberate women from constricted lives perhaps ignored the prepositions describing this relation, since freedom *from* domination does not mean being any less subject *to* its influence or, more insidiously, being subjectified *by* it in the first place. The dyadic account of domination and oppression insufficiently describes the complexities of subordination because its account of subjectivity is incomplete. Such an account presumes, in Foucault’s words, that “a full and positive relationship” with the self could be resumed once freed from “these repressive deadlocks”—which is why he suggests that, “the notion of liberation [should be] treated with precautions and within certain limits...”<sup>10</sup>

The subject cannot as such be disempowered or fully liberated, and to say as much, is less a matter of word play than it is to acknowledge an ineluctable feature of a constituting network. While particular instances of domination might be recognized and resisted, the conditioning effects of power are at the same time irremediable mechanisms through which bodies are invested with social meaning and, as Butler writes, “with the category of sex, making bodies into the bearers of a principle of identity.”<sup>11</sup> The gendered subject *is* this effect—*as* sexed. Is it the case, then, that absolute subjugation precludes even partial self-awareness?

The binary social tensions described by the tropes of domination and oppression insufficiently convey the multitudinous web of complex relations through which identity emerges and social inequalities manifest, but perhaps serve some disruptive purpose—that is, for thought. Towards this end, I suggest it is worthwhile to revisit an idea that rallied feminist theory and activism during the second wave; that of the ‘raised’ feminist consciousness, connoting as it does transformed sensibility for critical reflection and that this activity is a social good, and therefore an aim worth pursuing. A caveat is necessary: what I mean by a social good is not with reference to pre-conceived ends or fixed goals, but rather to possibilities leading to the growth and greater freedom of subjectivity generated by observation and reflective assessment of particular situations and contexts.

My sensibility here is Deweyan, by which I mean that my perspective is rooted in the work of the American pragmatist philosopher John Dewey, whose insights about the contextually, socially conditioned subject echo Foucault’s own. In Dewey’s schema, envisioned outcomes are part of an evaluative process, in which the work of imagination “elicits the possi-

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<sup>9</sup> Sandra Bartky, “Feminism, Masochism, and the Politics of Personal Transformation,” in *Femininity and Domination: Studies in the Phenomenology of Oppression* (NY: Routledge, 1990), 45.

<sup>10</sup> Michel Foucault, “The Ethics of the Concern for Self as a Practice of Freedom” interview conducted by H. Becker, R. Fernet-Betancourt, and A. Gomez-Muller on January 20, 1984 in *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth, vol. 1* (New York: New Press, 1997), 282.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 66.

bilities that are interwoven within the texture of the actual.<sup>12</sup> Thus the critical, evaluative process pertains to the possibility of change in real situations and relations. Regarding the concrete situation at hand, that is, the entrenchment and internalization of sexual stereotypes, what motivates a shift in thinking about gender? What catalyzes awareness and awakens feminist consciousness?

Dewey writes, "No complete account of *what* is experienced, then, can be given until we know *how* it is experienced, or the mode of experience that enters into its formation."<sup>13</sup> Critical investigation of perspectival assumptions inform reflexive activity, but the preliminary catalyst for seeing *how* something is experienced—that is, its felt qualities, ramifications, impact—is not likely to be a product of thought as much as it is a consequence of its interruption. Dewey's account of the "the contextual situation in which thinking occurs" is evoked by recognition of a problem, which in turn provokes the kind of reflexive activity leading to recognition that what is, does not have to be.<sup>14</sup> He likens the journey of daily life, everyday experience, to that of "a traveler faring forth" who suddenly stumbles.<sup>15</sup> "Shock, confusion, perturbation, uncertainty," disrupt the easy and unquestioned expectations for the walk, forcing a reevaluation of a situation only because a problem presents itself.<sup>16</sup> Noticing the boulder in the road occurs later; first is the jarring experience that provokes the need for inquiry. The rock presents no problem in and of itself; it becomes one only in the course of the stumble. The need for inquiry is provoked by this experiential context, which directs thought towards conceiving a way to proceed—that is, to problematization.

