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**FEMINIST POLITICS AFTER
POSTSTRUCTURALISM**

Christel Stormhøj

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POSTSTRUCTURALISM**

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Research Papers from the Department of Social Sciences, Roskilde University, Denmark.

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Abstract

This paper deals with the implications of poststructuralism for feminism as politics. Questioning the notion of the autonomous subject and the belief in reason as a means to go beyond repressive power structures, poststructuralism challenges basic theoretical foundations of feminist political discourse. By juxtaposing a poststructuralist feminist position with a Habermasian one I discuss a number of central questions concerning the subject of feminism, its constitution, its conditions of agency, and the political aspirations of feminism. Interpreting both positions as instantiations of the Enlightenment, but of different trends within it, I claim that the opposition between them may be understood as an expression of the dialectics of the Enlightenment.

Keywords: Feminism; Feminist Theory; Feminist Politics; Poststructuralist; Subject; Agency; Deconstruction; The Enlightenment; Philosophy; Social Sciences.

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FEMINIST POLITICS AFTER POSTSTRUCTURALISM

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Introduction

"(...) laughter in the face of serious categories is indispensable for feminism"
- Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble*

" To perform a feminist deconstruction of some of the primary terms of political discourse is in no sense to censor their usage, negate them, or to announce their anachronicity (...). This kind of analysis requires that these terms be reused and rethought, exposed as strategic instruments and effects, and subjected to a critical reinscription and redeployment"

- Judith Butler & Joan W. Scott,
Feminists Theorize the Political

The connection between theory and political praxis within feminism has always been close. The first wave of feminist theory, dating back to the 1960's, originated in a modern, political movement of liberation, aiming to emancipate women (Grant 1993: 17ff). Feminism has been understood to imply a political project of empowerment, connected with the emancipatory impulse of liberal-humanism and Marxism, and an epistemological project rooted in Enlightenment rationalism and universalism (Hekman 1990: 2ff; Mouffe 1992: 369f). During the 1980's these canons within feminist theory have been influenced by a set of poststructuralist discourses radically questioning its inherent epistemological rationalism and universalism as well as its ontological essentialism¹. As a result the political project of feminism faces a crisis. This is due both to the fact that questions concerning the notion of the political and the political aspirations and goals of feminism have been raised anew.

The anti-foundationalism of poststructuralism undermines those discourses which are based on the notion of the self-conscious and a powerful subject, and on the belief in reason and rationality. The faith in rationality involves two notions that have been questioned (Hekman 1990: 6f, 62). The first is the idea that women by means of reason can realize the world as it really is, and thus create absolute and universal truth. Second, the notion that women can free themselves from oppression and destructive conditions by reason. The

¹It has to be stressed that the critique of rationalism, universalism, and humanism is far from being limited to the contemporary trend of poststructuralism. Throughout the twentieth century philosophers, among them Heidegger, Gadamer, the later Wittgenstein, and the American pragmatist Dewey, have questioned the idea of a universal human nature, of a universal canon of rationality as well as the traditional conception of truth. The critique of essentialism and thus the questioning of the notion of the subject as a rational, transparent, and unified entity has not least been advanced by psychoanalysis (see also Mouffe 1992: 369f; Hekman 1990: 11ff, 62ff & 105ff). Besides, and equally important to stress, feminist theorists have established their own tradition of critique attacking the male-centeredness of rationalism and humanism. Problematizing the notion of woman within philosophy feminists have shown, how the universal rational subject (the male subject) has been established through exclusion of its "other", the irrational, the corporeal, and the female, in order to secure and stabilize its identity (see also Braidotti 1992; Hekman 1990: 30ff, 73ff, 112ff & 136ff).

predominant understanding of emancipation in feminism based on a scientized politics, i.e. a politics founded on the "right" theories unmasking and specifying the causes of women's oppression, has thus been undermined through attacks on rationalism (McClure 1992: 349). Such attacks combine with those on the predominant notion of the philosophical subject of the West involving two arguments. First, poststructuralism argues that knowledge is not acquired through a process of abstraction of an autonomous subject from a separate object, but, rather, that knowledge, along with both subjects and objects, is discursively produced. Second, poststructuralists attack the notion that there is only one true method by which knowledge is acquired. Instead poststructuralism defines knowledge as plural. There are different truths, not the Truth (Hekman 1990: 63). Thus, poststructuralism rejects both subjects and objects as essential entities, and with them the goal of absolute knowledge.

