

# **Getting Over the Self: The Decentered Subject and Contemporary Political Theory**

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(ABSTRACT)

Regardless of one's position on what has come to be called postmodern theory, there is no denying that this theoretical perspective is challenging the legitimacy of many of the traditional concepts of political and social theory. Foremost among these challenges is the opposition that postmodern theory pose to any attempt to provide foundational certainty on which subjectivity, our sense of who we are and our place in the world, can be established.

This thesis explores this postmodern "decentering" of subjectivity and argues that is a useful insight for contemporary political theory. Using the work of Judith Butler and William Connolly, I argue that a perspective that refuses to assume any foundational premises on which essential subjectivity can be established leads to a more ethical negotiation of difference and, ultimately, to a re-invigorated democratic ethos that allows for multifarious ways of being to be politically recognized.

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## INTRODUCTION

If we accept some interpretation of Thomas Kuhn's *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (1996) as applicable to the study of social phenomena, then it is safe to say that we are undergoing a sort of paradigmatic sea change in the nature of cultural, political, and social discourse. Furthermore, if we accept this shift as engendering an entirely new gestalt, then we can make sense of claims such as Jameson's that "premonitions of the future . . . have been replaced by senses of the end of this and that" (1995, 1) or Lyotard's notion of transformations in knowledge that "have altered the game rules for science, literature, and the arts" (1988, xxiii). Resulting from this shift is the proliferation of those discourses that uncomfortably fall under the monikers of postmodernism or poststructuralism. Encompassing thinkers as diverse as Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, Jean Baudrillard, Richard Rorty, etc., this approach has begun to stake its claim as a major competitor in the realms of political and social theory by attacking the foundations of traditional perspectives such as liberalism and Marxism.<sup>1</sup>

This shift, in as much as it is an accurate characterization, has substantial normative implications. Turning again to Kuhn, we learn that as "paradigms change, there are usually significant shifts in the criteria determining the legitimacy of both problems and proposed solutions" (Kuhn, 109). In contemporary social theory many of the approaches that reflect this shift seem to ignore, or at least move away from, the normative and ethical considerations that have been the focus of traditional political and social thought. Regarding subjectivity, for instance, the focus of many of the thinkers associated with postmodern or poststructural perspectives has been on attempts to decenter and problematize the notion of an essential subject as the foundation on which political action can be grounded. From this perspective, moves toward essentialism are problematic because they result in the exclusion of other possibilities of being. For instance, traditional theories, that established men as the primary form of being do so at the expense of women. Because men were placed at the top of some natural hierarchy, as in the case of the early liberal distinction between public and private, women were

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<sup>1</sup> For a comprehensive examination and critique of these theorists and the challenge they pose to traditional social theory see Stephen Best and Douglas Kellner, *Postmodern Theory* (1991).

excluded from participation in many aspects of life and also marginalized as less than human beings. As insightful as these attempts to reveal the dangers of essentialism may be, there are important questions that follow such efforts. Without recourse to an essential subjectivity on which we can anchor our actions as political agents, where do we gain an ethical or normative basis for such actions? Or is such an ethical politics conceivable in the first place?

In what follows I will attempt to provide answers to the questions posed above. In doing so, I will argue that the ethical-political considerations of traditional political thought can not only be sustained, but also reinvigorated, by this shift toward a decentered notion of subjectivity. I use the term decentered consciously. I am not endorsing a position that insists on doing away with the concept of subjectivity, nor am I posing a new theory of the subject; there are enough of those to go around. Instead, what I am suggesting is the possibility of an epistemological shift in the way the subject is considered in political and social theory, a shift that calls into question any centeredness from which a politics of exclusion can be engendered. Such a transition does not oblige us to give up on every claim we might have to subjectivity. However, it does oblige us to view the political creature of subjectivity quite differently. Instead of starting with a notion of subjectivity that assumes some specific character, for instance the liberal-rational-individual, the approach I am endorsing begins with the assumption that no such specifics can claim ontological primacy. Such a shift, I will argue, allows us to conceive of our political and social worlds in ways that make it possible to reevaluate and re-imagine what we mean by traditional concepts such as ethics and democracy.

In the first chapter of this thesis, I will explore the tradition of political thought that has engendered such a transition in the way that the subject is theorized. Tracing this tradition from Nietzsche through Foucault, I will show how this critical perspective has become increasingly influential in contemporary political and social thought. Against this background, I will provide a brief sketch of this perspective and point out what I believe to be its most insightful contributions to contemporary theory. Highlighting the insights of Foucault, I will explore the role of power and discourse in producing the various positions from which we come to view ourselves as subjects. From Foucault's perspective, the subject is not an essential being with a knowable core but the discursive

effect of productive power. This view effectively decenters our thinking and opens the way for a new perspective regarding subjectivity. Examples of the possibilities engendered by such a perspective, I will argue, are provided in the work of Judith Butler and William Connolly.

In the second chapter, I will focus specifically on Judith Butler. Butler, I will suggest, provides one of the most provocative notions of subjectivity that comes out of this tradition. Her importance comes on two fronts. First, she gives us an approach to subjectivity that is consciously resistant to the exclusionary moves which so many theories, such as those critiqued in her seminal work, *Gender Trouble*, are guilty of. Secondly, she seriously considers the implications of such an approach to subjectivity, and much of her subsequent work has served to explore the questions that come from such an approach. Among these, Butler asks, what does it mean to theorize subjectivity in this way? Is the subject still an important aspect of social and political life and, if so, is it one that is capable of some critical agency? Her answers to these questions, I believe, make an important contribution to contemporary theory because, in the end, she provides an approach that still insists on some notion of subjectivity, albeit a decentered one, and from this subject, she begins to offer the space from which a critical and democratic politics can follow.

