

1
3 **EXPLAINING THE POWER OF**
5 **GENDERED SUBJECTIVITY**
7

9 Christopher F. Zurn
11

13 **ALLEN'S ACCOMPLISHMENTS**

AU:1

15 Amy Allen's latest book *The Politics of Our Selves* (Allen, 2008) – like her
17 previous book – endeavors to come to terms with social conditions that are
19 alternatively enabling and constraining, and sometimes both at the same
21 time. Her earlier *The Power of Feminist Theory* (Allen, 1999) was concerned
23 to differentiate and investigate the various contemporary forms of power
25 that need to be grasped to understand the struggles and wishes of the age, in
27 particular, feminist struggles against and for various modalities of power.
29 Her latest book is also concerned with enabling and constraining social
conditions, although the focus here is subjectivity and autonomy,
specifically with the individual subjects' complex relationships to gender,
power, normativity, and politics. And like that previous book, her latest
makes several extremely important contributions to political thought,
especially to that form of thought concerned with articulating interdisci-
plinary explanatory theories of complex social phenomena with a normative
impulse towards emancipation – that is, to critical social theory.

It is worth *very* briefly summarizing Allen's achievements in this latest
book, before turning to some questions and concerns about some of its claims
and motifs. The central achievement, as I understand it, is to have provided a
synthetic account of gendered subjectivity that can incorporate the most

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1 important insights of both poststructuralist accounts of how subjects are
3 produced through gender-differentiated power structures (as exemplified in
5 the work of Michel Foucault and Judith Butler) and intersubjectivist
7 accounts of how reflexive autonomy emerges through the communicative
9 socialization of individuals (as exemplified in the work of Jürgen Habermas
11 and Seyla Benhabib), without taking on overly stringent and polemical theses
13 often used to pit these two broad forms of theory against one another.
15 Rather, Allen convincingly shows how a theory oriented toward subjection –
17 the processes by which historically specific power-laden processes of
19 subjugation produce modern subjects – and a theory oriented toward
21 autonomy – the capacities of individuals to gain reflective theoretical insight
23 into the social relations they act within and to be able to transform themselves
25 in the light of that insight – reciprocally require one another. In particular,
27 any explanatorily satisfying and practically insightful theory of society
29 oriented toward understanding and overcoming gender-based subordination
31 will need to grasp both how individuals come to inhabit deleterious gender
33 identities and how they can overcome the effects of those identities through
35 justifiable means of self-transformation.

19 The foundation for Allen’s synthetic account is found in her interpreta-
21 tions of Foucault, Habermas, Butler, and Benjamin, which are not only
23 supple and insightful, but more importantly show in detail how there is
25 much more in common between the four than is often acknowledged.
27 Allen’s interpretive tack is twofold: on the one hand, to undercut overly
29 stringent skeptical conclusions of some poststructuralists vis-à-vis normative
31 differentiation between better and worse forms of subject formation and, on
33 the other, to undercut overly idealized accounts of context-transcending
35 validity and the powers of rational insight given by some communicative
37 action theorists. I don’t want to go into too much detail here, since those
39 interested could hardly be better served than by reading Allen’s lucid prose.
But it is worth mentioning some of her leading conclusions, as they are quite
important – and to my mind convincing – contributions to on-going
discussions of how to interpret these major social theorists.

33 To begin with Foucault, Allen argues that he never argued for or
35 celebrated the death of the subject *simpliciter*, nor for allied concepts such as
37 individual agency, autonomy, and self-reflexivity. Rather what he rejected as
39 untenable was a particular conception of the subject: what Allen calls the
“transcendental-phenomenological subject.” This thesis is supported by a
detailed and careful reading of Foucault’s life-long consideration of Kant
throughout his corpus. Particularly notable here is Allen’s elucidation of
Foucault’s introduction to a French translation of Kant’s *Anthropology*

1 (a manuscript accessed by Allen in the Foucault archives), which reveals
2 Foucault's identification of the problematic of the transcendental-empirical
3 doublet throughout Kant's work. The upshot of this reading is that
4 Foucault takes the subject as his central topic throughout his career and sees
5 his theoretical work as a continuation-through-transformation of Kant's
6 original project of a critique of the subject. By clearing away an overly
7 strong reading of Foucault's skepticism about the subject, Allen is then in a
8 position to present and endorse Foucault's account of the relationship
9 between modern modes of power and the constitution of the modern
10 subject, an account that suggests that the subject's autonomy is always
11 inflected by relations of power even as autonomy is not merely reducible to a
12 pure effect of power.

