

Creating Oneself

Agency, Desire and Feminist Transformations

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1. Auflage 2011. Taschenbuch. VIII, 184 S. Paperback

ISBN 978 3 0343 0707 9

Format (B x L): 15 x 22,5 cm

Gewicht: 280 g

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Introduction

Antigone, Vashti, Rosa Parks, and the Suffragists are all individuals who acted not in accordance with the dominant norms of their times. They resisted the power of norms embedded in their social roles and identities as “women”, and risked their lives, at that. Their acts created changes. These are inspiring figures for many women given that they made their identities and social roles into sites of transformation; they did what they thought they ought do, rather than what was normatively expected of them, and in so doing, they created an impact on their world. These figures exemplify the essence of agency. Individual agency is the ability to influence one’s world through one’s actions. For many of us, our actions are less influential and less dramatic than the actions of these famous figures.

Today more than ever, technology, globalization, the media, ecological disasters, and violent conflicts between states, seem to shape and dictate every aspect of our lives. And yet, almost everyone can point to moments when she/he has influenced the course of her/his life in spite of all of these factors. Although these moments are part of who we are, and where we are socially positioned, they also confront us with our fears, imagination and hopes, as well as others’ expectations of us. These moments stretch and alter who we are and how we live. By that, they influence social reality as well. These are the moments I wish to elaborate on in this book.

The general aim of this book is to provide a detailed account of the political and ontological aspects of living as an *active subject*. Focusing on the term *agency* should stress the necessity of rethinking the place of the individual and her/his effective possibilities within a theoretical and political framework that has de-centred the individual from the role of a metaphysical, epistemological, methodological, and ethical nucleus.

This study rests on several presuppositions that are associated with postmodern philosophy. Drucilla Cornell has suggested the term *post-modern* to be a tool for specifying the endeavour to think beyond the

enlightenment's notion of the subject.¹ Judith Butler has stated that post-modernism is committed to treating conceptual foundations as changeable, contingent, and ever to be contested. According to this line of critique, regulatory norms constitute the sphere of the given, the evident, and the incontestable.²

Since the postmodern framework grounds the subject as effect of either power, symbolic, or material social formations, the individual's ability to resist and affect the social order is no longer evident nor clear. The individual, as an embodied subject, does not precede the different domains of her/his activity or the various social, political, theoretical, sexual, and material positions that she/he embodies.

Butler's statement that 'agency is a political prerogative'³ encapsulates the dualistic relation between power and agency in the postmodern view. It stresses that the individual's power to act and affect her/his reality is contingent on social power, which constructs the individual and her/his agency as social positions. Power both shapes and limits individuals as desirous and wilful beings.

The challenge of agency, given a postmodern framework and understanding of subjectivity, is to theorize agency in terms of individuals' lives, while figuring individuality as a modality of social existence and explaining the possibility of individuals to become effective factors in the construction of their realities, i.e. agents.

This book endeavours to explain agency as a mode of life in which social transformation and personal transformation meet and influence each other. This does not mean that the individual's life is a site of political struggle, as is expressed in the feminist motto 'the personal is the political'. It rather means that for women, the way to overcome their position as 'Other' to the *male* subject, and create for themselves alternative figurations of their subjectivity, is a continual practical process of creating oneself toward a horizon of a better future.

1 Drucilla Cornell, *The Philosophy of the Limit* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 1–12.

2 Judith Butler, 'Contingent Foundations', in Seyla Benhabib, Judith Butler, Drucilla Cornell and Nancy Fraser, *Feminist Contentions: A Philosophical Exchange* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 46.

3 Ibid.

The affirmation of an alternative through one's actions enables one to create new relations with others, to reflect on one's social roles, and to question one's current embodied identity. These abilities create new internal and external sites of freedom, which make the individual capable of further acting politically against oppressive norms and constructions.