Starting with her engagement with Freudian psychoanalysis I will explain the importance that I see in Butler's answers to the questions above. Butler's reading of Freud, I will suggest, is essential to understanding how she approaches the question of subjectivity. On the one hand, Freud affords her the opportunity to engage the sort of foundation-based theories that she wants to work against. On the other, Butler is indebted to Freud because his theory of melancholia serves as the grounding for much of her theoretical work regarding both subjectivity and the possibility of agency. Building on this, I will elucidate exactly what Butler means when she refers to subjectivity as the result of a "passionate attachment" to the terms that provide our social existence. Drawing from both Foucauldian and Freudian frameworks, Butler's approach argues that the subject is both the discursive production of power relations and also an existential necessity from which we gain our sense of place in the world. From here I will explore how Butler gets the possibility of critical agency out of such a fictive necessity. Turning

again to her use of Freud, as well as Nietzsche, Foucault, and Althusser, I will show how Butler's sense of the subject is one that is never quite as fully constituted by discourse as thinkers such as Foucault might imply. From the space made available by the incompleteness of such subjectivity it may be possible to gain a sense of critical agency.

The third chapter builds on the themes developed by Butler, but makes them more palpable in the realm of politics. Using the work of William Connolly I will push Butler's thinking about subjectivity onto the concrete political terrain of particular identities. Starting from a notion of decentered subjectivity, Connolly explores how the particular identities that we take part in relate to the political world in which we live, and he considers how these relations influence the ways that we interact with each other. Eschewing essentialist notions of subjectivity, Connolly endorses a democratic ethos that recognizes the importance of any particular sense of identity while insisting that any claim to such an identity is contestable at best. Out of this recognition of our own contestable nature, Connolly suggests, it is possible to arrive at a renewed relationship between identity and difference that allows for the ethical engagement of difference in a way that overcomes the drive to convert such difference into an excluded otherness.

Picking up where I leave off with the discussion of Butler, I will explain the relationship that Connolly sees between identity and difference and explore how this relationship leads to our constitution of subjects. From this interrelationship of identity/difference, Connolly's approach to a theory of decentered subjectivity allows him to posit a new sense of ethical responsibility that allows differing identities to encounter each other with an "agonistic" sense of respect. Following from this, I will explain how Connolly sees this sense of agonism applying to a renewed cultivation of democratic politics, one that reinvigorates institutional democracy. I will then show how this sense of ethical engagement with difference pushes past the limitations of political liberalism. Building on this sense of ethical engagement, Connolly endorses a politicization of the contested nature of identity that cultivates a renewed ethos of democratic pluralism oriented toward suppressing the political drives to set up the existence of a normalized identity over and against the possibility of others. I will conclude by showing how Connolly sees the recognition of the contestability of identity and a decentered notion of subjectivity as essential to the cultivation of such an ethos, a

cultivation that should begin with the reconfiguration of how the subject is thought about within social and political theory.

## Chapter 1

### **LOCATING THE DECENTERED SUBJECT IN POLITICAL THEORY**

All social science research, theoretical or otherwise, is based on an initial set of assumptions, and these assumptions, as well as the limitations they impose on the research, should be made explicit to the reader at the outset (King, et al 1994, 8). With this in mind, there are potential concerns with the following discussion that I feel are necessary to address at the beginning. To limit both the size and scope of the following analysis of subjectivity, I do not intend to write either a history of the subject or to advance an original or unique theory of subjectivity. My only goal in this initial chapter is to give a brief sketch of how subjectivity is viewed in one specific perspective in political theory. This perspective is one that refuses to accept many of the modern assumptions regarding an essential subjectivity and, instead, wishes to adopt a much more decentered approach to the subject. I will outline what I see as the insights of this perspective and its usefulness for political and social research. Therefore, I am beginning with the assumption that the idea of a decentered subjectivity has value for contemporary political and social research. The main purpose of this thesis is to discuss this value, and to suggest some ways in which this perspective can contribute to already existing analyses of political and social life.

With these clarifications out of the way, the following questions arise: what is this critical tradition of political thought that I am endorsing, and what are its insights regarding subjectivity? To engage the obvious question first, the tradition that I am drawing from follows Nietzsche's initial critique of the modern condition as it became manifest in the late nineteenth century. Nietzsche's aim was to problematize the modern emphasis on truth by contesting those discourses through which claims to truth were made. Focusing his criticisms on the conceits of modern philosophy and later forms of Christianity, Nietzsche gave an account of the modern condition that was far less flattering than many of the philosophers of his time. Unlike many of his contemporaries, who had dedicated their energy to shoring the foundations on which humanity could establish judgements about what is truthful and certain, Nietzsche reversed the emphasis of such pursuits and directed his questioning toward showing "the problem with the

value of truth and certainty” altogether (Nietzsche 1992,199). Instead of an endless search for one truth about the world, a truth that modern philosophers had yet to discover, Nietzsche suggested, in a sense, giving up on such philosophical undertakings. These endeavors only resulted in the manipulation of words and meaning and rather than uncovering certainty, only served to impose one perspective of what is certain on the world. Usually, this was the perspective of the dominant group or class, and this group or class usually practiced what Nietzsche called slave morality whereby an evil otherness was attributed to those who do not fit the definitions of humanity imposed by the dominant group.

Granted, the above discussion of Nietzsche is a somewhat oversimplified; however, I do not believe that a detailed analysis of Nietzsche is essential. What is essential is a consideration of Nietzsche’s role in inspiring a critical perspective in contemporary theory, specifically, his importance for contemporary thinking regarding subjectivity. In fact, this may be the area where his critique of the modern society still has the most relevance. Starting from his more general critique of 19<sup>th</sup> century European society, Nietzsche was able to critically engage many of the problematic aspects that modern thinking began to reveal on the level of the subject itself. Among these was the recognition that the subject’s position in the world, its reason for being altogether, always seemed to be the result of negotiating a complex relationship to the world around it. Most critical in these negotiations was the subject’s relationship to what it is not, i.e., difference. This relationship usually resulted in the exclusion of difference through a shoring up of certainty regarding one’s own subjectivity. From this engagement with the interrelationship between self and other, Nietzsche attempted to reveal the contingent nature of the subject and to problematize any sense of abstract agency that the subject might possess. Instead of accepting a theoretical foundation that provides recourse to an essential nature on basis of which principled action is justified, Nietzsche suggested that “there is no ‘being’ behind doing, effecting, becoming; ‘the doer’ is merely a fiction added to the deed” (481). Ultimately, he concluded, subjectivity is only another form of modern self-deception. By setting itself up over and against the threat of difference, the subject is able to grant itself a position of certainty and “merit” in a world full of contingency and uncertainty (482).