13 Allen then turns to Butler's account of the psychic anchoring of power as
14 an explanation of how individuals become attached to, and so invested in,
15 subjectifying social norms, such as socially current norms of femininity and
16 masculinity. Butler's account of the psychodynamics of identification is
17 shown to fill in a lacuna in Foucault's account, for Foucault was never really
18 able to answer how or why individual subjects would invest themselves in
19 and seek to maintain norms constituted through those new techniques of
20 disciplinary power that he memorably identified. However, Allen also points
21 to some normative shortcomings in Foucault's and Butler's respective
22 theories, specifically concerning the possibility of differentiating normatively
23 defensible forms of intersubjectivity from subjugating forms of power. Both
24 have, in short, a hard time distinguishing between worthwhile forms of
25 intersubjective recognition and reciprocity from forms of intersubjectivity
26 that are inherently subjugating and oppressive.

27 Habermas's theory of communicative action is, of course, oriented just to
28 these latter kinds of normative distinctions. Allen pays particular attention to
29 Habermas's intersubjectivist account of the formation of subjects, with its
30 stress on individualization as achieved in and through socialization into
31 structures of linguistic intersubjectivity. That account then provides a robust
32 and defensible theory of autonomy, where autonomy (for Allen) is defined in
33 terms of individuals' abilities (a) to have reflexive insight into the enabling and
34 constraining conditions of their socialization and (b) to be able to transform
35 themselves and their societies in the direction of more emancipatory practices
36 and forms of life. Could this account of intersubjectively secured autonomy
37 then be connected to the Foucault–Butler account of subject formation
38 through power and gender norms? In a fascinating series of investigations,
39 Allen turns to a number of different places in Habermas's corpus where one
40 might hope to theorize the relationship between subject-forming power and

1 individuals' capacities for autonomy, and thereby link up poststructuralist
 2 and communicative accounts of subjectivity. She concludes, however, that
 3 Habermas's thesis of the colonization of the lifeworld, his occasional remarks
 4 on the psychodynamics of moral socialization, and his conception of
 5 systematically distorted communication each cannot, in the end, be used to
 6 understand the power of subjection. Instead she recommends that at least the
 7 Habermasian account of communicative reason can be given a suitably
 8 pragmatic and contextualized reading – what she calls “principled con-
 9 textualism” – so as to be made compatible with the notion of immanent
 10 critique that she has attributed to Foucault.

11 Allen turns her critical acumen, finally, to Benhabib's narrative account of
 12 the self to see whether this more contextualized version of communicative
 13 theory is able to adequately understand the power of gender in subject
 14 formation. While in agreement with Benhabib's more dynamic and historicized
 15 version of communicative reason, Allen finds that there is still a problematic
 16 rationalist core in certain implications of Benhabib's view, such as the notion
 17 that gender is but one more set of narrative scripts that individuals could
 18 choose to reject or overcome in their self-forming narratives.

19 In the end, Allen argues that the self is gendered “all the way down,” as it
 20 were, and that individuals form deep psychic attachments to gender norms,
 21 norms intimately bound up with specific techniques of power oriented
 22 towards constituting docile subjects. Nevertheless, she agrees with the
 23 communicative theorists that there are realistic possibilities for the exercise
 24 of reflective insight and self-transformation – for the exercise of autonomy –
 25 vis-à-vis gender. We can make important normative distinctions between
 26 better and worse forms of subjection and thereby exercise our autonomy,
 27 even if we cannot, in the end, hope to transcend, through the exercise of
 28 pure reason alone, our context and its specific configuration of gendered
 29 practices, norms, and forms of power. Allen thus shows us a way of
 30 understanding gender, power, subjection, and autonomy simultaneously as
 31 enabling and constraining conditions, and puts forward useful suggestions
 32 for paths to progressive social transformation of these conditions.