It is a presupposition of this book that individuals' behaviour is basically a repetition of social regularities. Agency is the possibility of utilizing precisely these repetitions as transgressive and creative activities. Thus this book will address the question of how it might be possible for individuals to act *not* in accordance with the regularities of power that constitute them as intelligible subjects, and how such transgressive actions might affect the actor and her/his world.

In this book I strive to provide an account of agency as an aspect of people's lives. As such, this notion of agency reconnects political action with the ontological and phenomenological aspects of living. I will argue that in order to provide an effective account of agency, political philosophy must produce a rich account of individuality. I believe that the critical awareness of postmodern philosophy to the social and historical formations of individuality has created a tendency to minimize the place of the individual as a significant aspect of social life. This tendency has damaged the ability to yield effective politics from the critical perspective of postmodern theory.

My choice to place the notions of agency and individuality at the centre of the discussion express my conviction that effective political thought must *work through* those categories that dominate the philosophical and cultural arenas in which they operate.⁴ Although basically stemming from liberal thought, these notions are also central to Western modern culture. *Working through* these concepts spells the endeavour to transform their meaning, while at the same time accepting their centrality and influence at our present historical moment.

4 The term *working through* is borrowed from Freud, for whom it designates a process of repetition and interpretation facilitating the breaking out from repetition mechanisms dictated by repressed elements. See Jean Laplanche and Jean-Bertrand Pontalis, *The Language of Psychoanalysis*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (New York: W. W. Norton, 1974), 488–9.

One of the main aspects of agency I will elaborate on is agency's embodied nature. Drawing on Irigaray, Foucault, and Deleuze, I will present the body as a site of creative becoming. The embodied individual, as I will show, is a dynamic juncture of creativity and stability. She/he takes part in the open whole of effects called life, and is capable of politically strategizing the different aspect of her/his existence in order to live more joyfully.

Invoking individuality in relation to agency is of special importance in the feminist context. Joan Wallach Scott has argued that the historical tie between the emergence of the individual as a political and philosophical entity, and the emergence of sexual difference as a political and cultural line of excluding women from political arenas, form the true account of human individuality.⁵ Thinking about feminist agency in terms of individuality implies a transgression of this cultural form of power and a redefining of the relations between the subject of politics and reason, the sexed body, individuality, and agency.

Agency, Gender, and Feminism

I have been watching my six-year-old daughter gradually opening to the social world and figuring what it means to be a girl. I've accompanied her entering an imaginative world of fairies and princesses, shared by many other girls, and dominated by Walt Disney's classic figures. I've tried to sustain her enjoyment from her active body while allowing her to dress in "girly" dresses and wear "girly" shoes. I've watched her gradually discover the cultural aesthetics of being passive and helpless, just like the classic princesses. I now see her learning to view herself as a beautiful object. I try to think about our relationship as one site of my agency. I endeavour to understand how I may recreate that site to transform my own identity as

5 Joan Scott Wallach, *Only Paradoxes to Offer: French Feminism and the Rights of Man* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1996), 7–8.

a mother, an Israeli, a Jewish woman, and how I may create a space where my daughter could find new and non-oppressive paths for embodying her gender identity.

The feminist critique of the subject stresses the role of gender as a necessary analytic category for understanding agency. Feminist theory has analysed the ways in which social power shapes different aspects of women's psychic and social life. Feminists have also criticized the history of philosophy for associating the subject with an ideal male image.

A feminist notion of agency has to account for both the individual and social transformation required in order for women to occupy the position of the active subject. The question of agency in the postmodern feminist context is, how can individual women act within contemporary culture, without their actions contributing to their continual oppression? Thus, within feminist theory, agency has been mostly associated with *resistance*. For women, to be active subjects is equivalent to resisting current linguistic or symbolic orders, given there is no feasible way to simply work within these structures of signification and be a woman-subject at the same time.