Taking their cue from Nietzsche, thinkers since the end of the Second World War have turned their attention to the political implications of the modern notion of certainty in the world and the role that it plays regarding the constitution of the modern subject. In the modern tradition, the subject became an important aspect of political theory, and the idea of rationality was often utilized as the means through which subjects could gain a certain understanding about who they were and their place in a world filled with contingency. In fact, it could be argued that the question of subjectivity is one of the foremost questions that arose from this tradition, and not only political and social thought, but a variety of other discourses (biology, anthropology, astronomy, etc.) have been committed to finding the answer. Put simply one of the main lines of questioning that connect the broad systems of inquiry developed throughout the modern tradition has been a search for a sense of self through which one can, by appealing to its rationally conscious subjectivity, know and be certain one's place in the world.

In the aftermath of WWII, philosophers and political theorists began to consider this modern appeal to subjectivity in a much more critical light. Against those positions that purported to give an accurate understanding of the workings of the social body, these thinkers instead engaged in a revitalization of Nietzsche's warnings against the conceits of modern society where philosophy is regularly "in the habit of . . . adopt[ing] a popular prejudice and exaggerat[ing] it" (215). Many began to explore a much more critical perspective that refused to take many of the assumptions of modernity for granted. For instance, thinkers such as Horkheimer and Adorno engaged in a careful and critical reconsideration of the values and goals of the Enlightenment tradition in an attempt to illuminate those dangers that were previously ignored. The positive aspects of Enlightenment, of course, were the emphasis on human liberty, individuality, freedom, and the hope of emancipation. However, this same way of thinking also seemed to be capable of resulting in moves toward totalitarianism and domination. If left unchecked, a multitude of dangers seemed to be possible, and the so-called enlightened world, in their view, could again be one that "radiates disaster triumphant" (1972, 3). For Horkheimer and Adorno, the enlightenment and capitalist world domination became one and the same, and both were as "totalitarian as any system," because they sought certainty through domination, empiricism, and positivism (24). It was only in the enlightened

world that the rise of industrial capitalism became possible. And both Enlightenment and the capitalist mode of production were spread through the desire of both to impose human certainty on the world through a specific vision of what it means to be a human being, specifically, a thinking human being capable of the “creation of unified, Scientific order, and the derivation of factual knowledge”(81).

The emergence of the Frankfurt School, of which Horkheimer and Adorno were an important part, provided one of the first challenges to the tradition of thought that readily accepted the assumptions of modern society as givens and offered them as hope of potential human salvation. However, for some, the commitments of this tradition still carried far too many artifacts of the modern thinking, and many of those who called themselves “critical theorists” were still intent on “defend[ing] some boundaries, some categorical distinctions” that suggested more of a defense of modernity than a criticism of it (Best and Kellner 1991, 215). Picking from what they saw as the oversights of the critical perspective, a number of contemporary French and Anglo theorists have, themselves, subsequently attempted to work through Nietzsche’s original critique and show its relevance to contemporary western society. The most important and influential of these, at least regarding the question of subjectivity, is Michel Foucault.

Foucault is usually mentioned among a group of thinkers loosely identified as poststructuralist or postmodern. Although interpretations of this perspective vary, criticisms usually suggest that the only goal of these theorists is to engage in a scathing critique of modernity without offering any constructive alternatives of their own. When seen only as a new form of skepticism, this position is accused of everything from being politically “agnostic,” to explicitly concluding that “social change is meaningless because individual human beings are powerless to influence government and society anyway” (Rosenau 1993, 139-40). My interest in Foucault depends very little on whether or not he is guilty of being a postmodern theorist. What I am interested in is why Foucault might be accused of such charges. Foucault's criticism of modern theory, I believe, is precisely what makes him so valuable to a notion of decentered subjectivity regardless of one's position on postmodernism or poststructuralism. My main focus, then, is on Foucault's reinterpretation the concept of power in political and social theory, and how this notion of power works on the specific level of subjectivity. Beginning with his attempts to rethink

the workings of power, as a productive rather than an exclusively repressive force, Foucault posits the subject as a discursively constructed artifact of our historically specific period. Transgressing essentialist debates over the true nature of the human being as subject, Foucault wishes to engage more subterranean questions such as “[h]ow are we constituted as subjects of our own knowledge? How are we constituted as subjects who exercise or submit to power relations? How are we constituted as moral subjects of our own actions (1984,49)? Through his own appropriation of Nietzsche’s genealogical analysis, Foucault interrogates the subject and its constitution from a variety of positions. He reveals how power works in determining what one can and cannot be. In what is now the most famous of these works, *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault locates these regimes of power in the prison and other disciplinary institutions—the military, the school, etc.—where a new form of power, one that produces our positions as subjects through a complex network of surveillance, routine, and self-regulation, replace the explicit force of the embodied sovereign in establishing order and constructing and maintaining the concept of the individual.

Unlike traditional political theory, Foucault’s analysis does not view power as a repressive force that moves outward from one agent to another. Foucault envisions power having much more complexity. Following Nietzsche, this conceptualization of power depicts a much more fluid, anonymous, and multidirectional web of interaction that has both positive and negative possibility. Power, in his terms, “needs to be considered as a productive network which runs through the social body . . .” which is recognizable not so much in its actions as in its effects (61). The most notable of these effects is the presence of the subject itself. Working through the techniques of discipline, power, in Foucault’s terms, is responsible for defining what constitutes individual subjects “both as objects and as instruments of its exercise” (1995,170). In other words, the subject plays an active and participatory role in constituting itself as such, a role that is many times unrecognizable even to the consciousness of the subject itself.

