Rethinking resistance

Feminism and the politics of our selves

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Is accepting the Foucaultian claim that the subject is constituted by power tantamount to denying the possibility of emancipatory resistance? Not necessarily argues Amy Allen, taking a Habermasian detour to articulate a politics of opposition to gender subordination that is both individual and collective.

Introduction: Feminism and the problem of the subject

Perhaps the most difficult problem to emerge in feminist critical theory over the last thirty years is the problem of the subject. [1] The problem arises because of a particular way of thinking about power, inspired by the work of Michel Foucault, according to which power is constitutive of many aspects of our social reality, including not only our norms, practices, and institutions, but also our very selves. “The individual”, Foucault writes, “is not […] power’s opposite number; the individual is one of power’s first effects.” [2] This way of understanding the relationship between power and individuals – a relationship that Foucault described with the term “subjection” (assujettissement) – has been especially attractive to feminist theorists, many of whom have drawn on his conception of subjection to analyse the ways in which the multiple and intersecting axes of subordination along lines of gender, race, and sexuality constitute gendered, raced and sexed subjects. [3] However, the feminist embrace of the Foucaultian notion of subjection gives rise to an apparent problem: if the gendered subject is constituted by power relations, then (how) is it possible for that subject to be capable of agency, autonomy and resistance to gender subordination? Is accepting the claim that the subject is constituted by power tantamount to denying the possibility of what David Hoy calls “critical resistance”, which means emancipatory resistance to oppressive forces? [4] Or is it possible to understand the subject both as constituted by subordinating power relations and as capable of autonomous, critical resistance to subordination? How must the notions of subjection, autonomy, and critique be understood if we are to theorize their interconnections?

Recently, it has been argued that the problem of the subject is a red herring, a problem that is neither theoretically nor politically fruitful for feminists. This problem has not only attracted too much of our attention, it has also distracted us from what should be our
principal focus: the task of envisioning a truly transformative, freedom-enabling politics, where freedom is understood in Hannah Arendt’s sense as a collective practice of world-building. [5] As I have argued elsewhere, [6] I am not at all convinced that the problem of the subject can be set aside so easily. Collective practices of freedom, world-building and political engagement are made possible by and in turn make possible the empowerment of individual subjects. As such, the notion of collective freedom presupposes the concept of the individual subject – as Arendt herself was well aware [7] – at the same time that taking part in collective political action enables us to deconstruct, renegotiate and reconstruct our individual identities. Hence, we cannot escape the problem of the subject simply by shifting our attention to the domain of collective political action. Instead, we have no choice but to try to make sense of the relationship between the subordinating power relations that constitute our gendered selves and the possibilities for critical resistance to and transformation of them.

This brings me to the concept that I want to focus on, the politics of our selves. I borrow this term from Foucault; it appears in the following passage from a lecture that he gave in 1980:

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. [8]

By refusing the notion of the self as positivity, and instead thinking of the self as “the historical correction of the technology built in our history,” Foucault highlights the ways in which selves are constituted by historically specific relations of power, or technologies of domination. But by claiming that the main political task of the present is figuring out how to change those technologies, Foucault also highlights the ways in which selves are capable of deliberate self-transformation, through technologies of the self. [9] Thus, this passage expresses concisely the central ambiguity that is at the heart of the problem of the subject in feminist critical theory. Moreover, with this phrase “the politics of ourselves”, Foucault challenges us to think through this problem by conceptualizing the self as both constituted by power relations and capable of critically resisting and deliberately transforming that self-constitution at the same time.

In what follows, I explore the notion of the politics of our “selves”, in an attempt to sketch out an answer to the problem of the subject. [10] Although Foucault’s notion of the politics of ourselves is the inspiration and point of departure for these reflections, I should note at the outset that the account of the politics of our selves that I develop here is not fully faithful to Foucault. My overall strategy is to develop my account of the politics of our selves by bringing Foucault’s work on subjection into dialogue with Habermas’ account of autonomy, critiquing and modifying each thinker as I go along. In what follows, I start by sketching out the two sides of the politics of our selves – first the way in which the subject is constituted by power through the mechanism of subjection, as this is understood by Foucault and Butler, and then the way in which the self is capable of autonomous critical reflection and self-transformation, as this is analysed by
Habermas. Throughout, I am careful to point out how each side of the politics of our selves must be understood if we are to make sense of their interrelation. After having sketched out my account, I turn to the question of resistance, with a discussion of how we can use this conception of the politics of our selves to understand individual and collective resistance to gender subordination.