Feminist theorists holding on to the notions of both rationality and the self-conscious subject counter-attack poststructuralism because of its anti-foundationalism and anti-humanism. They claim that the deconstruction of the powerful and self-conscious subject tends to undermine the possibility of agency and with it, politically, the possibility of resistance and revolt. By calling into question the category of women, the essentialist foundation for theory as well as the platform for representational politics seems to disappear and make feminist politics impossible or at least impotent, the critics argue (Benhabib 1995b: 111; Hartsock 1990: 163; Moi 1985: 95; Soper 1990: 13).

In this paper I will outline some of the implications of the poststructuralist challenges to feminism as politics. My aim is two-fold. First, I intend to dislodge the accusations that feminist politics has lost its ways because of the influence of poststructuralism. Second, I will argue that the fundamental nature of the critique that has been offered by poststructuralism of the theoretical grounding and paradigmatic conventions making up the canon of feminism has been productive. The critique has promoted futile self-reflection within feminist discourses. Moreover, it has made possible a reformulation of what counts as the political, and advanced reflections on the political character of theory within feminist discourses. Thus, it has promoted a change of focus by questioning the understanding of feminism as being based on a scientized politics. Instead it has advocated a feminism which takes into account the politicized nature of science. Furthermore, by revitalizing the question of the subject of feminism and problematizing the notion of autonomy it has put the discussion of the political goals of feminism on the agenda anew.

In what follows I shall elaborate on four essential matters, all of them centring on the question of the subject, its conditions of constitution, its identity and its agency². In the first place, I will argue that the deconstruction of the feminist subject does not entail the destruction of feminist politics. Rather it establishes

²My discussion of these matters is confined to their articulations in Western feminism during the last 10 or 15 years.

as political the terms through which the subject is articulated, and opens up new possibilities for feminism as politics. Secondly, I claim that though the deconstruction of the category of women eliminates the category as an essentialist foundation, that category is necessary for representational, political purposes. This creates a dilemma for feminism with regard to safeguarding the persistence of it as a political project. Thirdly, I will argue that the deconstruction of the subject does not preclude the possibility of agency, but rather it relocates agency within the resignification made possible by discourse. In the fourth place, I assert that the deconstructive moves of poststructuralist feminism are in line with the emancipatory impulse of the legacy of feminism. Regarding feminism as a question of carrying out a critical ontology of what we are, think and do poststructuralist feminism follows a mode of philosophical investigation which is part of the Enlightenment. It aims at a permanent state of criticism.

The argument of the paper is based on an interpretation of the Enlightenment which deviates from the conventional one within Western philosophy and the social sciences. In my view the Enlightenment does not make up a homogeneous mode of thought. The ambiguity with regard to rationality and the belief in reason as well as the doubt that everybody has the ability to become autonomous self-positing subjects was already stressed by Kant (1994(1783): 120ff & 1993(1784): 72). These ambiguities have taken on various forms within the Enlightenment itself and have given rise to different trends. Within contemporary philosophical thought it is possible to identify several of these trends. In this paper I have chosen to focus on two of those which have been highly influential on feminist theory³. The paradigm of communicative rationality developed by Habermas and guided by a belief in reason informs among others the feminist theorist Seyla Benhabib. The thoughts of Foucault and hence of Nietzsche constitute what I will describe as the sceptical trend within the Enlightenment. This trend has played a significant part in the development of poststructuralism and informs among others the feminist theorizing of Judith Butler. Thus, Habermasian as well as poststructuralist feminisms are instantiations of the Enlightenment, however showing different trends within it.