Foucault gives the possibility of resistance an essential role in his equation. Resistance, he concludes, is “present everywhere in the power network” and provides the means through which one takes up its individual position as a subject (1990, 95). Foucault suggests multiple points of resistance that become available not only to a

privileged group within the social body but to the individual body as well. Where the discourses of power/knowledge work to create the available categories in which subjects can be identified, resistance always fights against this process and leaves it incomplete. For instance, scientific and medical discourses regarding human sexuality have created the category of homosexuality; however, these discourses can only go so far in determining how the individuals that fall into this category recognize themselves as homosexuals. Furthermore, as Foucault points out, the very category itself may be co-opted by those who fall under it in an attempt to reverse the power relation that is created by such a category and “demand that its legitimacy” be recognized (101). This is especially evident in the area of rights discourse where the very categories that once served as points of exclusion (e.g., gay, mad, woman, etc) are subverted into valid forms of subjectivity through which claims to rights can be made. In Foucault’s view, it is only through this process, this attempt to negotiate how power works on us as subjects, that we become visible as one of its effects and become known to both society and ourselves. Through the ultimate recognition of itself as a subject, capable of thought and action, the individual then is able to participate in a complex regimen of self-regulation that further contributes to the notion of one’s own subjectivity as docile and fixed.

Foucault’s analysis serves as an excellent starting point for a discussion intent on loosening the drive for an essential and certain subjectivity. Theorizing power in this way allows Foucault to advance the position that subjectivity itself is a discursive production of modernity. It is not, as often thought, that there is subjectivity out there, separate from our knowledge of it, waiting to be discovered; it is instead this constitutive knowledge, this pursuit of discovery that produces various modes of subjectivity in the first place. Foucault’s insights regarding the question of subjectivity are exemplary in outlining the aforementioned transition from conceptions of a foundational subject to that of a decentered one. Foucault’s intention was to show how this recourse to some foundation always results in some form of exclusion. By offering the subject as discursively constituted, Foucault effectively challenged the exclusionary moves made by more foundational claims about subjectivity. It is this challenge that I will argue deserves to be considered as a valuable perspective available to political and social theorists as they attempt to come to grips with the problems experienced in contemporary life.

With this said, however, there are limits to what Foucault himself can offer to this analysis. As his critics correctly point out, Foucault sometimes gives a rather ominous account of society as “an increasingly closed and terrifying machine” that leaves the subject paralyzed to act toward social transformation (Jameson, 5). Although he does suggest the possibility of resisting such a machine, it is not always clear if this resistance is possible beyond the level of the individual trying to negotiate its own position in the world. Furthermore, he does little to provide us with a notion of what such resistance might look like. As Best and Kellner point out, Foucault never accurately gives "a genealogy of resistance" that would allow the political implications of his concept of resistance to be explored (70). Likewise, his emphasis on the individual body as the site of resistance gives us nothing to go on when it comes to collective movements. How, it could be asked of him, do individuals resisting power on the corporeal level come to see themselves acting in concert with others? Judith Butler, I will suggest, offers an alternative theory that has increasingly attempted to overcome these problems sometimes attributed to Foucault. Like Foucault, her subject is also the product of the discursive workings of power; however, she also expands on this understanding and offers a theory of the subject that provides a more coherent account of the possibility of critical, political agency. By providing a more concise understanding of how subjectivity comes into being on the psychic level, Butler also explores how these psychic processes might provide the possibility for resistance. Furthermore, she expands Foucault's notion of discursive production in such a way that recognizes the discursive outside as a potential site in which a sense of political community may be evoked.

## Chapter 2

### **FROM ABIVALENCE TO AGENCY, PERFORMATIVITY TO POLITICS: JUDITH BUTLER'S POST-FEMINIST SUBJECT**

As I suggested in my introduction, Butler's importance comes on two fronts. First, like her predecessors, Butler provides a perspicuous critique of those theories that offer foundational assumptions about the subject and its source of agency. Second, expanding on this critique, Butler portrays subjectivity as both necessary and, at the same time, fictive. It is necessary in the sense that subjectivity is something that human beings cannot do without; it gives order to our worlds and meaning to our existence. Subjectivity is what we are, and it provides us with an understanding of our place in the world. She also imagines such a subjectivity as discursively produced and, therefore, fictive. Therefore, what we *are* isn't necessarily what we have to *be*. Subjects do seem to be produced by power in the way that Foucault implied; however, if they could recognize and re-imagine such a production, there may be a way out of the more exclusionary forms that it might take. For Butler, subjectivity is still inevitable, there is no way around it; however, there is nothing inevitable about the way that subjectivity is realized. In the gap between such necessity and such fiction, Butler imagines a subjectivity that is capable of a subversive agency through which it can work toward a multitude of political goals.

In this chapter I will explore the qualities of subjectivity as Judith Butler sees it. To begin, I will consider one of her more insightful critiques, specifically, her critique of Freud. Following this, I will flesh out Butler's picture of subjectivity. Starting with the fictional aspects, I will outline Butler's theory of performative subjectivity. Performativity, she argues, is the discursive process through which we come to recognize ourselves as subjects. With each performative reiteration of aspects of our identity we come to increasingly internalize these identifications as essential to our being. After explaining how such subjectivity is produced, Butler then seeks to clarify what she sees as the necessity of such a production. Using her most recent book on the subject, *The Psychic Life of Power* (1997), I will explain how Butler derives such a necessity from the

psychic production of subjectivity. Lastly, after considering her appropriation of psychoanalysis, I will explore how Butler sees a critical or subversive agency developing from a discursively produced subject. In fact, here she suggests that the discursive production of subjectivity is the very thing that makes this agency possible. The possibility of conceptualizing such an agency, I will argue, is essential if the decentered subject is going to be a useful concept for political and social theory.

### ***Gender Trouble and the Critique of the Foundational Subject***

It is helpful to start with a quick overview of Judith Butler's argument as it was initially posed in *Gender Trouble* (1990). This is important for a couple of reasons. First, it allows for a general introduction to Butler's thinking regarding the concept of a decentered subjectivity. In some ways, the majority of her work subsequent to *Gender Trouble* has been dedicated to answering some of the questions brought about by both the insights and problems generated by that text. Second, her critique of Freud in *Gender Trouble* will be useful for getting an accurate understanding of some of the concepts she develops in her later work. Much of Butler's account of agency is dependent on an understanding of Freud's concept of melancholia. Outlining this critique allows me an opportunity to explain how Freud conceptualized this phenomenon before moving to Butler's own interpretation later in this chapter.