The conceptual scheme of this study relates to what Lois McNay has called the negative paradigm of agency:

The main contention of the negative paradigm is that coherent subjectivity is discursively or symbolically constructed ... the negative paradigm ... tends to think of action mainly through the residual categories of resistance and dislocation of dominant norms.⁶

McNay argues that this paradigm tends to neglect the dialogical and creative aspect of agency. She believes that in order to account for this concept we need a 'renewed understanding of autonomy and reflexivity, understood as critical awareness that arises from self-conscious relation with others'.⁷

6 Lois McNay, *Gender and Agency: Reconfiguring the Subject in Feminist and Social Theory* (Cambridge UK: Polity Press, 2000), 3.

7 Ibid., 5.

I agree that creativity is an inherent aspect of agency. Indeed, this book elaborates extensively on the creative aspect of agency, which is, I argue, associated with an *affirmative* aspect of agency. I believe that in order to account for the creative aspect of agency there is no need to abandon the theorization of social power as a key concern. The real challenge for feminist theory is not to shirk the understanding of just how deep the grip of social power over one's selfhood, identity and subjectivity is. Feminist theory, I believe, is to provide a powerful tool for women to create their subversive and creative paths in this world. In order to develop a notion of creative agency, not as an abstract potentiality, but as an actual configuration of social reality, the account of creativity must be anchored in radical awareness to social power's grip over individuals.

A feminist account of the social formation of individuals need address and explain more adequately the extreme difficulties that women face in the dynamic of becoming agents of social change. I believe that it is the understanding of the relations between the negative, or as I call it, *reactive* aspect of agency and the affirmative aspect, that can provide a practical, reality-sensitive notion of agency, which helps to rethink the personal and the collective level of feminist political struggles.

In chapters one and two I analyse the limitations of understanding agency solely in reactive terms. To this end, I discuss two prominent and influential contemporary feminist thinkers, Luce Irigaray and Judith Butler, who hold very different accounts of social power and agency. I argue that both of their positions require some notion of affirmative politics in order to develop a useful account of agency as a continual aspect of individuals' lives.

I then elaborate on the affirmative aspect of agency and its relation to self-creation. Here I read Irigaray's first-person texts as implying an image of a textual woman-agent, suggesting a wider account of agency as affirmative self-creation. I employ Foucault's ethics in order to elaborate on a crucial factor left unclear in Irigaray's utopian, playful, and poetic language – the *process* through which an "I-woman" emerges as an affirmative creative pole of action, and the relations between affirmative and reactive aspects of agency. Moreover, I argue that affirmation assumes self-creation toward a horizon of well-being. Part of the general account of agency I propose is a non-unitary notion of well-being.

In chapters three and four I elaborate on the notion of desire as the transformative force of agency. I argue that desire is a positive vector constituting an ongoing process of creative becoming of an “I-woman”. I elaborate on the notion of “desire to be” as a creative desire that is constituted and intensified by certain relations between different aspects of our existence as individuals, e.g. our embodied experiences, affects, symbolic representations, and relations with others.

I portray “desire to be” as an ontological tendency to endure and be part of life. I suggest an understanding of well-being in terms of the creation of productive connections enabling the individual to draw from her mental and material resources, such as memories, thoughts, sensations, capabilities, as sources for productive enduring.

In Chapter five I argue that a notion of agency based on a dynamic of becoming, difference and transformation can and should employ sexual difference as a horizon. This argument also presents the possibility of an integration between two political strategies for overcoming the phallogentric logic of gender identities as a structure of power. The first strategy, held in different ways by Butler, Foucault and Deleuze, strives to undo sexual identities and endorses an ideal of multiplicity of desire formations. The second option, held by Luce Irigaray, stresses that the categories of sexual difference are necessary for undoing phallogentric sexual identities.

The final chapter asks how might a life of transformative political practices constitute a sense of identity – individual and collective. The account of agency I suggest throughout the book provides a means for thinking about identity and sexual difference in a transformative fashion. I elaborate on how a continual becoming may work through sites of sexual difference and oppressive feminine identity so as to create sites of freedom and affirmation of a different sense of feminine subjectivity.