Unpacking the monolithic notion of the Enlightenment seems important for several reasons. It makes possible an interpretation which is in line with that of Kant, stressing, to quote Horkheimer and Adorno, the dialectics of it, and thus taking into account the innate ambiguity within the whole conception of the Enlightenment. Furthermore, it enables one to dethrone any philosophical position which tries to monopolize and totalize the Enlightenment proclaiming itself as the true heir. Interpreting the social philosophy of Habermas as the true instantiation of the Enlightenment which is often done seems

³Several others trends which roots date back to the Enlightenment and constituting important sources of inspiration to feminist theory, among them Marxism, Psychoanalysis, Phenomenology and Existentialism, could have been included. In order to simplify the text I have confined my discussion to two main positions within contemporary feminist theory.

unproductive, leaving no other space for the thoughts of Nietzsche and Foucault than in the tradition of Anti-modernism or even Counter-Enlightenment. This represents, in my view, a crude misinterpretation. The sceptical trend stresses the necessary self-reflection of the Enlightenment rather than taking leave of it.

THE QUESTION OF THE SUBJECT OF FEMINISM, OR "WOMAN" ISN'T THE ONLY ONE

Questions concerning the foundation of the feminist subject have become central concerns within contemporary feminist discussions (Braidotti 1992; Riley 1988). The poststructuralist proclamation of the death of the subject is the starting point. Discussions about the conditions of the subjects constitution, its identity and autonomy have engrossed feminists intensively. They make up significant points of dispute between the feminism of Benhabib and that of Butler (Benhabib 1992; Benhabib, Butler, Cornell & Fraser 1995; Butler 1990, 1993a & 1993b).

As an adherent of the Habermasian position Seyla Benhabib advocates the idea of autonomous subjects endowed with reason and capable of action. Only the weak version of the thesis of the death of the subject is accepted by her. She claims that the subject still exists, but as always already situated in social and discursive practices (Benhabib 1995a: 20). Such situated subjects may, by means of reason, transcend, and thus emancipate themselves from specific power structures repressing them. Emancipation from the rigid gender dichotomy stands out as an utopia cherished by a longing for the "wholly other". i.e. the realization of different kinds of otherness, which at the present is excluded and repressed (Benhabib 1995a: 21 & 30). Benhabib claims that feminism ought to hold on to the idea of a collective, feminist subject in order to secure the viability of feminism as politics. The feminist subject should be inclusive, based on respect for differences among women, due to the various determinants of their situatedness. The aim is not consensus, but rather accordance, established through taking the position of the other (Benhabib 1992: 25).

Poststructuralist feminists oppose this point of view by dethroning the autonomous subject. Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity represents this position. The notion of the autonomous subject is seen as an illusion. It is not an argument against the idea of the subject per se, but against the conception of it as prior to rather than the effect of normatively prescribed actions. Subjectivity is seen as a constituted effect of regulated actions, and not, as the Habermasian position asserts, the origin and cause of actions. Drawing on the Nietzschean critique of the notion of the subject as a substantive thing (Nietzsche 1993(1887): 47), poststructuralist feminism advocates the abolition of an ontologically grounded feminist subject. Instead, the gendered subject is seen as performative, that is, constituting the identity it is purported to be

(Butler 1990: 25). Thus, by doing away with the "doer behind the deed", poststructuralist feminism exposes itself to criticism. The accusation is as follows: without an ontologically grounded feminist subject feminist politics loses its way (Benhabib 1995a: 20; Butler & Scott 1992: xiv; Mouffe 1992: 371 & 381). But, the point that needs to be stressed is that deconstructing the feminist subject only means the destruction of the possibility of politics when politics is understood as a representational discourse. That discourse usually presumes an already-constituted subject, conceived through the category of "women", and endowed with fixed interests (Butler 1990: 1; Mouffe 1992: 373f). Poststructuralist feminism abandons such a conception of politics at a meta-theoretical level. Instead, it establishes as political the socially instituted and maintained norms of intelligibility through which the category of "women" is produced and regulated. The ways "women" are conceived, defined and talked about have political implications. Thus, feminism as politics is understood as a matter of a critique of the dominant definitions of women, including its own, aiming at destabilizing them. That means opening up their meanings to various rearticulations in order to make them sites of permanent contest.

