



Gender and Agency

RECOGNIZING THE SUBJECT
IN FEMINIST THEORY

Lois McNay

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**Reconfiguring the Subject in
Feminist and Social Theory**

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1

GENDER, SUBJECTIFICATION AND AGENCY: INTRODUCTORY REMARKS

From negative to generative paradigm

In the last few years, a cluster of issues pertaining to the question of agency have become the renewed focus of thought in feminist and social theory. The concern with the concept of agency has been initiated, in part, by more general reflections on the changing nature of economic and social structures in late-capitalist societies. The many debates about modernity, postmodernity, reflexive modernization, globalization and detraditionalization address in various ways questions about the changing nature of action in a society which, it is claimed, is becoming increasingly complex, plural and uncertain.

One of the most pronounced effects of these macrostructural tendencies towards detraditionalization is the transformation of the social status of women in the last forty years and the restructuring of gender relations that it has arguably initiated. The effects of these processes of gender restructuring upon the lives of men and women are ambiguous in that they do not straightforwardly reinforce old forms of gender inequality; nor, however, can their detraditionalizing impact be regarded as wholly emancipatory. New forms of autonomy and constraint can be seen to be emerging which can no longer be understood through dichotomies of male domination and female subordination. Instead, inequalities are emerging along generational, class and racial lines where structural divisions amongst women

are as significant as divisions between men and women. Feminist theory has registered the ambiguous effects of these social changes through a rethinking of the concepts of gender identity and agency. In so far as these concepts, inherited from first-wave feminism, are premised upon notions of patriarchal domination, they do not explain sufficiently the types of behaviour and action exhibited by men and women in their negotiation of complex social relations. In short, underlying the move away from what are regarded as relatively ahistorical theories of patriarchy and female subordination is an attempt to reconceptualize agency which, in feminist theory, is often formulated as explanations of how gender identity is a durable but not immutable phenomenon.

The conceptualization of gender identity as durable but not immutable has prompted a rethinking of agency in terms of the inherent instability of gender norms and the consequent possibilities for resistance, subversion and the emancipatory remodelling of identity (e.g. Butler 1990, 1993a; Pellegrini 1997; Sedgwick 1994). This book is a contribution to that project of thinking through aspects of the dialectic of stasis and change within gender identity and its implications for a theory of agency. My central claim, however, is that recent theoretical work on identity offers only a partial account of agency because it remains within an essentially negative understanding of subject formation. If, following Michel Foucault, the process of subjectification is understood as a dialectic of freedom and constraint – ‘the subject is constituted through practices of subjection, or, in a more autonomous way, through practices of liberation, of liberty’ – then it is the negative moment of subjection that has been accorded theoretical privilege in much work on identity construction (Foucault 1988: 50). The predominance of a primarily negative paradigm of identity formation – of subjectification as subjection – comes from the poststructural emphasis on the subject as discursive effect and is a theme common to both Foucauldian constructionism and Lacanian psychoanalysis. The idea of the subject formed through an originary act of constraint has been particularly powerful for feminist theory because it offers a way of analysing the deeply entrenched aspects of gendered

behaviour while eschewing reference to a presocial sexual difference. I do not dispute the power of this negative paradigm of subjectification for an examination of the seemingly compulsory nature of the sex-gender system. I question, however, the extent to which it is generalized in much recent theoretical work on identity to become an exhaustive explanation of all aspects of subjectivity and agency. The idea that the individual emerges from constraint does not offer a broad enough understanding of the dynamics of subjectification and, as a consequence, offers an etiolated understanding of agency.

Although it is formulated in diverse ways, the main contention of the negative paradigm is that coherent subjectivity is discursively or symbolically constructed. This idea of discursive construction becomes a form of determinism because of the frequent assumption, albeit implicit, of the essential passivity of the subject. This uni-directional and repressive dynamic is reinforced by the exclusionary logic that is used to invest the subject with levels of self-awareness and autonomy. Following a relational theory of meaning, the assertion of the subject's identity is explained through a logic of the disavowal of difference; the subject maintains a sense of self principally through a denial of the alterity of the other. While this might be a foundational moment in the formation of coherent subjectivity, it does not provide on its own a comprehensive explanation of all possible ways in which the subject may relate to the other or deal with difference. When this exclusionary logic is extended to explain all aspects of subject formation, it results in an attenuated account of agency which leaves unexplored how individuals are endowed with the capabilities for independent reflection and action such that their response, when confronted with difference and paradox, may involve accommodation or adaptation as much as denial. In other words, it leaves unexplained the capabilities of individuals to respond to difference in a less defensive and even, at times, a more creative fashion. Arguably, it is such qualities that are partially characteristic of the responses of women and men to processes of gender restructuring in late-capitalist societies.