According to Drucillia Cornell, gender trouble "is the good news that [Judith] Butler brings to feminist theory, breaking open the space for freedom, since gender identity cannot determine us" (Cornell 1998, 71). Although rather vague, Cornell's suggestion has implications that are essential to my understanding of the importance of decentered subjectivity to political and social thought. Attempting to reconceptualize the possibilities engendered by feminist theory, theorists such as Butler offer an approach that is much less exclusive regarding what the conceptual framework of "woman" can potentially look like. In doing so, Cornell claims, she is able to open up and extend the space in which political battles can be fought. The suggestion here is that there is something about contesting the idea of a universal subjectivity that allows the politics of identity to proliferate. From here, the political space available to challenge exclusionary

forms of subjectivity can be re-imagined in a way that implies a more inclusive form of democratic politics.

In the opening paragraphs of *Gender Trouble*, Butler outlines her own thinking regarding this approach. Here she explains her goal as one that challenges those traditional notions of the subject that imply some pre-discursive foundation on which politics can be based. Taking contemporary theorists of gender as her interlocutors, Butler shows how even some of the more critical of these approaches assume a fixed category of the subject, i.e. woman, which can be used as a starting point. Contemporary feminism, she argues, “has assumed some existing identity, understood through the category of women” that serves as the foundation on which challenges to the dominant masculine perspective can be initiated. Although laudable in their attempts to advance the political aims of feminism, Butler suggests that the foundational notions of gender underlying these theories also reinforce some of the assumptions regarding gender and identity. Heterosexuality is primary among these assumptions, and throughout the book, Butler shows how so much of the thinking regarding gender, as progressive as it may seem, begins with the presumption of heterosexuality and, therefore, invalidates homosexuality as a legitimate subjectivity (1).

Contesting these exclusionary approaches to gender, Butler’s aim is to reveal forms of gender regulation that may not be explicit. Long held views of sex and gender, even those that accept the two as categorically distinct, often take as their starting point some set of assumptions that legitimizes one form of sexuality while excluding others. Gender, in these interpretations, may well be the socially constructed manifestation of sexuality; however, the natural conception of this sexuality itself is usually not a point of debate. This approach positions some natural idea of sexuality as a given that exists before the constitution of any form of social regulation. This naturalized heterosexuality, then, results in those who do not conform to the normative assumptions being excluded from recognition.

In Butler’s view, the power-dynamics of such normative regulation are only another element in the complex web of exclusionary discourses that give meaning to the identity bearing subject, and her goal in this book could effectively be described as an attempt to problematize this relationship. By contesting the existence of a foundational

subjectivity on which such exclusionary regulations are based, Butler is arguing for an approach that opens up the space available for representation to all sorts of subject positions. Existing approaches, in her view, make no sense because they only “extend representation to subjects who are constructed through the exclusion of those who fail to conform to the unspoken or normative requirements of the subject itself” (5-6). Instead, what is needed is a complete re-theorizing of the very concept of representation in order to challenge the very idea of a subjectivity that is somehow beyond the reaches of power (32). In *Gender Trouble*, she begins this process by critically interrogating many of the existing theories of gender and beginning to reveal her own unique approach to the question of subjectivity. She does this by challenging the category of woman as a natural and pre-discursive subject position, because ultimately “recourse to an original or genuine femininity . . . tends not only to serve culturally conservative aims, but to constitute an exclusionary practice within feminism, precipitating precisely the kind of fragmentation that the idea purports to overcome” (36).

Of course this is a rather contentious argument, and in important ways Butler’s subsequent work on the subject is aimed at clarifying some of the more inflammatory of these claims. Although these clarifications will be discussed later in this chapter, what is immediately important is the way in which she engages the existing theories of gender and the insights that these critiques provide. A detailed analysis of Butler’s critique of Freud will be useful for two reasons. First, if there is a thread that runs through all of the specific theorists that Butler challenges in *Gender Trouble* (Lacan, Kristeva, Wittig, etc.) it is that they all have developed their individual positions as a response to Freudian psychoanalysis; therefore, outlining Butler’s position on Freud provides a useful overview of her method of critique in *Gender Trouble*. Secondly, as mentioned earlier, Butler’s own idea of subjectivity has become heavily indebted to her reading of the Freudian concept of melancholia. To gain an understanding of Butler’s position, it is helpful to begin with an understanding of Freud’s own idea of how melancholia works. Outlining Butler’s critique of Freud seems essential to gaining this understanding.

The critique of psychoanalysis provided in *Gender Trouble* is, for the most part, focused on the way that gender identity is developed in Freudian theory. In Butler’s view, much of this process is dependent on Freud’s understanding of what he describes as

melancholia where the ego is able to overcome a loss through a process in which characteristics of the lost object are incorporated into the ego as a means of identifying itself. Initially, melancholia was a merely a result of the ego losing an object of desire and had nothing to do with gender consolidation. Freud made an important distinction between this process and the related process of mourning. Mourning, he thought, was a relatively healthy process through which the ego overcomes the loss of a desired object through a natural, but temporary period of grief. This grief, of course, is painful, and resulting from this pain the individual could potentially reach the conclusion that complete withdraw from the world around it is a viable option. However, the healthy individual recognizes that eschewing the world around it is probably not the best approach and through an arduous and painful process the ego is detached from its desired object. Ultimately, the initial desire fades into the recesses of the memory and “the ego becomes free and uninhibited again” (Freud 1957,127).