In making use of the term 'problematization' I am following Colin Koopman, whose work in critical/historiographical analyses develops this pragmatist feature in the work of Foucault, who asserted that, "The notion common to all the work that I have done since *History of Madness* is that of problematization."<sup>17</sup> Koopman writes:

What is problematization? ...Critique as problematization can be specified as a form of inquiry with two core aspects: contingency and complexity. By focusing on the emergence of hybrid networks of problems we can come to recognize our problems as contingent complexes rather than necessary givens.<sup>18</sup>

For both Foucault and Dewey, conditions for the possibility of analysis and transformation (partial and contingent) arise from actual situations, not from causally determined inevitabi-

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<sup>12</sup> John Dewey (LW 10:348), in *John Dewey's Ethics: Democracy as Experience*, by Gregory Pappas (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008), 102.

<sup>13</sup> John Dewey, *The later works, volume 5: Essays, The Sources of a Science of Education, Individuals Old and New, and Construction and Criticism* (Carbondale, Illinois: University of Carbondale Press, 1930, 2008), 228.

<sup>14</sup> John Dewey, *The later works, volume 1: Experience and nature* (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1925, 1988), 61.

<sup>15</sup> John Dewey, *The middle works, volume 14: Human nature and conduct* (Carbondale, Illinois: University of Carbondale Press, 1922, 1988), 127.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 127.

<sup>17</sup> Michel Foucault, "The Concern for Truth," an interview by Francois Ewald, in *Politics, Philosophy, Culture: Interviews and Other Writings, 1977-1984*, edited by Lawrence Kriztman (NY: Routledge, 1984, 1988), 257.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

lities. Dewey emphasizes an aspect of problematization that Foucault ignores or only infers, and this is the envisioning of resolutions or outcomes to an interrogated problematic situation, but problem formulation must occur first, and criticism is fundamental to formulating a problem and conceiving solutions, for, as Dewey states, “Our analysis shows that the *ways* in which we believe and expect have a tremendous effect upon *what* we believe and expect.”<sup>19</sup> The point of critical analysis is not merely practical, not only engaged in view of ends, but is the process through which habits of thinking and belief might be challenged and transformed in the process. The real aim is growth.

Foucault emphasizes the complexity of inquiry, for “the mechanisms of subjection cannot be studied outside their relation to the mechanisms of exploitation and domination,” but these, in turn, involve other relations within other forms of domination.<sup>20</sup> Here, the genealogy of analysis must of necessity lead down a maze of inquiry from which there is no easy pathway leading out—maybe to a purview not much beyond the hedges. For Foucault, inquiry proceeds *within* the mechanisms of exploitation, which involves immersion in a pattern of “circular relations.”<sup>21</sup> At issue is whether the subject can ever be sufficiently freed from the pattern of relations through which the self is defined in order to attain enough critical distance to make a difference. Is transformation of consciousness possible?

Amy Allen, in an early essay, “Foucault on Power: A Theory for Feminists,” writes that, “In Foucault’s account, power operates locally, circulates in the capillaries of the social body, and emanates from every point in the social field.”<sup>22</sup> This aptly captures how there has come to be an ever-widening gap between feminist theorizing and popular culture representations of women’s lives since, given that contemporary memes of sexuality and sexual expression blatantly replicate the oppressive norms they appear to be challenging. Certain oppressive sexist attitudes might still be recognized and resisted, but absent is any discussion of liberation from the conditioning effects of power. Gender stereotypes appear to be intractable. In any case, it is clear that power does not merely ‘trickle down’. Likewise, the shifting sands of social stratification undermine the conceptual traction of the domination as a hierarchical force. As Butler states, “power is not simply what we oppose but also, in a strong sense, what we depend on for our existence and what we harbor and preserve in the beings that we are.”<sup>23</sup> This makes the problematic impossible to name, giving rise to a paradox noted by Foucault: “How can the world, which is given as the object of knowledge (*connaissance*) on the basis of the mastery of *tekhne*, at the same time be the site where the ‘self’ as ethical subject of truth appears and is experienced?”<sup>24</sup> In other words, how can that which is perceived, assessed,

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<sup>19</sup> Dewey, *The later works, volume 1: Experience and nature*, 23.