**Subjection**

Foucault is famous (or infamous, depending on your perspective) for having declared that the individual is an effect of power. This claim is central to his notion of subjection. Critics of Foucault, in particular his feminist and Habermasian critics, often take this to mean that Foucault thinks that the individual is *merely or nothing more than* an effect of power. Thus, Foucault is charged with rejecting the very idea of subjectivity, with embracing or participating in the so-called death of the subject. For example, Linda Martin Alcoff claims that, for Foucault, “subjectivity is causally inefficacious, historically constructed, even a kind of epiphenomenon of power/knowledge.” [11] Similarly, Jürgen Habermas maintains that Foucault understands individuals “as standardized products of some discourse formation – as individual copies that are mechanically punched out.” [12]

In my view, this is a mistaken interpretation of Foucault. If we look carefully at what Foucault actually says, it is clear that this is not what he has in mind. Consider, for example, one of the crucial passages upon which Alcoff’s critique is based:

> It is [...] a mistake to think of the individual as a sort of elementary nucleus, a primitive atom or some multiple, inert matter to which power is applied, or which is struck by a power that subordinates or destroys individuals. In actual fact, one of the first effects of power is that it allows bodies, gestures, discourses, and desires to be identified and constituted as something individual. The individual is not, in other words, power’s opposite number; the individual is one of power’s first effects. The individual is in fact a power-effect, and at the same time, to the extent that he is a power-effect, the individual is a relay: power passes through the individuals it has constituted. [13]

Here, Foucault contrasts his conception of power with the juridical conception, according to which the individual is in itself unsullied by power relations, and thus is taken to be an “elementary nucleus” or a “primitive atom” or an “inert matter” on or against which power relations are subsequently applied. Foucault’s account, by contrast, highlights the ways in which power shapes our very individuality. However, this does not mean that individuals are merely or nothing more than effects of power. Foucault specifically claims that individuals are not “inert,” and his conception of the individual as the “relay” of power suggests, to the contrary, that she plays an active role in the maintenance and reproduction of power relations. Individuals convey the power relations that make them who they are; their very individuality is a conduit for power relations.

So Foucault does not view the subject as merely or nothing more than an effect of power, nor does he reject the notion of subjectivity per se. Indeed, in an important late essay, he claims that “it is not power, but the subject, which is the general theme of [his] research.” [14] To those who think that the point of his genealogical analysis of power is to undermine the notion of the subject, this claim will no doubt seem surprising and
In my view, the best way to make sense of it is to understand his archaeological and genealogical works as taking aim at a particular conception of the subject – namely, the transcendental-phenomenological subject presupposed by Kant and Husserl. In other words, Foucault rejects the conception of the constituent subject, the subject that stands outside of the flow of its experiences and constitutes them as experiences for herself. But the point of this is not to reject the concept of the subject tout court, to view it as nothing more than the epiphenomenal effect of power relations and discourse formations. Rather, the point is to re-conceive the subject as constituted by historically and culturally specific power-relations. [15]

In other words, the way to make sense of Foucault’s claim that the subject is the general theme of his research is to understand his oeuvre as an inquiry into the historically and socio-culturally specific discursive and non-discursive conditions of possibility for being a subject. In his early, archaeological phase, he articulates the discursive conditions of possibility for being a knowing subject; in his middle, genealogical phase, he analyses the non-discursive, practical conditions of possibility for being a moral subject; and in his late, ethical phase, he investigates the possibilities for remaking our subjectivity through what he calls practices of the self. If this description of his project is plausible, then it seems that Foucault was indeed, and from the very beginning, “a remarkably able Kantian” (to borrow Ian Hacking’s phrase). [16] Foucault’s archaeological and genealogical works can fruitfully be interpreted as a transformation from within of the Kantian critical project, as an attempt to historicize Kant’s central concept, the transcendental subject. Hence, Foucault’s project aims at a critique of critique itself. [17]