Freud argues that melancholia is a sign of psychological illness with the melancholic process itself constituting a “morbid pathological disputation” where the ego is unable to “willingly abandon” one object of desire, “not even when a substitute is already beckoning . . .” (125-6). Although not altogether unlike the process of mourning, in melancholia the ultimate foreclosure of the original desire for the object is never successfully accomplished and the ego is never liberated from its desire the way that it is in mourning. It is the response of the ego that Freud suggests as the distinction between the two related processes. Where in the case of mourning the ego is eventually freed from the pain, if not entirely the memory, of lost desire, in the melancholic the ego is never liberated as such. This leads to the ego practicing a sort of self-reflection whereby it comes to see itself as the as the source of its grief. Here, the ego turns against itself out of a sense of self-loathing and “one part of the ego sets itself up over and against the other, judges it critically, and, as it were, looks upon itself as an object” (129). Ultimately, it is concluded that this object itself is not worthy of love.

It is the very process of the ego’s taking itself up as an object that is important for Butler in her reading of this process and the role that it has in the development of gender identity. Moving away from the initial discussion offered in *Mourning and Melancholia*, Butler draws her criticism much more from *The Ego and the Id* where Freud recognized

that his previous work “did not appreciate the full significance of this process and did not know how common and typical it is”(1960, 23). In this formulation, Freud seeks to extend the explanatory weight that he attributes to melancholia in the process of ego development. Specifically, he offers melancholia as the process by which all sorts of identifications are taken up by the ego as it attempts to overcome a lost object-cathexis. In the early stages of an individual’s ego development this process is especially important and Freud goes so far as to suggest that this is potentially the only way in which such objects are eventually abandoned by the ego (24). The result of this process is the transition from object-libido, which is open to loss, to narcissistic-libido, which allows the ego to be considered worthy of love by standing in as a replacement for the lost object.

It is this more complex understanding of melancholia that Butler uses as her point of departure in *Gender Trouble*. In her reading, Freud’s theory of gender development is intent on showing the natural facts of gender that are able to overcome the initial bisexual dispositions of the ego. Basically, the Freudian emphasis on sex and desire is present at every stage of ego development. In the initial stage, where the ego is disposed to bisexuality, it would seem that either parent could be taken up as a love-object. In fact, it seems that loss of this object would be responsible for the identification of the ego with the gender characteristics of that parent. First, however, Freud must provide the means by which this desire is blocked; this is done by introduction of the incest taboo into the equation. With incest now disallowed by social sanction, a sanction that is incorporated into the ego ideal, the desire for the parent must be foreclosed. This foreclosure, like that explained in the above discussion of melancholia, requires a transition from the condition of object-libido, the desire for the parent as love object, to narcissistic libido, the taking up of identifications of the lost object by the ego as a way to establish love for itself. The identifications in this case are those of gender. In other words, the male child’s desire for the father results in the ego recognizing itself through the male gender characteristics. The desire for the father is transferred to the ego through the adoption of these characteristics. If the mother is the object of desire the opposite is true.

Of course, this explains only gender development generally and not “correct” gender development, i.e., the correct gender being assigned to the appropriate sex.

Theoretically, the child could take either parent as the object of desire and, therefore, adopt either gender as its own gender characteristics. To accomplish the correct acquisition of gender Freud brings the Oedipal conflict into his original idea of melancholia. This provides a somewhat magical process whereby, in the end, things end up exactly how they should be. Based on the Oedipal story, this process is one by which the developing male child takes the mother as the source of object-libido. This desire for the love of the mother leads to the boy developing a sense of loathing for the father. Given the previous discussion of melancholia and gender identity, it would seem like the only solution here would be adoption of female identification by the ego. After all, this desire for the mother is still forbidden as an act of taboo. However, this is not the case. The ego, which does not want to disavow its desire for the mother, finds a solution by taking the male characteristics as its own. Since the mother's desire is directed at the father, who himself has these characteristics, the child has something to gain by identifying with his father because "it permits affectionate relation to the mother to be in a measure retained" (Freud 1960, 27). For Freud, Butler suggests, the complex processes through which both the incest taboo and the Oedipal complex are resolved are, in fact, the very processes that lead to the consolidation of a gender identity. The object-choice of a child, regardless of where directed, must be disavowed. The melancholic structure of this disavowal constitutes the taking up of gender identifications of the parent toward which the desire was directed. The disposition toward bisexuality implies that this could go either way and the child could identify with the gender of either parent; however, Freud's introduction of the Oedipal complex into this process assures that the correct gender identifications are incorporated into the ego of the child.

It is not hard to imagine why Butler might find Freud's solution to the problem of gender identity problematic. It seems that gender is consolidated through a process that looks a lot like that of melancholia, and Freud already points out that this is a less than healthy state. Here, however, he seems to imply that the process is a rather normal one. If not, the entire process seems to be one of neurosis and there is no foundation for heterosexual gender development or desire to gain primacy over the initial bisexual desire. In Butler's view, "gender identification is a kind of melancholia, in which the sex of the prohibited object is internalized as a prohibition," and this prohibition is based on a

social sanction that has delineated the line between the naturalness of heterosexuality and the impossibility of homosexuality (1990, 63). The suggestion here is that the processes imagined by Freud, far from explaining the natural development of gender, is based on a pre-existing assumption regarding gender's role in sexuality. Therefore, the entire process is built on an assumption of heterosexuality. The fact that the Oedipal process is posited as such a magical solution is exemplary here. For this process to provide the correct results, the desire of the male child must be directed at the mother. This distinction is not revealed by the taboo against incest; therefore, Butler concludes, "the taboo against homosexuality must *precede* the heterosexual incest taboo." In order for the Oedipal scenario to work, the assumption that the bisexual dispositions will be properly overcome must already be in place. Far from showing the "primary constitutive facts" of gender development, what Freud shows is how normal gender identification occurs within an already existing discourse of heterosexuality in which so called normal gender identity is the only identity allowed (64).

For Butler, Freud and many of the theories of gender that follow from his perspective participate in establishing theoretical assumptions that are founded on some form of exclusion. Among these assumptions, heterosexuality is primary; however, this is not always the case. Through her reading of Wittig, Butler shows how even theories that purport to be subversive can also be founded on exclusionary assumptions. In Butler's reading, Wittig's recourse to the act of lesbianism as a subversive act "appears to cut off any kind of solidarity with heterosexual women [or men in general] and implicitly assume that lesbianism is the logically or politically necessary consequence of feminism" (127). If this is the case, the question is begged: can anyone become a lesbian? Furthermore, if used as Wittig intends, to disrupt the homosexual/heterosexual binary, is being a lesbian even a possibility? Here it seems Wittig is intent on assuming the very category she wishes to problematize.