The claim advanced by the Habermasian position that the subject is always already situated in discursive practices is inadequate as a description of the conditions for its constitution. Besides, it is politically dangerous. It owes to the fact that it ignores the political investments of the terms through which the gendered subject is constructed (Butler 1990: 2ff; 1993a: 301). The gendered subject ought to be understood as constituted by discourses, primary, what can be termed, compulsory heterosexuality. Power operates in the creation of the heterosexualizing frame for thinking about gender. It produces not only the binary relation between "women" and "men", but also the internal coherence of those identity categories (Butler 1990: 17). In light of these arguments, the aim is to challenge the notion of the feminist subject, understood through the category of women, because the category is produced and confined by the very discourses through which emancipation is sought (Butler 1990: 2). All identity categories tend to be regulatory and thus normalizing. Using the category of women in order to secure the viability of feminism as politics involves two problems: the problem of exclusion, and that of reification. First, because the category of "women" implies particular normatively defined versions of femininity, it may, as an unintended consequence, exclude some of the "subjects", who feminism aims to represent. As feminism operates within the contemporary field of power, constituted by the structures of language and politics, feminism itself takes part in the regulation and normalization of power through defining a female identity. In this way feminism opens itself to charges of misrepresentation. Second, it risks displaying gender identity as a coherent and stable object. Thereby, it reifies identity, which is never simple and internally self-identical because identity is based on a necessary exclusion of difference.

The critique of the category of "women" opens up new possibilities for feminism as politics. At first, there seems to be at least two. In the first place,

the critique makes it possible for feminism to realize its own complicity in the profound heterosexism informing the thinking about gender (Butler: 1990 & 1993b). Secondly, it enables feminism to embrace a "politics of difference" as suggested by several poststructuralist feminists (Butler 1990: 14f; Mouffe 1992: 373 & 381; Sawicki 1991: 26). Such politics is based on shifting political alliances with other subordinated, positioned subjects and constituting provisional unities. Which profitable alliances feminist should create ought not to be dependent on an abstract principle of unity, but rather on historical and concrete analysis of the field of struggle. Alliances may thus be created around family resemblances between subordinated or marginalized social groups with regard to the different kinds of exclusions they are exposed to, whether it is based on sex, race, ethnicity or sexual orientation.

A PRECARIOUS DILEMMA: THE NECESSITY AND REFUSAL OF THE CATEGORY OF "WOMEN"

Feminism faces a serious dilemma both having to employ and refuse the category of "women" at the same time. This paradox cannot be ignored, if feminism as a political movement is to survive and pursue its own agenda. Depending on the point of view, "a return to innocence", or to "a state of war", that is, in both cases holding on to any notion of real essence which constitutes womanhood, is, on the one hand, unthinkable after the attacks on essentialism. On the other hand, poststructuralist feminism has itself to consider, how to make feminist politics, understood as a representational discourse, possible on its own terms. Though "woman" is deconstructable and turns out to be an unstable category, it is a category whose instabilities are the subject matter of feminist politics, as Denise Riley stresses (Riley 1988: 5).

To represent a subordinated political constituency which is precisely subordinated and oppressed as women it remains political imperative that women act as women and thus identify, at least partially, with the category of "women". Feminist political practice is necessary in order to struggle for feminist goals whether these are defined as the visibility and acknowledgement of women, equality or autonomy. But by identifying with the category of "women" and attributing any positive elements to it, feminists risk becoming essentialists. That means not only denying differences among women, but also taking part in the reification of the category. Thus, feminism is placed in a paradoxical situation in which it is both dependent on the idea of "woman" and has to refuse it.