33

35 **AUTONOMY AS RATIONAL ACCOUNTABILITY**

37 Notwithstanding my deep admiration for Allen's accomplishments in this
 38 book, I would like to take up some themes and claims I believe warrant
 39 further attention. To begin, I should put my theoretical cards on the table:
 in previous work, I attempted to elucidate and defend Habermas's

1 intersubjectivist, competence-theoretic account of the development of
2 subjects, specifically against contextualist worries about the historical,
3 ethical, and institutional specificity of the structures of personal identity,
4 and I attempted to show how this robust conception plays an important
5 normative role in critical social theory's substantive diagnosis of social
6 pathologies (Zurn, 1999). While I presently plump for the substantive results
7 of that project, it should be pointed out that Allen shows how this general
8 type of project should have been done all along.

9 I agree with Allen that the core of Habermas's account of autonomy is the
10 notion of rational accountability. On his account, an autonomous person is
11 able in intersubjective contexts to defend, at ever higher levels of reflexivity
12 and abstraction if need be, the meaningfulness and validity of her or his
13 speech and action as based on defensible reasons rather than on contingently
14 given or taken for granted meanings, truths, conventions, values, etc. Allen's
15 reading of autonomy repeatedly foregrounds two central capacities as
16 necessary for autonomy: the capacity for critical reflexivity with regard to
17 socially current meanings, truths, norms and values, and the capacity for self-
18 transformation away from personal identification with regressive, oppressive,
19 or subordinating meanings, norms, and so on. While Habermas surely takes
20 these two capacities as important entailments of autonomy, I wonder whether
21 foregrounding them in the way Allen does as virtually synonymous with
22 autonomy leads her to give an overly rationalist and idealist – hence
23 insufficiently pragmatic and empirical – reading of Habermas's conception of
24 the subject. I wonder, further, whether her reading misunderstands the kind
25 of justification Habermas is giving for his more universalist, enlightenment-
26 style claims concerning individual autonomy, namely, that autonomy is a
27 defensible normative ideal built into the structures of intersubjective life,
28 and not merely one historical mode of subjectivity among others. Because this
29 is a complex set of issues, it will take a bit of explaining.

30 On my reading, the broad notion of rational accountability provides a
31 window into various different types of interactive competences required by
32 individuals, where those competences span across a number of different
33 domains. Surely critical insight into one's social conditions and the ability to
34 change oneself in light of insight are important competences for autonomous
35 individuals – these are captured in German idealism's celebration of self-
36 understanding, self-direction, and self-realization. But the distinctiveness of
37 Habermas's competence-theoretic rendering of these themes is the way the
38 account combines the results of empirical studies of individual development
39 across many different domains, and then shows that progressive development
across these diverse competences can be characterized in structurally similar

1 ways. The diverse forms of competence include cognitive abilities, comprising
the types of epistemic competence captured by Piaget, linguistic competences
3 isolated by linguistic developmentalism and formal pragmatics, and
normative-interactive competences analyzed by the likes of Mead and
5 Goffman. One must also consider psycho-motivational competences,
achieved through both psychosexual maturation as outlined in Freudian
7 and post-Freudian psychoanalysis and psychosocial development as analyzed
by Erikson and other life-cycle analysts. There is further a set of
9 individual identity competences: capacities for self-ascription, social role
integration, self-determination, biographical appropriation, narrative inte-
11 gration and authenticity, and other aspects of self-realization. Finally there is
developed moral competence – the particular focus of much of Habermas’s
13 work on autonomy – which combines cognitive, psycho-motivational, and
individual identity competences with normative-interactive competences.

15 This is a more differentiated and capacious conception of the domains
across which intersubjective answerability ranges than Allen’s narrower
17 definition of autonomy. However, the key justificatory move is not made by
the breadth of these different competences alone, but rather by the
19 structural claim: namely, those identical or very similar structural
transformations characterize progressive learning, improvements in indi-
21 viduals’ ability to cope with and negotiate the intersubjective world, *across*
these quite distinct domains of speech and action. In short, similar
23 developmental logics underlie the progressive acquisition of these different
interactive competences, and to the extent that these similar developmental
25 logics can be characterized as increasing capacities for rational account-
ability, the intersubjectivist account of autonomy can justify heightened
27 capacities for accountability as normatively defensible. Habermas is of
course aware that there is a specific socio-historical context in which these
29 progressive achievements have been demanded of subjects – namely
modern, complex, pluralistic, and functionally differentiated societies – but
31 that context of genesis does not imply that autonomy is simply the by-
product of historically specific disciplinary regimes. On my reading,
33 furthermore, Habermas’s defense of autonomy as rational accountability
is not a matter of reason working itself pure as Allen sometimes implies, but
35 is rather based on a complex reconstructive claim: the claim that diverse
results of empirical social sciences can be understood to buttress one
37 another by evincing underlying structural homologies, thereby shedding
light on the underlying developmental logic of progressive learning, through
39 socialization, in the direction of increased generalization, abstraction, and
reflexivity.