<sup>20</sup> Michel Foucault, “The Subject and Power,” in *Power: Essential Writings of Foucault, 1954-1984*, Volume 3, edited by Paul Rabinow and James Faubion, (NY: The New Press, 1998, 2000), 332.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>22</sup> Amy Allen, “Foucault on Power: A Theory for Feminists,” in *Feminist Interpretations of Michel Foucault*, edited by Susan J. Hekman, (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1996), 271.

<sup>23</sup> Judith Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1997), 1.

<sup>24</sup> Foucault, *The Hermeneutics of the Subject*, 487.

analyzed—in a word, critiqued—be the site for critical understanding if this site is inseparable from who the subject is in the first place?

Allen's project in *The Politics of Ourselves: Power, Autonomy, and Gender in Contemporary Critical Theory* is to resolve this paradox and she states the problem as follows: "thinking of the self... as constituted by power, makes a politics of the self [as autonomous]... impossible, because it reveals agency, autonomy, and critique to be nothing more than illusions, power's clever ruses."<sup>25</sup> The critical distance necessary for thinking about how one is situated within the social world would appear to be an illusion of the conditioning frames through which reflection is thought to be possible. As Allen puts it, in Foucault's schema, "subjection refers to the ambivalent process whereby one is constituted as a subject in and through the process of being subjected to disciplinary norms."<sup>26</sup> Any space between domination and oppression is compressed so tightly that the distinction between them disappears if tension does not; in any case, there seems to be no room for the subject to exert herself in protest. Thus in answer to Bartky's question as to whether it is "possible for individuals to prefigure more liberated forms of sexuality in their own lives now, in a society still marked by the subordination of women in every domain?"—The response is likely to be a resounding 'no'.<sup>27</sup>

On the other hand, Sullivan reminds us that, "as feminists have argued, the need to rethink contemporary conceptions of gender, and the notions of sex and sexuality that transact with them is urgent."<sup>28</sup> Her own approach is Deweyan. In *Living Across and Through Skins: Transactional Bodies, Pragmatism, and Feminism*, Sullivan challenges the explication of gender as a performance informed by discursive repetitions of power relations. Against Butler, or perhaps in expansion of her view, Sullivan shows how Dewey's analysis of habit broadens the field of analysis and opens a gap between an irremediable undergoing and non-linguistic experiencing. Within this gap lies the possibility of generating a response that is not discursively predetermined. For Dewey, as for Foucault, experience is informed by social mediations and power relations, but Dewey saw experience as transactional, a term suggesting both undergoing *and* interaction as features of experiencing itself, thus pushing the possibility for an experience to put into question habitual modes of responding and thinking.<sup>29</sup> While response is perspectival, experience is also fundamentally generative, always potentially richer than any descriptive limits according to which it seems set.<sup>30</sup> Elaborating upon a Deweyan sensibility of the problematic, Sullivan writes:

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<sup>25</sup> Amy Allen, *The Politics of Ourselves: Power, Autonomy, and Gender in Contemporary Critical Theory* (NY: Columbia University Press, 2008), 2.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 72.

<sup>27</sup> Bartky, 50

<sup>28</sup> Sullivan, 89.

<sup>29</sup> See John Dewey, *The later works, volume 1: Experience and nature* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1925/1988). In the words of John Stuhr, Dewey's conception of experience "is understood as a transaction, as 'double-barreled,' as the irreducible unity of subject and object, organism and environment, foreground and background," in *Genealogical Pragmatism: Philosophy, Experience, and Community* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1997), 128.