Several strategies have been developed to handle this paradox. They all centre on an idea of a doubled strategy: maintaining "women" as if they existed in order to make political actions possible, while at the same time being aware of the constructed character of that identity (Martin 1988). One can apply essentialism strategically, as suggested by Gayatri Spivak (1997). It means an essentialism that does not attribute any essence to womanhood in an

ontological sense, but which employs positive notions about being a woman for the sake of political action. To advocate essentialism this way implies that it remains a strategy, and is not mistaken for a theory. It requires a persistent critique of the category all along the way. Denise Riley puts forward a similar strategy on the basis of pragmatic considerations (Riley 1988: 112f). She suggests that feminism must speak in the name of "women" in order to represent them, while at the same time developing and cultivating an active scepticism about the integrity of the category of "women". Employing and refusing the sign "women" at once can also be accomplished through avowing the sign's strategic provisionality (Butler 1993a: 305). Stressing the provisional character of the sign serves three functions. It reminds us of the innate instability of that identity category. Besides, it allows the identity to become a site of contest. Furthermore, it prevents a foreclosure of potential future resignifications which nobody at present is able to foresee.

Though these strategies seem to be both reasonable and probable, I am not sure whether they constitute "good enough" solutions. Even if the category of "women" is used strategically, such a strategy may have effects exceeding the goals intended, for example the exclusion of women who are unable to identify with the category. The paradox remains because of the difficulty resulting from the fact, that there can never be any easy fit between a given strategy and the realization of it.

AGENCY ON POSTSTRUCTURALIST TERMS

The dispute about, whether the possibility of agency implies a pre-given subject, i.e. an ontologically grounded subject, has been especially fierce (Benhabib, Butler, Cornell & Fraser 1995; Hekman 1990: 79ff). The adherents of the Habermasian feminist position assert that with the farewell to the autonomous and self-conscious subject the possibility of agency is undermined, and with it, any chance of resistance against and critique of hegemonic gender discourses (Benhabib 1992: 241 & 1995b: 111)⁴. Furthermore, by obviating any notion of autonomy the poststructuralist conception of the subject as being an effect of discourses, they claim, ends as a tragic determinism of the subject by discourses (Fraser 1995; Hekman 1990: 65).

Responding to these accusations poststructuralist feminists put forward two arguments which are connected to each other. Firstly, they correct a typical misunderstanding of the concept of "constitution" or "construction". Though the subject is constituted in and through discourses, they do not determine it. Neither discourse nor any substitute of it, like power or culture, is understood as impersonal forces, constructing the subject. Rather, the constitution of the

⁴See also Hartsock 1990: 163 putting forward a similar critique, though formulated within feminist standpoint theory.

subject is conceived as a ongoing process of construction, a process of reiteration of hegemonic gender norms by which subjects as well as acts come to appear. At the same time, power as a reiterated acting, which both makes the subject possible and constrains what qualifies as an intelligible subject is renewed or contested (Butler 1993a: 8f). As I previous mentioned the notion of an autonomous subject is obviated altogether by poststructuralist feminists. They oppose the conception of the subject as prior to rather than the effect of actions. The anti-essentialist character of poststructuralist thinking implies a profound settlement with any kind of ontology, including the notion of an ontologically grounded subject. Instead, the subject is seen as constructed in and through the deed. This point, the interdependence of discourses and reiterating subjects, is often overlooked by the critics.

Secondly, they settle with the idea that the deconstruction of the subject dissolves agency by (re)formulating the notion of agency on poststructuralist terms. Thus, the understanding of agency so dependent on notions of autonomy and rationality within certain trends of the Enlightenment is released from them (Butler 1990, 1993a, 1995a & 1995b). The reformulation consists in giving a non-voluntarist account of agency. Because the subject is conceived as a transfer point of constitutive discourses, and because the constitution of the subject is an ongoing process, the subject also becomes a site of resignifications (Butler 1995a: 42 & 48). The possibility of agency is to be located at the junctures where hegemonic gender norms are renewed (Butler 1990: 145 & 1995b: 135). Since the gendered subject is constituted by a continuous and compelled identification with gendered signifiers ("woman" and "man") consisting in a process of reiterating, agency is understood as the interruption in iterability. Agency is related to the compulsion to insert an identity through citing the signifier, demanding an non-determined interval in the citational chain that identity seeks to foreclose (Butler 1993a: 220).