1 **THE DEFENSE OF MODERNITY**

3 This point about rational reconstruction relates finally to a problem Allen
5 rightfully gives a fair amount of attention to: the relationship between
7 empirically specific contexts that we find ourselves in and the sense of
9 context transcendence that we attach to our validity claims. She is
11 particularly concerned that Habermas’s strong theoretical claims for the
13 context-transcending universality of core elements of Western modernity
15 are insufficiently attentive to the impurities of the empirical contexts in
17 which and from which such claims are raised. I cannot go into this topic
19 sufficiently, but I do want to raise one issue for consideration. I agree with
21 Allen’s general strategy of giving a more contextualized reading to
23 Habermas’s philosophical project, and I found her assessment of the work
25 of Maeve Cooke and Thomas McCarthy in this direction to be quite
27 useful. As I understand Allen’s project (which may be a misunderstanding),
29 she seeks to portray both Foucault and Habermas as engaged in imminent
31 critique of modernity. They are engaged in critique because both are
33 attempting to critically investigate and evaluate contemporary norms,
35 forms of reason, and ideals of autonomy to investigate whether and how
37 they might be the unacknowledged result of power, interest, or desire,
39 rather than the vaunted non-illusory ideals they purport to be. They are
engaged in immanent critique because both deny the ability of critical
theory to be able to escape its socio-historical, power-laden context, to be
able to escape the rootedness of everyday reason from a pure, rational view
from nowhere. To put Habermas and Foucault together in this way, Allen
needs to read Foucault as engaged in a more substantive normative
project, one that has commitments and ideals, one that is not a mere form
of “happy positivism,” but rather a continuation through transformation
of the self-critique of the enlightenment itself. And she needs to read
Habermas as giving up on his ambitious meta-theoretical claims to be able
to give a rational defense of reason itself, and so to prove rationally the
trans-contextually validity of ideals such as autonomy, settling instead for
an acknowledgement that validity is always connected to power and that
reason always impure. As she puts the position, “we can rely on the
normative ideals of universal respect and egalitarian reciprocity in making
normative judgments while at the same time acknowledging that these are
ideals that are rooted in the context of late Western modernity.... This
requires us to be more historically self-conscious and modest about the
status of our normative principles than Habermas himself has tended
to be” (Allen, 2008, p. 180).

1 I would want to give a different reading to Habermas's project than the
attempt to divorce validity claims from history. In particular, I do not
3 think he is giving a de-historicized and power-free rational defense of the
ideals of reason and autonomy, but a thoroughly historical one. On my
5 reading, Habermas does claim that the normative ideals of reason,
autonomy, equality, reciprocity, and the like can be justified, precisely
7 because they have shown themselves to be the results of historically
particular learning processes. Hence they are not defended from a context-
9 transcendent view from nowhere, but rather from a rational reconstruction
of the practices of modernity, whereby earlier and deficient ideals and
11 practices were overcome through determinate negations. This is of course a
progressive vision of history, one descended from Hegel. However, it is not
13 justified on the grounds of metaphysics or pure philosophy as Hegel (and
Kant) attempted, but rather on the grounds of the empirical results of
15 diverse social scientific reconstructions of observable learning processes,
where developments in different domains of social life can be seen to
17 exhibit the same or similar stage-to-stage structural transformations. In
short, on my reading, Habermas's historically situated and empirically
19 based defense of the normative ideals of modernity is quite similar to his
defense of the ideal of autonomy as rational accountability for individuals:
21 both can be seen, from a reconstructive perspective, as the outcome of
progressive and directional learning processes achieved through coming to
23 terms with the problems of intersubjective life befalling both societies and
subjects. Grand claims to be sure and an audacious justificatory strategy.
25 But this is a different program than the one of a pure philosophical
justification of the idealizations of modernity. Allen does at one point
27 recognize that this kind of societal developmentalism is central to
Habermas's project, but it is not one she is anxious to recuperate, calling
29 it "perhaps the most problematic assumption of Habermas's entire project"
(Allen, 2008, p. 154). Not only do I respectfully disagree concerning
31 societal developmentalism, but I would like to point out that a similar
form of developmentalism is crucial to the robustness of Habermas's
33 account of individuation and his normative defense of individual autonomy
as rational accountability. If my reading is correct, then even though both
35 Habermas and Foucault are engaged in a form of critique-through-
transformation of enlightenment ideals, they seem not nearly as compatible
37 as Allen argues they are. Whatever common theoretical antipathy both
may have for the Kantian transcendental subject, Foucault's equally
39 forceful antipathy to Hegelian progressive developmentalism is surely not
shared by Habermas.