<sup>30</sup> And as John Stuhr writes, "Experience constitutes reality." *Genealogical Pragmatism: Philosophy, Experience, and Community* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1997), 128. In other words, we are not only socially situated in a world we experience as reality, experiencing is both constitutive and disruptive of this reality.

In particular situations and for specific purposes, making a distinction between the social and the linguistic can be very helpful for understanding and improving the world; being able to distinguish the nonlinguistic from the linguistic often is important for attending to the “had,” lived aspects of experience that are ambiguous and thus “overflow” the words one uses to describe them.<sup>31</sup>

What is taken for granted becomes subject matter for inquiry and critical questioning when an experience disrupts expectation. Even the most ordinary event might become a source for reflection and new insight. Experience overflows language, but language is the “tool” with which experience is given shape, problematized, interpreted, re-interpreted, challenged, and perceived anew.<sup>32</sup>

The question, then, is how ‘ways’ of receptivity might shift. If transformation of consciousness portends the possibility of real change, both perceiver and what is perceived are changed. Dewey’s transactional account generates a complex view of experience that is to some extent captured by what Charlene Haddock Seigfried describes as the “result of interaction between a live creature and some aspect of the world in which he lives.”<sup>33</sup> Indeed, the subject of experience is both affected by (and effected through) events, circumstances, deeds, and interactions. As Seigfried writes, “From the first, subjectivity and objectivity are not dualistic antagonists; they are reciprocal emphases in a transaction in which experience is organized dynamically... characterized by temporality and growth.”<sup>34</sup> Here, if the experiencing subject is subject to and subjugated by experience she may also be surprised by it, and must therefore rise to meet it, even to make sense of it anew.

In *The Psychic Life of Power*, Butler’s take on the Foucaultian notion of subordination understood as the condition of subjection—the condition through which the self comes to be *as* a subject—turns on the question whether this condition of subjugation can serve as point of departure for the subject’s resistance. Whether resistance itself constitutes a significant shift in perspective or portends transformation of consciousness remains in question. According to Butler, Foucault’s explanation of the subordinated subject leaves the ways in which subject formation takes place opaque, since he has not adequately addressed the “psychic form that power takes.”<sup>35</sup> She postulates a deeper level of subjugation through which a psychoanalytic layer of “primary dependency” conditions and effects fundamental characteristics of subjectivity, showing that “subordination proves central to the becoming of the subject,” and takes place prior to discursive expression.<sup>36</sup> The subject’s discursivity is thus not constitutive of being but is already its expression. Does this mean that the sexed body speaks through gender codifications that the subject cannot address? Butler sees primal dependency as constituted

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<sup>31</sup> Sullivan, 89.

<sup>32</sup> Dewey, *The later works, volume 1: Experience and nature*, 146.

<sup>33</sup> John Dewey, quoted by Charlene Haddock Seigfried, *Pragmatism and Feminism: Reweaving the Social Fabric* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 145.

<sup>34</sup> Seigfried, 145.

<sup>35</sup> Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power*, 1.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid*, 1, 8.



within “a psychic domain that is said to precede or exceed the social,” more influential than any putative desire for autonomy, which suggests that the regulative networks of power in some way serve to reify dependency patterns at the deepest level and do not emerge in response to it.<sup>37</sup> Therefore, attempts to resist dependency patterns simply fasten or normalize these patterns, for “psychic resistance *in terms of the social*” cannot be accomplished without that reformulation becoming a domestication or normalization.”<sup>38</sup> In other words, there seems to be no escape from the ties that bind subjectivity to social norms, for every protest, each point of resistance chokes on knotted psychic strands of need. Perhaps this is why today’s “enlightened sexism,” a parody of feminism, has so successfully outwitted second-wave tropes by making the stereotypical feminine a new mark of liberation.<sup>39</sup>