One of Butler's primary aims in *Gender Trouble* is to critique some of the existing theories of gender and to reveal the foundational assumptions that allow these theories to legitimize some forms of being through the exclusion of others. However, she also sees usefulness in those theories that she initially criticizes. In fact, I would suggest, in light of her subsequent adoption of melancholia as an aspect of agency, she chooses

her interlocutors very carefully. Instead of picking easy targets and forgiving those with whom she has affinity, she instead engages the latter in such a way that she can make her critical point but also retain the usefulness of the theory she is criticizing. Again the case of Freudian psychoanalysis is exemplary because although, in the end, it too falls back on an exclusionary set of assumption, its doing so creates a contradiction that problematizes these assumptions. Freudian contradictions, for instance, ultimately rely on the assumption of heterosexuality; however, until he introduces the Oedipal Complex as a solution, the body of Freud's theory seems to argue against a simple binary model of gender and sex. In Butler's view this is useful because it suggests "multiple and coexisting identifications" that "produce conflicts, convergences, and innovative dissonances within gender configurations which contest the fixity" of gender and, therefore, the exclusionary discourses of masculinity and heterosexuality. Thus she concludes, these theories reveal the fact that "the Law is not deterministic" and "may not even be singular" (67). This recognition of Freud's relevance becomes especially important as her theory of subjectivity develops.

### **Butler's Performative Subjectivity?**

In the final chapters of *Gender Trouble* Butler begins to reveal her own thinking regarding subjectivity by introducing her concept of the performative. Starting with the assumption that there is not a fixed subject, Butler suggests that subjectivity itself is established by repeated performances; the result of each iteration constitutes a sort of reification of the performance itself. Her discussion of gender makes this a little clearer. As her reading of psychoanalysis points out, there is nothing essentially real about gender. However, there is no denying that something like gender exists. What Butler argues is that there is this thing called gender; it comprises culturally sanctioned and regulated ways of acting and being that represents the subject's relationship to its sex. Instead of being a gender, Butler's view is that we become one through repeated iterations or performances of the culturally sanctioned ideals. This is a process that starts at birth, when having one or the other sex organ begins a life-process that determines multiple aspects of our existence. Naming, clothes, what we are taught at home and school, extracurricular activities, are only a few examples of those artifacts that dictate

the types of performances we engage in.

Where traditional approaches have argued for the necessarily essential nature of subjectivity, Butler is suggesting that this essentialism may not be necessary at all. It is not the subject that is in question here, but the essential nature that subjectivity has imposed on it. Borrowing a phrase from Nietzsche, she concludes, “there need not be a ‘doer behind the deed,’ but that ‘the doer’ is variably constructed in and by the deed” (142). There is an important distinction to be made regarding what Butler means by this statement because it is here that critics usually find fault with Butler’s thinking. On one hand, she is associated with those who have pronounced the death of the subject, therefore endorsing a fatalism that provides no opportunity for a politics that would lead to social transformation. On the other, there are accusations that Butler is yet another postmodern thinker who has duped us with the “fantasy of escape from human locatedness” (Bordo 1990, 142). From this perspective, Butler’s approach to identity implies the ability to be whatever we want whenever we want.

The distinction I would make, then, is between a theory of the subject that is guilty of these charges, and one that simply suggests that subjectivity is a constructed position and that this constructed subject is one capable of critical politics. Endorsing a decentered subject, I would argue, does not necessarily imply giving up on the idea of subjectivity altogether. The doer may be, in fact, constructed by the deed; however, neither the doer nor the deed becomes irrelevant. In fact, future acts of doing are dependent on the interrelationship between the two. In other words, there is an important difference between what we are, as the product of repeated performances, and what we could become if those performances were subversively altered. This she makes explicit when she claims that her idea of subversive agency is dependent on an already established subject position. “All signification,” she explains, “takes place within the orbit of the compulsion to repeat; ‘agency’ then, is to be located in the possible variation on that repetition” (Butler 1990, 145). As her discussion of drag makes clear, even those performances that subvert are dependent on already acceptable performances of heterosexual gender identity. In fact, drag as a subversive act makes sense only within the field of established heterosexual discourse where the performance “involves identifying with a set of norms that are and are not realizable” (1993, 126).

If Butler is right about subjectivity being the effect of a series of repeated performances then there are some important questions that follow. First, how is it that one performance is adopted over another? In other words, what is our role in producing the performance, and consequently, our own subjugation? Secondly, how is it that these performances do the work that Butler claims? Lastly, how can we change those performances that we take part in? To provide answers to these questions, she gives an analysis of power that accounts for the subject's role in constituting itself. In *Gender Trouble* she follows Foucault's conception of productive power quite closely. Although she does engage a psychoanalytic perspective, she ultimately eschews its explanatory force. Subsequently, however, she has attempted to use psychoanalysis more constructively in an attempt to push beyond what she sees as the limitations of Foucault. Although Foucault implies that power is internalized, he never really explains quite how. Furthermore, he implicitly suggests that the corporeal self is somehow a site of resistance. Materiality, more accurately the site of the body, is set up as a line of demarcation that power cannot easily cross. This materiality, however, is also a discursive production. In these terms, the Foucauldian and the psychoanalytic perspective are both limited because they both establish a site (the body and the psyche) where power is not able to effectively normalize the subject. Reading the two against each other, Butler attempts to come up with an analysis of power that overcomes the deficiencies of each and explains how the subject participates in the production of itself as having this subjectivity.