1 **A SHARED PROBLEM FRAME IN CRITICAL**
3 **SOCIAL THEORY**

5 I want now to raise a different set of questions about Allen's theory,
7 revolving around the role that theses concerning psychic attachment are
9 playing in her theory. The foregrounded problem Allen's book addresses
11 can be construed as the question: is the social constructionist, power-laden
13 account of subjectivity that is convincingly put forward by Foucault and
15 Butler consistent with, or in fundamental tension with, the strong normative
17 ideals articulated by Habermas and allied theorists? There is however
19 another problem that crops up throughout the book, and might even be
21 interpreted as the deep problem that Allen sets out to solve. I can give some
23 indication of this problem by showing how it parallels a theoretical-cum-
25 practical problem faced by early Western Marxism, and in particular by the
27 first generation of the Frankfurt School. The problem for them (at least on
certain potted readings) was prompted by the question: how was it that the
expected revolution did not occur even after relentless and convincing
critique of the status quo? For the early Frankfurt School (as for Lukács),
the question was more specific: how could it be that workers did not revolt
in the most advanced capitalist countries even though they were in the best
position to have insight into their oppressive conditions and to understand
how overcoming capitalism would be in their objective interests? It strikes
me that Allen is asking a structurally similar question: how is it that women
(and men) have not revolted against the manifold forms, practices, and
norms of gender subordination even after relentless feminist critique of the
status quo has convincingly shown how gender subordination ill-serves the
interests of women particularly and the interests of sociality generally?

29 This parallel can be pushed further. Consider how both Allen and the
earlier theorists of revolutionary disappointment take materialist explanations
off the table as unconvincing. According to (the potted story of)
31 Western Marxism, individuals' material interests are matters of relatively
33 clear-headed rational calculation. The Marxist critique of capitalism shows
35 all too clearly how participation in capitalism is not in the rational self-
interest of the proletariat as a whole, even if it is practically necessary for
37 any isolated individual faced with either starving or accepting a stingy wage.
Thus, by pure self-interest, it should have been clear that collective action by
the proletariat against capitalist structures was justified, and this rational
critique should have had even more practical effect among more educated
39 workers in highly developed industrial societies than among the peasant

1 societies where some form of revolution actually succeeded. So materialist
 2 explanations of revolutionary failure won't work; some other form of
 3 psychological or social or cultural explanation will be needed. Similar kinds
 4 of considerations might be driving Allen away from materialist explanations
 5 (since androcentric oppression is clearly not in the self-interest of women)
 6 and toward other form of explanation for the failure of convincing feminist
 7 critique to overcome gender subordination.