POSTSTRUCTURALIST FEMINISM AS A LIMIT-ATTITUDE

Within poststructuralist feminism the distinction between theory and political practice breaks down. Theory is never merely a disengaged contemplation, but is rather conceived as political. Or more precisely, as a political praxis (Butler 1993b: 302). By employing a set of critical strategies, deconstruction and genealogy, perceived as practico-political strategies, poststructuralist feminism can be said to be an ongoing political practice itself (Butler 1990: 147; Derrida 1987: 508; Foucault 1970: 77, 1976: 24 & 1984b: 50; Sawicki 1991: 26). Such strategies ultimately aim at the dissolution of all gender identities and with them, any kind of gender hierarchy. In performing a permanent critique of the excluding and reifying effects of gender identity categories, poststructuralist feminism is in line with the Enlightenment. The thread that connects poststructuralist feminism with the Enlightenment and with that, the emancipatory impulse of the legacy of feminism, is to be found in the tradition of criticism, especially related to the sceptical trend of the Enlightenment. As

previously mentioned, I interpreted Nietzsche and Foucault as belonging to this trend. Foucault's way of practicing criticism of the totalizing and hence subjugating tendencies of modern power-knowledge regimes has been of special importance to poststructuralist feminism.

Instead of placing Michel Foucault in opposition to the Enlightenment, as is often done, Foucault's project, consisting of carrying out a critical ontology of what we are, do and think, may be understood in line with the Enlightenment (Foucault 1984b: 42ff)⁵. Actually, Foucault describes himself as "a child of the Enlightenment" (Foucault 1984b: 43). His various genealogies of the modern subject may be seen as rooted in the Enlightenment to the extent that they are expressions of a certain mode of philosophical interrogation promoting reflections on what we are and may not need to be any longer. In his reading of Kant's essay, "Was ist Aufklärung?", Foucault stresses that Kant recognized the simultaneousness of the philosopher and hence, asked us to undertake a critical ontology of ourselves and our present (Foucault 1984b: 38; Foucault 1984a: 148). Although, transcending the present is impossible, adopting an "attitude of modernity" makes it possible to reflect on what we are and our ways of thinking. The aim is to free ourselves from these modes of subjectivity and thought (Foucault 1984b: 45). Taking on an attitude of modernity implies both a genealogical investigation of "the limits that are imposed on us and an experiment with the possibility of going beyond them" (Foucault 1984b: 50).

Adopting Foucault's ways of practicing criticism poststructuralist feminism aims at pointing out and disturbing the limits of hegemonic gender discourses. The main purpose is to extend the limits of what counts as intelligible genders (and sexualities). This is accomplished through a critical, feminist investigation of how we have been engendered through a binary frame of thinking about gender. The critique involves a genealogical investigation of gender ontology. It seeks to understand the discursive production of the gender binarism designating as origin those identity categories that are in fact the effects of compulsory heterosexuality (Butler 1990: ix & 32). Such an analysis is in line with what Foucault calls a "critical ontology of ourselves". It implies destabilizing and disrupting the accepted categories that define "women" and "men", and exploring the limits of the hegemonic, heterosexual discourse.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

The aim of this paper has been to make probable the argument that feminism as politics has not lost its way due to the challenges of poststructuralism. But, if one advocates the necessity of some form of autonomy and rationality to rescue the powerfulness and viability of the feminist subject, poststructuralism does seem to undermine feminist political praxis. The point, however, that

⁵Foucault makes a distinction between humanism and Enlightenment. While he rejects the former, he places himself within the latter (Foucault 1984b: 43f).

needs to be stressed to make sense of this implacability is that the Habermasian approach of Benhabib and the poststructuralist one of Butler represent incompatible theories with regard to the constitution of the subject. For that reason it makes little sense to evaluate the theoretical grounding and paradigmatic conventions of Butler's theory of the subject on the terms of Benhabib's and vice versa.