Yet Butler’s analysis goes a long way in explaining how psycho-sexual subordinating patterns are established and become entrenched as unchallenged ways of life. The feminist philosophy class I teach university students is a service-learning course and one of the volunteer agencies students work with, is the local women’s shelter, which serves as a revolving door for many clients who return to their abusing partners even after repeated escapes to the shelter. At first my students were unable to understand this pattern of abuse, leaving, and then subsequent return to the abusing partner, and they sought explanations informed by the belief that the woman subject to violence was charting her own course of action. The students surmised, then, that she was motivated by financial considerations or concerned that her children would have access to their father—and these are reasons offered by victims of abuse. After more focused observation, however, the students began to discern patterns in which love and violence intertwined with a different kind of need, expressed through patterns of sexual desire that appeared, in some cases, to be linked to elaborate courtship rituals of aggressive ‘masculinity’ violating fragile ‘femininity’ followed by guilt-laden remorse and unifying re-engagement in the romantic behaviors likely to have defined the relationship in its early stages. The pattern, reified, informs the cycle through repeated performance.

Discerning this pattern of subjugation required a shift in student perception and, to recall Dewey’s insight, this was not merely a cognitive shift but an experiential jolt. Anodyne responses—‘well, she should just get out, she has the power to leave; why doesn’t she leave?’—were rejected in favor of reflective activity engaged in problematization.

In her essay, “Feminine Masochism and the Politics of Transformation,” Sandra Bartky problematizes what she views as sexual desire and practices/ fantasies at odds with “with feminist principles.”<sup>40</sup> Following psychoanalyst Ethel Person’s account of how the psyche’s primary “sex-print” informs adult desires and influences “factors that may be involved in psychosexual development,” Bartky looks at “dysfunction”—by which she means sexual/ social behaviors and practices harmful to the self and/ or to others—through the double lens of psychoanalysis and the subordinating norms of patriarchy.<sup>41</sup> She writes,

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid, 102.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid, 102.

<sup>39</sup> Susan J. Douglas, see *Enlightened Sexism: The Seductive Message that Feminism’s Work is Done* (NY: Times Books, 2010).

<sup>40</sup> Bartky, 60.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 58, 60.

In a sexually inegalitarian society, these manifestations of male power are precisely the instruments by which men are able to accomplish the subordination of women. Hence, insofar as male power is eroticized, male dominance itself becomes erotically charged.<sup>42</sup>

The social/political instantiations of these dyadic tensions play out on the personal/erotic stage where masochism is enacted.

Bartky's analysis focuses on the sexual politics of domination through its effect on erotic desire, while Butler's analysis suggests that social/political configurations are themselves a subliminal effect of more primary and ineffable needs. Both would agree that the subject can be harmed by proclivities she cannot resist, but Bartky views self-sabotaging sexual desires as a consequence of systemic practices of "oppression [that] damage people in ways that cannot always be undone," especially to the extent they are internalized within the "the intimate recesses of personality," maiming and crippling the spirit.<sup>43</sup> Freedom from this kind of oppression is thus not absolute and any notion of a self—now freed from "repressive deadlocks"—Bartky may hope for, is conditioned by social forces. This being said, her analysis also suggests a clear separation between the subject and the situations conditioning who she has come to be.<sup>44</sup>

In contrast, Butler's account of power as a "regulatory regime" operates "not only as an external constraint or repression [...], but as the formative principle" thus linking the dominated, subjugated self and subjugating forces so tightly that the subject disappears.<sup>45</sup> Where does this leave the possibility for critical reflection of and resistance to social norms when the reflecting agent is in this primary sense a product of power?