This is not to say that the negative paradigm of subjectification does not offer a theory of agency, but it tends to think of

action mainly through the residual categories of resistance to or dislocation of dominant norms. In part, the predominance of the cluster of ideas of dislocation, resistance, hybridity and resignification in work on identity construction stems from the rejection of unfeasible Marxist notions of revolutionary praxis that dominated radical theories of change and agency during the early 1970s (e.g. Foucault 1980: 78–108). Such ideas denote strategies of subversion which have a more tangential relation to dominant forms than directly oppositional and fully self-conscious models of revolutionary change. Yet the terms resistance and dislocation have, in some respects, become truisms in that they are used to describe any situation where individual practices do not conform to dominant norms. This is a tendency evident, for example, in some types of cultural studies which impute to certain everyday practices a kind of inherently subversive status (McNay 1996). Yet, if it is accepted that individual practices never reflect overarching norms in a straightforward fashion, then this widely deployed notion of resistance loses analytical purchase. This is not to deny the efficacy of all forms of resistance, but it is to suggest that a more precise and varied account of agency is required to explain the differing motivations and ways in which individuals and groups struggle over, appropriate and transform cultural meanings and resources. This, in turn, indicates the necessity of contextualizing agency within power relations in order to understand how acts deemed as resistant may transcend their immediate sphere in order to transform collective behaviour and norms.

This attempt to sketch out other aspects of subjectification and agency which have been underelaborated in the negative paradigm involves trying to integrate the idea of a determining constraint within a more *generative* theoretical framework. The symbolic determinism of the negative paradigm is partially overcome, for example, through a more *dialogical understanding of the temporal* aspects of subject formation. The emphasis in the negative paradigm on subjection tends to highlight the retentive dimension of the sedimented effects of power upon the body. This underplays the protensive or future-oriented dimension of praxis as the living through of embodied

potentialities, and as the anticipatory aspects inherent within subject formation. Unravelling some of these dialogical relations replaces the stasis of determinist models with a generative logic which yields a more persuasive account of the emergence of agency. The main implication of this generative logic for a theory of agency, which is taken up in this book, is that it yields an understanding of a creative or imaginative substrate to action. It is crucial to conceptualize these creative or productive aspects immanent to agency in order to explain how, when faced with complexity and difference, individuals may respond in unanticipated and innovative ways which may hinder, reinforce or catalyse social change. With regard to issues of gender, a more rounded conception of agency is crucial to explaining both how women have acted autonomously in the past despite constricting social sanctions and also how they may act now in the context of processes of gender restructuring. I also argue that attendant on the conceptualization of a creative dimension to agency are renewed understandings of ideas of autonomy and reflexivity, understood as the critical awareness that arises from a self-conscious relation with the other. These concepts have proved problematic for feminist theorists, in particular, because of their association with a form of masculinist abstraction that privileges a disembedded and disembodied subject. I argue, however, that the converse insistence, made by many feminists, on the ineluctably situated nature of the subject hinders the conceptualization of agency in so far as it necessarily involves a partial transcendence of its material conditions of emergence.

The account of a creative substrate to agency that arises from a generative account of subjectification also results in a slightly altered perspective on certain problems upon which much work on identity has become fixated. Some of these problems appear particularly intractable because of an unhelpful polarization that is an effect of the debate over essentialism which preoccupied feminist and other work on identity during the late 1970s and early 1980s. I do not make the grandiose claim that these very difficult issues are overcome through a reformulated account of subject formation, but rather that they may be reconfigured. The term reconfiguration

suggests that by slightly rearranging the relations existing between elements within a given theoretical constellation, insight might be generated into ways of moving beyond certain overplayed dualisms and exegetical clichés. I focus, in particular, on the insights that a generative account of subjectification and agency offers into three clusters of issues that have predominated in much thought on the construction of the subject: the relation between the material and symbolic dimensions of subjectification; the issue of the identity or coherence of the self; and, finally, the relation between the psyche and the social. To enable a more detailed discussion of these issues, I will discuss the negative paradigm of subjectification, as it is formulated in the thought of Foucault and Lacan, and its relation to feminist thought on subjectivity and agency.