On this interpretation, Foucault’s late turn to the investigation of practices or technologies of the self is perfectly consistent with his attempt to problematize the transcendental-phenomenological subject in his earlier archaeological and genealogical works. Moreover, at a conceptual level, Foucault’s notion of subjection must be understood as a Janus-faced process: the individual becomes a subject who has certain capacities through subjection to existing power-knowledge relations. Crucially, these capacities include the capacity for personal autonomy, in two specific senses of that term: first, the capacity for critical reflection on the contingent and historically specific power-knowledge relations that have made you who you are, which Foucault refers to as the capacity for thought understood as a kind of reflective problematization; [18] and, second, the capacity for deliberate self-transformation through a patient, bodily, practical work on the self. [19] Foucault’s view that the formation of our subjectivity – including our critical capacities – and our subjection to power relations are two sides of the same coin implies the further claim that there is no outside to power. That is to say, there is no hope of gaining access to a subjective or intersubjective point of view outside of power relations, from which we can critique them. But this does not mean that the critique of power is impossible or fruitless, only that it must be ongoing. We are, as Foucault put it, “always in the position of beginning again.” [20]

In her work on subjection, Judith Butler further illuminates this side of the politics of our selves. Like Foucault, she sees the individual as an effect of power, including the regulatory power that shapes gender and sexual identity in subordinating ways. Also like Foucault, she emphasizes the ambivalent nature of subjection. For Butler, the subject is a subject “of” power in two senses: power is both a condition of possibility for subjectivity and a force that the subject wields. [21] Hence, the subject is “neither fully determined by power nor fully determining of power (but significantly and partially both).” [22]
Butler’s notion of subjection is thus compatible with agency – albeit a “radically conditioned” form of agency. [23] However, Butler departs from Foucault in her focus on the question of how and why individuals become psychically attached to their own modes of subjection and/or subordinated identities. In order to address this question, Butler turns to psychoanalysis as a way of illuminating the link between desire and the will, and making sense of the (all too common) phenomenon whereby the subordinated come to desire their own subordination. This is a crucial point because it suggests that rational critique by itself is not enough to motivate the undoing of subjection. Even if thought can get free enough from itself to critique the relations of subjection that have made us who we are, the practical work of resistance and self-transformation will require us to change not only our minds but also our desires, wills, modes of attachment and sources of recognition.

In sum, both Foucault and Butler brilliantly illuminate the first dimension of the politics of our selves – the ways in which selves are constituted by power relations – and both are attentive to the second dimension – the capacities of selves to be critically self-constituting. Nevertheless, their accounts of this second dimension are not wholly satisfactory. In fact, both Foucault and Butler are vulnerable to a common objection: neither of them pays sufficient attention to the important role for collective social and political action in the politics of our selves. [24] As I will discuss in more detail in below, collective social and political movements – such as the feminist and queer movements, to name two collective struggles that are close to the theoretical and political concerns of Foucault and Butler – can serve as a site for the deconstruction, negotiation, and reconstruction of the subjectivity of participants, and they can provide conceptual and normative resources for participants and non-participants who are struggling to reconstitute themselves in less subordinated ways. But this dimension of the politics of our selves is notably absent from the work of Foucault and Butler. This lacunae in the Foucaultian account of subjection is part of what motivates the turn to Habermas, since his focus on intersubjectivity and the public sphere can help to fill in this gap in our account of the politics of our selves. But, in turning to Habermas, we will have to take care not to abandon the insights of Foucault and Butler’s account of subjection. Rather, the challenge is to try to rethink Habermas’ account of the intersubjective formation of autonomy in light of the notion of subjection.

**Autonomy**

Habermas’ normative-philosophical framework offers a compelling starting point for thinking through the second side of the politics of our selves: the capacity of the self for autonomous self-constitution. For the notion of autonomy is at the core of Habermas’ philosophical project. As Habermas put it in his inaugural lecture in Frankfurt in 1965, “the human interest in autonomy and responsibility is not mere fancy, for it can be apprehended a priori. What raises us out of nature is the only thing whose nature we can know: language. Through its structure, autonomy and responsibility are posited for us.” [25] Although Habermas has subsequently rejected many of the assumptions of his early work, the notion of autonomy has remained central to his critical-theoretical enterprise. Following Maeve Cooke, I take the core of Habermas’ notion of autonomy to be his account of personal autonomy, understood as rational accountability. [26] On this conception, as Cooke notes, “the autonomy of a person would be measured against her or his ability to support what she or he says with reasons, as well as against her or his
willingness to enter into argumentation and against his or her openness to criticism.”