8 Another parallel: both Allen and (at least some members of) the Frankfurt
 9 School seem to turn particularly to depth psychological explanations, strongly
 10 influenced by psychoanalytic accounts of how we become invested in self-
 11 damaging and irrational thought processes and activities.¹ Allen turns not to
 12 the Freudian drive theory as they did, but rather to Butler's account of psychic
 13 attachment, to understand how subjection becomes anchored in individuals'
 14 desires. Recall that Butler provides a way of completing the story of how
 15 power-inflected gender norms, as analyzed by Foucault, become internalized
 16 and supported by the very subjects subordinated by such norms. To be a bit
 17 brisk, the account starts with the notion of primary narcissism as a
 18 fundamental drive, particularly powerful in children, and especially formative
 19 in its effects for later life. The idea is that children deeply desire to be positively
 20 recognized by others to satisfy their narcissism. But the specific cultural forms
 21 that such recognition can come packaged within are thoroughly gendered, and
 22 perniciously so, insofar as these gender norms serve to perpetuate women's
 23 subordination to men. So girls become psychically attached to – they identify
 24 themselves in and through – the very norms supporting the subordination of
 25 women. However, even when these norms are subjected to relentless critique, a
 26 critique that is even theoretically convincing to the subjects themselves, it is too
 27 painful to give up one's attachment to them. As Allen frequently and vividly
 28 puts the point, it is less painful to be recognized through subordinating norms,
 29 than to forgo recognition altogether. The pain of a loss of social identity is
 30 much greater than the self-lacerating pain of being recognized through, and
 31 attached to, disadvantaging norms. Psychic attachment thereby explains (at
 32 least in part) the failure of convincing critical feminist theory to produce the
 33 overthrow of the disciplinary power of gender.

34 Let me now briefly raise three concerns about this intriguing account, two
 35 about its generalizability and a third about the relation between psychological
 36 and other forms of explanation. To begin, it is worth considering whether
 37 Butler's account of psychic attachment to gender is to be understood as
 38 generally true for women in contemporary Western societies, true for men
 39 and women, or perhaps only true for some men and women, or even only
 some women? I wonder in particular here about its generalizability when

1 considering all those persons who seem to have been able to extinguish their
2 early psychic attachments to distorting norms in general; not just to gender
3 norms (though there seem many examples of this), but to other kinds of self-
4 subordinating norms as well. Many in our society tell a common narrative of
5 full, authentic self-realization through painful and difficult – but, in the end,
6 achieved – liberation from self-lacerating norms of disciplinary power they
7 were socialized into as children, and there seems good evidence to believe at
8 least some of those stories. If then the Butler/Allen account is not fully
9 generalizable, it could at best play but a partial role in explaining our
10 disappointment at the apparent impotence of feminist critique of the status
11 quo. If, in contrast, the account is intended to be generalizable, then much
12 more will need to be said about how and why some do and some don't
13 continue to seek recognition through deleterious gender norms, and so the
14 depth psychology will need to become much more elaborated.

15 A second issue concerns the generalizability of depth psychology itself, and
16 so its proper role in a critical social theory. For instance, Allen is right to point
17 out that, by the end of the 1970s, Habermas had stopped trying to integrate
18 specific psychoanalytic themes into his work. While he has consistently claimed
19 that the maintenance of secure ego identity requires certain motivational (and
20 so psychic) competences, he has stopped trying to specify both the details of
21 such competences and any generalizable stage-sequential learning processes
22 underlying motivational maturation. Allen argues the Habermas dropped
23 detailed consideration of psychoanalysis because he sorts cognitive compe-
24 tences into transcendental philosophy and psychodynamics into empirical
25 social science. As I indicated above in the second section), I understand all the
26 interactive competences identified in Habermas's intersubjectivist account of
27 individuation to be supported through reconstructive arguments using
28 evidence from the empirical social sciences – so I don't agree with Allen's
29 argument here. I have speculated, in contrast, that Habermas's changing
30 relationship to psychoanalysis in particular and psychodynamic theories of
31 development in general resulted from his conclusion that there simply was no
32 identifiable consensus amongst researchers on the crucial empirical questions,
33 thereby indicating the unreliability and potential partiality of psychodynamic
34 generalizations (Zurn, 1999). Whatever the truth of this speculation about
35 Habermas, the underlying concern about the lack of generalizable empirical
36 results concerning psychic formation indicates that it is at least an area of
37 serious concern for any critical social theory that wants to put explanatory
38 weight on a specific account of psychic formation. It is also worth noting here,
39 that similar kinds of theoretical worries about generalizability might be raised
40 by Foucault's forceful arguments concerning the contextual specificity of the

1 psychoanalytic notion of the deep self, a self that is seen as a product of the
truth eliciting practices of specific therapeutic (and disciplinary) techniques
3 (Foucault, 1978).