Bartky admits that sadomasochistic practices clash with her "own understanding of feminism," which may well serve as "a new apology for a very old hypocrisy."<sup>46</sup> Her problematization nevertheless serves to drive a wedge between subjugating forces and being subjugated, at least conceptually, although the origins and enactments of desire, like the gender roles they mimic, are not easily distinguishable. Foucault captures this enmeshment of conditioning factors and agency:

Not a furtive reality that is difficult to grasp, but great surface network in which the stimulation of bodies, the intensifications of pleasures, the incitement to discourse, the formation of special knowledges, the strengthening of controls and resistances, are linked to one another, in accordance with a few major strategies of knowledge and power.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 47.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 58, 60.

<sup>44</sup> Foucault, "The Ethics of the Concern for Self as a Practice of Freedom," 282.

<sup>45</sup> Butler, "Sexual Inversions," 64.

<sup>46</sup> Bartky, 60, 62.

<sup>47</sup> Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, vol. 1, An Introduction*, Translated by Robert Hurley (London: Allen Lane, 1978), 105-106.

Perhaps the condition formerly known as patriarchy operates as such a strategy, pitted against Bartky's own ethos of "the formal commitment to justice and equality."<sup>48</sup> Contemporary popular culture, however, increasingly resists strategies and counter-strategies through a continuous reversal of iterations of freedom and of domination. Journalist Chris Hedges observes that the efforts of second wave feminists to "free women from sexual tyranny have been defeated by a cultural embrace—by both men and women—of bondage and objectification," enacting what Bartky would call dysfunctional desire in "stripping, promiscuity, S&M, exhibitionism, and porn," and becoming "mainstream chic."<sup>49</sup>

If the theoretical frames of second wave feminism influenced critical reflection of social patterns relating to domination and oppression, the memes of contemporary culture mirror fun house distortions of their expression. Towards what point should critique be directed? Where is all this leading? What does transformation of consciousness signify? These questions recall Foucault's: "What is the point towards which this reflexive activity, this reflected activity, which turns the individual back to himself, must be directed?"<sup>50</sup> I suggest that this point is inspired not by the "work of the intellect," but by experiential disruption, which must be the catalyst for thinking.<sup>51</sup> Foucault infers something along these lines or at least allows for the possibility of a break between 'what is' and the problematization of it. The subjugation of the self through power may yet leave open the possibility of autonomy for a subject capable of critical thought and efficacious action. Allen shows that the paradox of Foucault's "twin notions of autonomy—understood as the capacities for critical reflection and self-transformation" and as thoroughly subjected by power to the point that subjectivity itself would seem to be its mere affect—is in fact resolvable.<sup>52</sup> Foucault himself suggests that there are "two meanings of the word 'subject'... subject to someone else by control and dependence, and tied to his own identity by a conscience or self-knowledge."<sup>53</sup> This double meaning presents an incipient possibility for struggle against power and dependency, for if subjugation and self-knowledge can be linked through a critically evaluative purview, then reflexive activity is possible.

Power itself, Foucault writes, "is nothing other than a certain modification, or the form, differing from time to time, of a series of clashes which constitute the social body."<sup>54</sup> Thus, if patterns become reified, as Butler's analysis suggests, power itself never becomes static, but is both the effect and effecting force of social and historically contingent relations. The gendered subject, the intelligibility of which is informed through power, exists within specific cultural contexts and the contingencies of time and place—but times change. Configurations of power shift and so do compartments of gender. Noting Foucault's examples in *The Use of Pleasure*,

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid, 62.

<sup>49</sup> Chris Hedges, *Empire of Illusion: The End of Literacy and the Triumph of Spectacle* (New York: Nation Books, 2009), 86.

<sup>50</sup> Foucault, *The Hermeneutics of the Subject*, 38.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 38.

<sup>52</sup> Allen, *The Politics of Ourselves*, 20, 2

<sup>53</sup> Foucault, "The Subject and Power," 331.