Central to this conception of autonomy, then, is the capacity for critical reflexivity, the capacity to take up a reflective stance on one’s beliefs, norms, practices, institutions, cultural forms, and so on. Habermas’ notion of personal autonomy presupposes a subject who is capable of critical reflection on the power relations that have made her who she is; and his account of individuation through socialization explains how this subject emerges. Hence, his critical theory has much to offer an account of the second dimension of the politics of our selves.

One might think, however, that Habermas has little or nothing to say about the first dimension of the politics of our selves, and, in a certain sense, this is accurate. Habermas does not have an analysis of subjection, and he is, as I mentioned above, critical of Foucault’s claim that the subject is an effect of power. Moreover, it is a common criticism of Habermas’ theory of communicative action that it tends to screen power out of the lifeworld. This criticism refers to the distinction between system and lifeworld in Habermas’ two-volume masterpiece *The Theory of Communicative Action* and his tendency to reserve the term “power” to refer to one of the core components of the system – namely, the administrative political system. Since the lifeworld is the domain in which culture, society and personality are maintained and reproduced through communicative practices and interactions, the socialization of individuals is a lifeworld process. So if Habermas screens power out of the lifeworld, then he screens it out of the process of individuation through socialization as well, which means that he would have no way of making sense of what Foucault and Butler discuss under the heading of subjection.

In response to this criticism, Habermas insists that it was never his intention to screen power out of the lifeworld, and he cites his colonization of the lifeworld thesis and his account of systematically distorted communication as evidence for this claim. As I argue in more detail elsewhere, I do not think that either of these accounts of how power operates in the lifeworld is sufficient for making sense of subjection. A more interesting and also more promising possibility can be found in the third way that power functions in Habermas’ account of the lifeworld, in the form of the often unnoticed but nonetheless necessary role that power plays in the formation of Habermas’ autonomous subject. This account of power in the process of subjectivation arises in the context of Habermas’ account of individualization through socialization. Drawing on work in cognitive, developmental, and social psychology, Habermas offers an intersubjective account of the self which traces the formation of the self through processes of socialization that are rooted in the lifeworld. According to Habermas, the self has an intersubjective core because it is generated communicatively, as he says, “on the path from without to within.” Significantly, however, Habermas views individuals as produced through socialization but not determined by socialization. As he puts it, “identity is produced through individuation, that is, precisely through a growing independence in relation to social systems.” This is because linguistic and moral development generates capacities for autonomy and reflexivity that enable socialized individuals to take up a critically reflexive stance on their own socialization processes.

What is most interesting for our purposes is Habermas’ acknowledgement of the
necessary role that power plays in this socialization process. Habermas regards the internalization of structures of authority as a necessary feature of the process of subjectivation and the development of moral autonomy. As he puts it:

the task of passing to the conventional stage of interaction consists in reworking the imperative arbitrary will of a dominant figure of this kind [i.e., a parent] into the authority of a suprapersonal will detached from this specific person [...]. Particular behaviour patterns become detached from the context-bound intentions and speech acts of specific individuals and take on the external form of social norms to the extent that the sanctions associated with them are internalized [...], that is, to the extent that they are assimilated into the personality of the growing child and thus made independent of the sanctioning power of concrete reference persons. [34]

The growing child undergoes a transformation from a dependence on a wholly external authority (usually a parent) through an internalization of that asymmetrical power relation to an ability to reflect internally on social norms, relationships, and expectations, and assess their validity. Here, Habermas accepts the basic Freudian and Meadian picture according to which the internalization of social controls is thus a necessary - though not a sufficient - condition for both adherence to and reflection upon moral norms; thus, it is a necessary condition for the achievement of individual autonomy.