Besides, it seems that answering the question, whether feminist politics is possible after poststructuralism, depends on the context in question and on the notion of the political. Discussions about poststructuralism and its implications for political practice have been, and are still a highly meta-theoretical matter circulating among researchers within philosophy and the social sciences. While these discussions go on often in isolation, feminist politics happens everyday on the level of *realpolitik*. Struggles with male domination and in favour of equality, based on an essentialist notion of sex, and taking place within the realm of representational politics, happen despite poststructuralist feminism. The gap between "high" theory and political activism seems a fact that one can either lament or face as a reality. Furthermore, the definition of the political seems of decisive importance answering the question. From the point of view of political representation it is necessarily for women at several occasions to appear under the sign of "women". But if power exists already at the level at which gendered subjects are articulated and made possible, that is, if the gendered subjects are totally imprinted with power, then the political has everything to do with the definitions of femininity and masculinity and with the whole disciplinary workings of the gender binarism. Political praxis then means something quite different than that which can be contained within the discourse of representational politics. Instead it involves making identity categories "sites of necessary trouble" challenging any attempt to fix them. Politics has to do with locating strategies of subversive reiterations of the hegemonic gender norms.

In this paper I have discussed four essential matters within contemporary feminist discourses. First, I have argued that poststructuralist feminism does not undermine the idea of the subject per se, but abolishes an ontologically grounded feminist subject. Besides, poststructuralist feminism attacks the conception of politics usually understood as a representational discourse presuming an already-constituted subject, conceived through the category of "women". Instead, it establishes as political the norms of intelligibility producing and regulating the category of "women". The political task of feminism is being reformulated as a matter of a permanent critique of the hegemonic definitions of women, including those (re)produced by feminism itself. Second, I have discussed an unavoidable dilemma for feminism. Feminism both has to use and refuse the category of "women" in order to speak on behalf of "women" within a representational discourse. Although, poststructuralist feminism obviates an essentialist foundation of the category of "women", it does not ignore the necessity of representational politics, as if it could. It puts forward various doubled strategies to handle the dilemma. Third, I have claimed that the deconstruction of the subject does not undermine the

possibility of agency. Rather, it relocates agency within the resignification made possible by discourse. The possibility of agency is to be found at the junctures where hegemonic gender norms are renewed. Fourth, I have asserted that the deconstructive moves of poststructuralist feminism are in line with the emancipatory impulse of the legacy of feminism. Poststructuralist feminism carries out a critical ontology of what we are and think consisting in a critique of the totalizing and hence subjugating tendencies of modern gender regimes. Thus, poststructuralist feminism follows a mode of philosophical investigation which is part of the sceptical currents within the Enlightenment. Pointing out and disturbing the limits of hegemonic gender discourses the aim is to extend the limits of what counts as intelligible genders.

Although there can be no reconciliation, as I previously mentioned, between the positions of Butler and Benhabib, they have something in common. Both of them deal with what I consider to be the central concern of feminist theory: the question of liberty and hence of emancipation. The joint concern across various feminisms is a critique of the discourses of male domination that constitute women as inferior. Emancipating women from subordination seems to be the subject matter of feminism. The discussions of freedom of both positions are rooted in the Enlightenment, although they relate to different trends within it. The opposition between Butler and Benhabib, I would suggest, can be understood as an expression of "the dialectics of the Enlightenment". Benhabib advocates the benefits of rationality and sees reason as the means to go beyond oppressing discursive gender regimes. Butler stresses the destructiveness of the modern rationality consisting in its totalizing, subjugating and hence exclusionary tendencies. She urges us to engage with a permanent critique of precisely such tendencies. Thus, she advocates the necessary self-reflection of the Enlightenment.

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