<sup>54</sup> Michel Foucault, "The Question of Power," (179-182) an interview conducted by Bernard-Henri Levy in *Foucault Live Semiotext(e)* (NY: Columbia University, 1989), 188.

volume 2 of *The History of Sexuality*, Sullivan remarks that, “the contingency of gender binarism becomes particularly visible when one remembers that other peoples at other times have had very different gender configurations.”<sup>55</sup>

If the historical contingency of gender configurations suggests an impermanency of their expression this does not mean that these configurations are arbitrary or easily changed through reconceptualization. No doubt, the latter activity in this and perhaps every era is rarely viewed as desirable, much less as necessary. Today, an effect of the unquestioned characteristics of “normative femininity” is the fear that sexual/gender norms cannot be questioned without harming something essential about what it means to *be* a woman.<sup>56</sup> For instance, students enrolled in my feminist philosophy classes are generally disinclined to use the feminist appellation, even if they appreciate the historical advances feminist activism has wrought. They are, however, less worried about critiquing gender norms than they are concerned that ‘being a feminist’ will make them seem less feminine in the eyes of others—and therefore less socially and sexually desirable as women. So when Bartky relates having taught a “controversial class on the moral and political implications of sex roles,” it was a “compliment” when a student told her she had done so “without sacrificing her femininity.”<sup>57</sup>

During a recent semester, one of my students, frustrated by the ongoing critique of desirability and femininity, suddenly blurted out, “I only want others to think I’m pretty.” With those words she captured in raw vulnerability the yearning to live up to a specific gender norm. The entire class shuddered in recognition. If another student in the class had said as much, for instance the former runway model, the other female students might have nodded in reticent agreement, as well as in surprise—“What? Even you?”—but they would not have been disturbed. This student—a self-described transgendered lesbian—gave stark representation of what Sullivan calls the rigidity of gender binarism. Because ‘prettiness’ is assumed to be an essential requirement of being female (signified by the success or failure to be so, whether acknowledged, refused, resisted, or celebrated), it is linked irrevocably to sex, theoretical commitments to the contrary, notwithstanding. This assumption was suddenly and experientially disrupted when ‘sex’ manifested unequivocally as a cultural conscript, given voice by a woman not biologically sexed as female. Then—speaking for myself because no one spoke aloud—suddenly and very briefly the injunction and the need “to be pretty” (as a formative principle!) felt to be both an irremediable burden and an absurdity. The reality of the need speaks to the reverberations of power through every level of what it means to live as female in Western culture in the present era, but the recognition that it is socially conscripted altered, at least for a moment, the alliance of subjugation with subjectification. It is in that moment that the possibility of re-problematization begins.

If liberation from the strictures of patriarchy is a lost illusion from the second wave, sexist attitudes and habits are still entrenched within social life. What does transformation of consciousness mean today? It is not the past to which I wish to return in resurrecting the idea of unconditioned liberation, but to a reconsideration of the feminist subject, whose recognition

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<sup>55</sup> Sullivan, 90.

<sup>56</sup> Allen, *The Politics of Ourselves*, 73.

<sup>57</sup> Bartky, 45.

of the problematic situation might lead to a shift in social and self-consciousness creating the possibility for change.

It is in fact Foucault who insists, "We are never trapped by power: we can always modify its grip in determinate conditions and according to a precise strategy."<sup>58</sup>

It is my contention that the advent of feminist consciousness operates as an experiential disruption from the grip of determinate conditions and thus makes modifications possible. Even a momentary pause within the flow of circumstances allows for the possibility of stepping back and attending to a situation in such a way that might, upon reflection, lead to thinking that what is, does not have to be. The transformation of consciousness *as* feminist consciousness thus may be a means for "deciphering a layer of reality," to use Foucault's phrase, because it establishes a point of resistance, even at a superficial level, to delimiting patterns of societal norms of gender binarism.<sup>59</sup> That these patterns should be resisted is also part of my thesis—echoing an ethos the second-wave—but to be resisted they must be seen, that is, recognized in the first place, which means they must be *experienced*, as well as *problematized*.

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<sup>58</sup> Foucault, "End of the Monarchy of Sex," 152.

<sup>59</sup> Foucault, "The Question of Power," 198.