4 A third issue harkens back to debates within Western Marxism and
5 concerns the relationship between depth psychological explanations and
6 other forms of explanation, especially materialist and structural. To begin,
7 does the Butler/Allen account of psychic attachment unduly ignore the
8 material dynamics of gender subordination, in particular, the real social
9 benefits that males gain structurally through the maintenance of andro-
10 centric advantage? Might not the failure of feminists to change the incentive
11 dynamics of patriarchal power structures be an equally compelling reason
12 for disappointment? And what exactly would be the Allen/Butler story
13 concerning males' gender identity attachments? There seems a kind of
14 asymmetry in the accounts here between men and women, since it appears
15 much more straightforward to say that men attach to their masculinity to
16 reinforce the advantages of continuing patriarchy in terms of power, money,
17 and status. There is no evidence that Allen intends to discount or rule out of
18 bounds such materialist and structural explanations (even as she does
19 specifically argue against one account of femininity as a rational choice for
20 individual women), and so my thoughts here are really an invitation to
21 broaden the palette of potential explanations and to consider the ways in
22 which different kinds of explanations might interact in this case.

23 There is one final issue on which Allen's work can be complementarily
24 contrasted with the work of the first generation of the Frankfurt School:
25 namely, thinking critically about what a politics of emancipatory transforma-
26 tion might be. (Again on the potted version) The Frankfurt school theorists
27 faced a political problem about failed revolution, gave an explanation relying
28 in part on depth psychology and in part on a culturalist critique of the shape of
29 Western reason, and ultimately either fell into a practical pessimism about the
30 impossibility of any progressive change or, at most, hoped for a fundamental
31 metaphysical revolution in the direction of mimetic and anti-instrumentalist
32 forms of reason. Allen faces a parallel political problem, offers an explanation
33 relying in part on depth psychology and in part on an institutionalist critique of
34 disciplinary practices of power, but unlike the Frankfurt School, offers some
35 intriguing and concrete suggestions about what a transformative and
36 emancipatory politics of the self might look like. She endorses diverse
37 possibilities for action ranging across cultural, psychological and social
38 domains: consciousness raising groups; new recognitive spaces within which
39 girls and women could subvert dominant norms of femininity; critical
experimentation with new modes of gender performance; vibrant forms of

1 practically-oriented feminist and queer theory; the development of artistic
counter-publics aiming to change the cultural imaginary relevant to our desires
3 and fantasies; and, social movements constructing new experiments in
sociality, forms of subjectivity and modes of life. Although questions about
5 practical political strategies are not the focus of the book, I would like to
register a request for further work in this area. In a spirit of contributing to
7 further development in that area, I suggest that Allen not underestimate the
way in which much positive normative content – for instance gender
9 egalitarianism – can be socially stabilized, solidified, and even positively
promoted through institutional structures. So for instance, Allen may be right
11 in following Jessica Benjamin’s theory that true mutual recognition is a mere
fleeting possibility within dynamic and temporally changing face-to-face
13 interactions. But it seems to me that there is more hope for reciprocal relations
of mutual recognition that are determinately institutionalized, for instance in
15 law or politics or schools, or in normalized (and normalizing) practices in
business, parenting, or intimate relationships. In these institutional contexts,
17 we might even say that persons are often more or less coerced into living up to
more egalitarian, more reciprocal forms of mutual recognition than they might
19 otherwise adopt without the institutional pressures and “oversight.” There are
also important structural changes, for instance in economic incentives that
21 foster the maintenance of gender subordination, that warrant further attention.
If these suggestions are right, then it is worth exploring a politics that aims at
23 transforming not only the cultural imaginary and various desire-constituting
practices but also whatever institutional and economic structures are materially
25 implicated in the maintenance of subordination through gendered subjectivity.
I expect that the insightful conceptual and explanatory theory of gendered
27 subjectivity that Allen develops in *The Politics of Our Selves* would provide an
excellent foundation for further work on the manifold ways in which members
29 of oppressed groups, and those in solidarity with them, overcome the
deleterious power of gendered subjectivity.

31

33

NOTE

35 1. The interest in marrying a form of Marxist analysis to Freudian and other
forms of psychoanalysis is a constant throughout both Marcuse’s and Fromm’s
37 career; a like interest is influential in the work of both Adorno and Horkheimer from
the formation of the Institute for Social Research in the late 1920s at least through
the late 1940s studies of authoritarianism; a similar interest in the explanatory and
39 theoretical roles of psychoanalysis in critical social theory are prominent in
Habermas’s work at least through the 1970s.

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