The subject in Foucault and Lacan

Much feminist work on gender identity is dominated by the thought of Foucault and Lacan, which exemplifies some of the major features of the negative paradigm of subjectification. Although feminists have considered in detail the shortcomings of their thought, particularly with regard to integrating an account of agency into an understanding of the formation of gender identity, there have, on the whole, been few attempts to locate alternative theoretical sources beyond these two paradigms.

Lacan's thought has had an enormous impact upon feminist psychoanalytical accounts of the formation of gender, principally because his interpretation of Freud through structural linguistics permits an account of the institution of sexual identity that is not biologically reductionist. These aspects of Lacan's work are extensively discussed in feminist literature and, therefore, will only be briefly set out here (e.g. Gallop 1982; Grosz 1990; Ragland-Sullivan 1986). For Lacan, the stable subject is an illusion which obscures the ceaseless disruption of identity by the workings of the unconscious. The imaginary aspect to the formation of the stable subject or 'I' can be discerned in a 'primordial form' in Lacan's account of infant self-identification during the 'mirror stage' where lack is connected to the

anatomical underdevelopment of the infant which is concealed by the illusion of a premature corporeal unity given in the reflection. The dilemmas of the mirror stage prefigure the dynamic of the subsequent formation of the subject within language or the 'field of the Other' (Lacan 1977c: 203). The formation of the subject within language is crucially linked to the ambiguous status of the sign itself. Signifiers in themselves have no absolute meaning for meaning is only the effect of a negative relation between signifiers (Rose 1982: 32–3). The subject can only emerge as such within language. At the same time, however, the unstable nature of language means that, at the moment of its appearance, the subject is 'petrified' or reduced to being no more than a signifier. The subject is constituted within the other of language, but language cannot confer on the subject any absolute guarantee of its meaning. This play of presence–absence which characterizes the emergence of the 'I' within language is what Lacan calls the 'fading' of the subject (*aphanisis*): '*aphanisis* is to be situated in a more radical way at the level at which the subject manifests himself in this movement of disappearance that I have described as lethal . . . I have called this movement the *fading* of the subject' (Lacan 1977c: 207–8). The disappearance of the subject is connected to the movement of the unconscious which eludes capture within language and which is located beneath the networks and chains of the signifier in an 'indeterminate place' (1977c: 208). Thus, despite the persistence of the subject's belief in the wholeness of its identity, the subject is in fact constituted upon a fundamental lack or division. In terms of the instauration of gender identity, this lack ensures that there is no inevitability or stability to the process whereby women and men assume feminine and masculine identities. The stabilization of identity is constantly thwarted by the destabilizing effects of the unconscious upon the symbolic order of phallogocentric meaning.

The difficulty with Lacan's linguistic account of subjectification, it is widely argued, is that the ahistorical and formal nature of the paradigm forecloses a satisfactory account of agency. This is most evident in the description of the phallogocentric construction of feminine identity, which is construed in such

univocally negative terms – woman as double lack – that it is difficult to see how it connects to the concrete practices and achievements of women as social agents. The uni-directional account of subject formation as the introjection of the repressive law of the symbolic results in a monolithic account of the phallogentric order which remains essentially unaltered by social and historical variations. Although the destabilizing force of the category of the unconscious points to ways in which the internalization of the law of the symbolic can be resisted, a more substantive account of agency beyond the individualist terms of a libidinal politics is foreclosed. The socio-historical specificity of agency and of particular struggles is denied by being reduced to an effect of an ahistorical and self-identical principle of non-adequation between psyche and society. Indeed, agency is imputed to the pre-reflexive realm of the unconscious, rather than being conceived of as the property of determinate historical praxis. A further difficulty for feminist theory is that the priority that is accorded to the phallus in determining meaning within the symbolic realm means that agency is usually only considered in relation to sexual difference.