However, unlike Freud and Mead, Habermas seems quite sanguine about the implications of this internalization. For this picture raises the interesting question of how “pure” – that is, how independent of power – autonomy can ever hope to be, given that the individual must first internalize structures of authority in order to, in a second step, be in a position to critically assess their legitimacy. Although Habermas acknowledges this worry, he is, in my view, overly confident about our abilities to attain critical reflexivity about the power relations that have made us who we are. Hence, for example, his claim that “adolescents [...] can retrospectively compensate for the asymmetry of filial dependency by liberating themselves through a critical reappraisal of the genesis of such restrictive socialization processes.” [35] Perhaps. But if the internalization of structures of authority whose legitimacy we cannot assess until after they have been internalized is a necessary feature of the formation of the autonomous subject, then what are the psychic and social consequences of this? What limits or constraints are imposed upon our autonomy by the fact that we can only become autonomous by first subjecting ourselves to an asymmetrical power relation whose legitimacy we can assess only later? How far can we go in criticizing the power relations that have made us who we are? These are questions that Habermas’ work is not well-equipped to address; they are better addressed by bringing his conception of autonomy into dialogue with the insights of the Foucaultian and Butlerian analysis of subjection.

If, however, we take on board the Foucaultian and Butlerian analysis of subjection, then we must also acknowledge, as Butler puts it, that “power pervades the very conceptual apparatus that seeks to negotiate its terms, including the subject position of the critic.” [36] This acknowledgement, in turn, puts considerable pressure on Habermas’ commitment to the context-transcendence of validity claims. Although the details of his analysis of claims to truth and normative validity have changed over the years, he has
consistently been committed to a particular interpretation of the notion of transcendence from within, according to which a validity claim is raised here and now, in a particular context. However the moment of unconditional validity contained within it also transcends that local context, even “bursts every provinciality asunder”. [37] As Habermas puts it: “The validity claimed for propositions and norms transcends spaces and times, “blots out” space and time; but the claim is always raised here and now, in specific contexts, and is either accepted or rejected with factual consequences for action.” [38] It is difficult to see how this strong construal of the notion of transcendence from within could be compatible with the idea that there is no outside to power relations, that power even pervades the subject position of the critic herself. Hence, in order to bring together the insights of Habermas’ conception of autonomy and Foucault and Butler’s analysis of subjection, it will be necessary to understand transcendence from within in a more contextualist and pragmatic way, as the context-transcending aim of validity claims, [39] or as an “idealizing projection” or a “promissory note” rather than as a fait accompli. [40]

Rethinking resistance

The key, then to understanding the politics of our selves is to think about its two dimensions – subjection and autonomy – as interrelated. Drawing together Foucault’s and Butler’s insights into subjection and Habermas’ insights into autonomy, we can understand selves as constituted by but not thereby wholly determined by power relations. Subjection does not preclude the capacity for autonomy in the sense of critical reflexivity and deliberate self-transformation – indeed, our critical capacities are themselves formed through processes of subjection to power relations, as Habermas’ account of individuation through socialization inadvertently shows. Autonomy is possible for subjected subjects but never outside of power, hence it is always conditioned and ambivalent. The commitment to a conditioned and ambivalent conception of autonomy does not undermine the normative basis for critique, although it does mean that we have to understand that normative basis in a more contextualist fashion than Habermas tends to do.

This model of the politics of our selves proves extremely useful for feminist theory, inasmuch as it enables us to think of the gendered subject as constituted by subordinating gender norms, practices, institutions, forms of identity and so on, and yet at the same time as capable of taking up a critical stance on and deliberately transforming the self in ways that are subversive of those norms, practices, institutions, and forms of identity. However, this model of the politics of our selves also raises some serious questions for theorizing resistance in the context of feminist theory. The problem is not whether or not resistance to subordination is possible. The problem is whether, given the embeddedness of the critic and her critique in relations of power and subjection, we can ever be in a position to tell whether a given instance of resistance is genuinely subversive of subordination or not? Think, for example, of the heated feminist debates from the 1980s and 1990s about pornography. Should we understand women’s production or consumption of (at least certain kinds of) pornography as an act of resistance to a subordinating norm of female sexuality (one that claims that good girls do not love sex)? Or should we understand it as a form of capitulation to masculine desire (a desire which figures women’s bodies as the passive and inert targets of the male gaze, which functions as a stand in for the male sex organ)? Or as somehow both at the same...
time?

