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BOOK REVIEW

Amy Allen, *The Politics of Ourselves: Power, Autonomy and Gender in Contemporary Critical Theory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013), ISBN: 978-0-231-13622-8.

Subjection and autonomy are two sides of the politics of ourselves, says Amy Allen (173), yet in political theory they are almost always represented as being in tension with one another through an on-going academic debate. On one side of this debate are postmodern theorists like Michel Foucault and Judith Butler who investigate the self as a heterogeneous concept constituted of positive power relations, and on the other side are those normative theorists like Jurgen Habermas and Seyla Benhabib who argue that the postmodernist approach is incompatible with the notions of agency and autonomy mainly because it is limited to an understanding of subjectivity that does not allow any possibility for capacity for rational critique (47). For these accounts, personal autonomy means having the freedom to choose what is right for oneself, and it is based on a pre-supposition of rational accountability.

Amy Allen's work is an important contribution to critical theory in the sense that it encourages us to get out of the theoretical vicious cycle which forces us to take it for granted that postmodernist and normative accounts of subjectivity are mutually exclusive. Instead, this work suggests a broader vision to help us better understand and recognise the complex relationship and interconnections between the normative and poststructuralist aspects of the politics of the self. From this point of view, its main contribution is to ambitiously draw attention to the ways within which theorising subjectivity as constitutive of power relations does not necessarily mean giving up the normative angle all together, while at the same time recognizing the value of Habermasian critique.

Analysing the self as constitutive of power relations in the footsteps of Foucault, and at the same time engaging in a productive dialogue with the Habermasian approach, means that one has to go back to the roots of the so-called contradiction between these two accounts. Amy Allen stresses that a Foucauldian conceptualisation of the subject is not entirely in contradiction with Kantian philosophy as Habermasian critiques would argue, rather that Foucault's theory should be understood as a radical transformation of Kant's idea of the subject (41). From this perspective, Foucault does not refuse the idea of subjectification per se; rather by shifting the emphasis to the embeddedness of the subject in historical, social and cultural conditions (46), he brings forward a critique towards the transcendental-phenomenological subject. This understanding becomes

clearer when we look at Foucault's conception of power as a strategic relation of production; not as a substance of repression (49). This means that the individual is always the relay of power, and as such individuals play an active role in the maintenance and reproduction of power relations (55).

This point shows that Foucault's approach is not the reduction of the subject merely to the effects of power (47); instead what Foucault suggests is a genealogical account of the ways the subject has been constituted – which is not a total rejection of autonomy. From this perspective, Foucault's theory of subjectivity looks beyond the transcendental phenomenological subject by not totally refusing it. When it comes to gendered subjectivity for example, Butler's psychoanalytic interpretation of Foucault is very important to consider because this perspective helps us better understand how individuals become attached to their subordination (174). This is an angle that would potentially and inevitably be disregarded by Habermasian theorising because this analysis is problematic in recognising the dynamics of power relations in the core domains of the social world, for example the socialisation processes within a family (97). This also means that equating personal autonomy with rational accountability could mean getting stuck within the confines of normativity. Such a Foucauldian conception of the subject is a useful one for uncovering a set of historically and socioculturally specific conditions of possibility of subjectivity, agency and autonomy (154).

Amy Allen argues that Foucault's work on some level can respond to the critiques that claim that his analysis of power undermines any possible conception of subjectivity, agency and autonomy. In fact, Foucault does not deny practical reason and autonomy; rather he understands them as impure (177). However, this does not mean that Foucault's theory does not have any limits when it comes to questions of subjectivity and resistance. For example, defining power in terms of strategic relations and understanding the exercise of freedom in relation to power in this sense makes it difficult to pragmatically analyse how collective social and political movements generate the conceptual and normative resources on which individuals draw in their own efforts to transform the subjection into liberation (69). At this point it is important to re-address the normative insights of Habermas. An understanding of autonomy which is intersubjectively developed through socialisation processes will help us to take up a critical view on the very power relations that are viewed from a Foucauldian angle. As a result, these two accounts cannot be seen as mutually exclusive: "recognizing that there is no outside power would help us to be more historically conscious and modest about the status of our normative judgements and principles" (182).

Amy Allen's in-depth analysis successfully engages the reader with the first-hand readings of these seemingly diverse theoretical perspectives, and brings forward a framework which illuminates both sides' methodological strengths and weaknesses in a systematic way. In this work Amy Allen is able to show that individual choice and resistance can be thought through without shying away from either of the theoretical angles. On the contrary: it is possible to understand the self as constituted by power relations as the Foucauldian tradition would suggest, but

also accept the autonomous action with an Habermasian interpretation. From this perspective all we need to do is to be able to selectively read both accounts. Allen therefore suggests that:

by reading Foucault in a way that emphasizes his connection to the Kantian Enlightenment tradition and by interpreting Habermas in a more historicized, contextualist and pragmatic direction it is possible to stake out a productive and fertile middle ground between these two theorists whom commentators often take to be diametrically opposed (177).

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