Running counter to Lacan's thought, the work of Michel Foucault on the body and power has been one of the most influential sources for the development of constructionist accounts of subject formation. The impact of his work upon feminist theories of gender identity and agency is so well known that it need not be gone into here (Diamond and Quinby 1988; McNay 1992; Ramazonglu 1993). It is a widely rehearsed criticism that Foucault's earlier work on discipline lacks a concept of subjectivity and, therefore, also precludes a theory of agency by reducing individuals to docile bodies. The major part of his oeuvre, from *Psychiatry and Mental Illness* to the first volume of *The History of Sexuality*, exemplifies the negative paradigm of subjectification in that it is devoted to exploring the different ways in which the identity of dominant groups has been maintained through the exclusion and derogation of marginal groups and liminal experiences.

The lack of a substantive category of subjectivity is corrected in Foucault's final work where he sets out the idea of 'technologies of the self' understood as the practices and techniques

through which individuals actively fashion their own identities. This active process of self-formation suggests how the seemingly inexorable processes of corporeal inculcation, or 'technologies of domination', may be resisted through the self-conscious stylization of identity like a work of art. Individuals are regarded as relatively autonomous in so far as the process of identity formation involves neither passive submission to external constraints nor willed adoption of dominant norms (McNay 1992). However, Foucault's idea of the self does not really offer a satisfactory account of agency. Although the idea of practices of the self or an 'aesthetics of existence' gestures towards the autonomous and even creative element inherent to action, it is asserted rather than elaborated in detail. For example, the status of the self-fashioning subject who appears to precede an ethics of the self remains unexplained. The failure to distinguish more precisely between practices of the self that are imposed on individuals through cultural sanctions and those that are more freely adopted also means that the idea of agency ultimately has voluntarist connotations. The lack of detail in Foucault's consideration of how the dialectic of freedom and constraint is realized in the process of subject formation results, ultimately, in his thought vacillating between the moments of determinism and voluntarism. The insights in the work on discipline are not fully integrated with the later work on the self and so Foucault can only offer the over-determinist view of the subject subsumed by the operations of power upon the body or the solipsistic outlook of an aesthetics of existence.

While Foucault's work does not foreclose an account of agency in so stark a manner as the Lacanian reification of the phallogentric order, it is seriously limited by its conceptual underdevelopment. Despite the lack of a detailed account of agency, much feminist and other constructionist theory of identity tends to remain within a Foucauldian paradigm. This is evident, for example, in the work of Susan Hekman (1995), who criticizes the work of thinkers such as Teresa De Lauretis (1987) and Paul Smith (1988) for deploying 'dialectical' notions of subjectification which fail to break from a dualist model where a Cartesian concept of agency is grafted mechanistically

onto a pre-given subject. Against this dichotomous concept of the constituting–constituted subject, Hekman argues that Foucault's idea of the construction of the self as a 'work of art' exemplifies an alternative, monological and active sense of agency. However, given the elliptical nature and voluntarist implications of Foucault's account of self-formation, it is hard to see how it breaks substantively from other dualist conceptions. In order, therefore, to understand the creative elements of action that are so suggestive in Foucault's idea of an aesthetics of existence, it would seem necessary, if not to move beyond the negative paradigm, at least to enlarge it with a more generative account of subject formation and agency.

Agency in feminism

On the most general level, a revised understanding of agency has long been the explicit or implicit concern of feminist research devoted to the uncovering of the marginalized experiences of women. These experiences attest to the capacity for autonomous action in the face of often overwhelming cultural sanctions and structural inequalities. This unifying impulse notwithstanding, the concept of agency has been theorized in ways which mirror bifurcations in feminist thought. Echoing conceptual problems in mainstream social theory, feminist thought could be said to be divided between the relatively unmediated notions of agency and practice characteristic of microsociological and relational theories, on the one hand, and the discursively determinist accounts of poststructural feminist theory, on the other.

Within sociology, the exploration of female agency has been conducted mainly at the level of interpretative microsociology, particularly feminist ethnomethodology. A problem with this work on the submerged practices of women and other marginal groups is that it can too easily slip into a celebration of these experiences as somehow primary or authentic. This is evident, for example, in the work of feminist standpoint theorists, such as Dorothy Smith (1987), who accord an epistemological privilege to women's dual perspective on social reality.