According to the view that I have defended here, I would have to say that we can’t answer these questions, at least not in any final sense, because knowing the answer to these questions would require us to take up a position outside of complex and multifarious power relations that are constitutive of gender and sexuality, and that seems to me to be impossible. I am not convinced that we could imagine – even as a hypothetical or as the basis of a regulative ideal – a form of life that would be completely purified of strategic power relations. Even if we could imagine such a form of life, I do not think that it would be recognizably human. This does not mean that no other types of human social relations, aside from strategic power-over relations, are possible. Of course, moments of recognition, love, and even mutual empowerment (or power-with) are possible and, happily, often actualized. To say that there is no outside to power (by which is meant: power in the strategic sense of exercising power over others) is just to say that there can be no recognizably human form of social life from which such power relations have been wholly eliminated.

Even if we can never be in a position to know, once and for all, whether our acts of resistance genuinely subvert or somehow unwittingly recapitulate our subordination, this does not mean that we should now resist. All it means is that we must view our projects of resistance and their outcomes as open to ongoing, never-ending, open-ended contestation. But the notion of the politics of our selves that I have offered seems to raise a further puzzle about resistance: given the psychic and subjective depth of the hold that power has upon us, through the process of subjection, how is resistance to be fostered? Given that we have no choice but to start from where we are, as gendered subjects who are constituted by and therefore also psychically attached to our subjection to subordinating gender norms, how is the motivation for resistance ever to take hold?

I think that two sorts of answers are possible here. The first refers to the relationship between individual struggles against subordination and collective social movements. Collective social movements such as the feminist or queer movements generate conceptual and normative resources on which individuals can draw in their own attempts at critical resistance. For example, feminists working collectively in counterpublic spheres have generated new language for describing social reality – including such terms as sexism, male chauvinism, sexual harassment, date rape, the double shift, and so on – language that has enabled many individuals (not just women, and not just feminists) to recast their identities and to resist subordination in their daily lives. Similarly, the queer movement has performed a similar function by reclaiming the term queer and transforming it from a homophobic slur into a descriptor of a radical and subversive understanding of sexuality. Such social movements thus provide space and resources for the ongoing deconstruction, negotiation, and reconstruction of subordinating modes of identity, recognition, and attachment.

As an example, consider the following anecdote told by Jane Mansbridge, in the context of her work on how the feminist movement has generated conceptual and normative resources that can be used by women in their individual struggles for resistance. Mansbridge emphasizes that these resources are used by women who are not themselves active in the feminist movement, and even by those who do not regard themselves as feminists. In other words, the resources generated in collective social movements are
available not only to those who participate in or identity with those movements, but potentially to all those who are struggling against subordination in their daily lives. She tells the story of a woman that she interviewed in New York City who was engaged in a micronegotiation with her husband over the gendered division of paid and unpaid labour in her house. She had recently taken a job as a teacher’s assistant in order to help the family out financially, but she soon found that the job changed her, made her feel more empowered. The woman relayed the following story to Mansbridge:

Well, I love to cook – I really do – but I like to cook a big meal – from so many years of cooking. And I made a big meal one night – the works! Ham and muffins and all. And he went over to the table and looked it all over and went, “Yup, forgot the mustard!” […] And I had been working about six months and that enraged me so much. And he went into the living room and picked up the paper. And – it’s probably the strongest stand I ever took – I stood over him and said: “I bring the medical and dental benefits into this house; you get the mustard!” [41]

As Mansbridge observes, this story does not contain any explicit reference to feminist terminology; nevertheless, “feminist ideals of equality, feminist possibilities for a stronger self, and feminist analyses of the reasons why women don’t ‘give themselves enough credit’ served as conceptual and normative resources in the negotiations she carried on within herself and with others.” [42]

A second possible source of resistance to subordination can be found in the cultural and social imaginary as expressed for example in works of literature, film and art that envision new ways of living and new possibilities for recognition. As María Pía Lara has argued, the feminist narratives embedded in literary fiction and autobiography can generate new cultural understandings of concepts such as justice, equality and the good life, and the cultural transformations made possible by such narratives in turn make possible social and institutional change. As Lara puts it, “emancipatory narratives can themselves create new forms of power, configuring new ways to fight back against past and present injustices, thus making institutional transformations possible.” [43] Lara argues that new political forms “have to be imagined before they can be achieved,” and that the feminist narratives generated in literary and artistic counterpublics are an important source of such imagination. [44] Such narratives can envision and thus help to make possible new forms of subjectivity, modes of self-understanding, sources of recognition, patterns of attachment and identification, and ways of living together.

As an example, consider the classic radical feminist novel from 1976, Marge Piercy’s Woman on the Edge of Time. [45] The book offers two starkly contrasting pictures of social reality: a dystopian picture of New York City in the 1970s and a possible utopian future, one hundred and fifty years hence, in a society called Mattapoissett. The protagonist of the novel, Connie Ramos, is a Latina who has been subject to the harsh disciplinary power of the welfare state: labelled a child abuser, her child has been removed from her care; judged to be insane, she is placed in a mental hospital and held there against her will. There she begins receiving regular visits from Luciente, an inhabitant of that future world. Hence, Connie is the woman “on the edge of time”, caught between the dismal present and a possible future, and part of the genius of the novel is that the reader is never quite sure whether the visitor from the future is real or a
figment of Connie’s imagination.

Be that as it may, the future presented in the novel is a feminist utopia which gender, racial and class hierarchies have been radically transformed. The level of detail of Piercy’s vision of what is required for a world beyond gender subordination is especially striking. In Mattapoisett, language has been radically re-imagined, such that there are no more gendered pronouns, and everyone is referred to simply as per, which is short for person. Childbearing and reproduction have been de-biologized and are now done via mechanical wombs. The nuclear family has been abolished, and children are raised communally, by groups of several pers, in order to break the stranglehold that the nuclear family has on the reproduction of gender norms. And norms of gender performance have been transformed, such that there are no outwardly visible signs of gender difference in terms of style of dress, hairstyle, make-up, or of bodily comportment. This novel presents a radical feminist imaginary that offers a vision of new ways of living, new possibilities for recognition and attachment, and new modes of self-understanding, that can fuel individual and collective acts of resistance (and that was no doubt also inspired in part by such acts).

To be sure, one might still wonder whether these gestures toward collective social movements and radical imaginaries are sufficient to explain the possibility of resistance. Why should we think that feminist literary or political counterpublics will actually make a difference, especially in light of the fact that I must have become passionately attached to my gender identity before I am in a position to read feminist literature or to take part in social activism? Does this not mean that the conceptual, normative, and narrative resources found in such social and literary counterpublics will never enable me to get outside my gender identity and thus genuinely to resist it? The mistaken assumption here is that resistance is only real or genuine when it comes from a place that is behind or outside of power relations altogether. As I have already said, I think there is no such place. This does not mean that resistance is futile nor does it imply that resistance cannot change anything for the better. It does mean that we have no choice but to start from where we are, as gendered subjects who are constituted by power relations, and that resistance, subversion and transformation of such power relations will have to come from within. Hence, we can never be in a position to know, once and for all, whether some act of resistance is genuinely progressive and emancipatory or serves to reinforce subordination. Even our judgments about what constitutes change for the better will have to remain permanently open to contestation. What shape such transformations will ultimately take must be left up to what Foucault once called “the undefined work of freedom.” [46]

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Footnotes

1. The problem of the subject is one of the central points of contention in Seyla Benhabib, Judith Butler, Drucilla Cornell, and Nancy Fraser, Feminist Contentions: A Philosophical Exchange, ed. Linda Nicholson, New York: Routledge 1995.


9. For Foucault's distinction between technologies of domination and technologies of the self, see ibid. 203.


22. Ibid. 17.

23. Ibid. 15.

24. This, I think, is the kernel of truth in Linda Zerilli's critique of the feminist obsession with the problem of the subject, discussed above.


27. Ibid. 279.


33. Ibid. 74.


38. Ibid. 323.


42. Ibid. 36-37.


44. Ibid. 77.


46. Foucault, "What is Enlightenment?", 316.

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