The themes that become most important in this discussion of subjectivity are complicity and what she calls "the desire to desire" that makes complicity desirable. Again, following Nietzsche she asks, "how are we to account for the desire for the norm and for subjection more generally in terms of a prior desire for social existence, a desire exploited by regulatory power" (1997a, 19)? Butler's assertion here is alluring and, I would suggest, insightful. What she is implying is that existence itself may be predicated on the process of subjection and this subjection itself is dependent on a "passionate attachment" to the very discourses through which one becomes a subject. In other words, we gain meaning as subjects through our relation to the social world. These social terms are those that provide context for both life and action; therefore, it is not clear how

subjects can exist without this social context from which they gain meaning. Once again, a discussion of gender provides an example. For the better part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, women in US households were only valued in subservient roles. In fact, it could be argued that for a significant percentage of the population this is still the case. Broadly speaking, then, we can readily conclude that women have traditionally been forced into these marginalized positions in US society. However, in most cases, this was not outright force or coercion. Instead, women voluntarily, if tentatively, accepted the roles that met these social expectations. After all, the thinking traditionally assumed, that's what women do; they are homemakers, mothers, caregivers, etc. In other words, through the construction of these subservient roles the social world provided the context through which a woman could exist in American society. To exist otherwise was to exist outside these terms-- "old maids," "sluts," and "dykes" being obvious examples. As contemporary reactions against feminism demonstrate, threats to these roles are resisted as much by those who gain their existence from them as those who benefit from the marginalization of women. In many cases, those who would seemingly benefit the most from changing the social discourse that produces women's subjectivity are also those who are most resistant to the thought of such change.

The strength of the desire for social existence cannot be overemphasized in Butler's account of subjectivity. It is this desire that gives meaning to our lives and potentially threatens to take this meaning away. This desire itself, it seems, comes about through the psychic processes of prohibition and subjection that not only establish the existence of subjectivity in the first place, but also guarantee the continuation of this subjectivity. This desire for social existence both constitutes and perpetuates subjectivity. The resulting subject is one that becomes complicit in the terms that constitute it, even if this complicity comes through a painful process of foreclosure. As Freud's discussion of the melancholic reveals, desires are not disavowed easily. Much like Freud's ego is constituted through the prohibition of libidinal-desire in terms complicit with the ego-ideal's socially accepted norms of gender and sexuality, the subject in Butler's account will attach itself to social terms that give it meaning, even if the price is the painful foreclosure of other possibilities.

Here Butler describes a sort of ambivalence that follows from the Freudian theory

of melancholia. In Freud, this ambivalence comes from the fact that there is an attempt to both detach from the ego the object that is lost and also an attempt to incorporate this object into the ego through a process of self-identification. The attempt at detachment is seen by the ego as an affront; however, it is the ego itself that is attempting this detachment. Butler's idea of social existence through desiring attachment works much the same way. On one hand, there is an attempt to foreclose desire. This is accomplished through passionately attaching to terms through which the subject can gain social existence. On the other hand, however, there is an equal importance attributed to the continuation of that desire. In fact, the subject's existence is, in a strange way, predicated on the desire that is being foreclosed. In other words, the very notion of otherness—as something that the subject may desire to be—is necessary for the social terms that the subject ultimately adopt to make sense.

If Butler is right that the “desire to desire is a willingness to desire precisely that which would foreclose desire,” (61) i.e., a desire through which the subject attaches itself to specific terms of existence by giving up the possibility of other attachments, there seems to be a lot at stake in the process that establishes this point of subjectivity. For Butler, it seems, the subject itself plays a large role in its own constitution, and given the role she attributes to this complicit desire, it would appear as if those criticisms that read an inherent fatalism in this account of the subject are right. Of course, I have already claimed that this is not the case; in fact, if anything is inherent in Butler it is that a sense of agency can be built upon this subjectivity. To imagine such an agency, she relies on both the Nietzschean tradition of decentered subjectivity and the psychoanalytic theory that follows from Freud. In her view, as insightful as either tradition appears, both fall short of adequately describing an idea of subjectivity that recognizes its own role in its discursive production while, at the same time, leaving open the possibility of resistance to the process of subjection. To overcome the problems Butler sees in each of these traditions she seeks to “consider the ways in which [the Nietzschean perspective of] Foucault and psychoanalysis might be thought together” (1999, xxv).

Starting with Nietzsche, Butler adopts a position that claims the subject is indeed a fiction; however, it is a necessary one. Working from Nietzsche's discussion of the promising will, Butler shows how this fictitious account of subjectivity is necessary if

one is going to be capable of the authority to promise. According to Nietzsche, this is inaugurated in an act of the will's turning back on itself that establishes the sovereignty of the subject and its authority to promise. Again there is pain implied in this process whereby the sovereignty of the subject is founded. In order for this promise to be carried out, the subject must recognize, and then act upon, a notion of guilt that originates with the burned-in memory of potential injury that would be inflicted if the promise were not upheld. This process is dependent on the presence of an "I" that becomes responsible for its actions, even if those actions are temporally or spatially disconnected from the original act of the promise. It is not the case that the act is entirely founded on a subjectivity that precedes it. Through the act of promising the subject evokes its own existence as a sovereign "I" being capable of promising. Of course, this is not to suggest a one-time process through which one evokes a sense of sovereign subjectivity. Instead, the subject is always engaged in this turning back and, subsequently, always in the process of constituting itself as a subject. It is not as if one promise establishes the authority to make all others, although it does play some role. The memory of one promise participates in the authority of the next; however, this sovereign authority is always changing, and this dynamic and mutable quality reveals the subject's decenteredness.

Butler's performative subjectivity helps clarify this discussion of Nietzsche's will that turns on itself. Gender, she explained, is not a fixed position but the result of repeated performances. As a subject position, a gender is the socially prescribed way of being and acting according to some biological determinate of sex.<sup>2</sup> Of course, every time we perform one of these socially acceptable actions, we are acting in complicity with these terms as they satisfy the desire for social existence. Against the approach that would claim that one acts in a certain way because one is that gender, the process detailed above suggests that every one of these gendered actions requires a new sense of subjectivity to be engendered. Instead of being a gender, this repetition mimics those former actions and allows the subject to constantly become one. Of course, this does not

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<sup>2</sup> Of course, this discussion assumes a binary of sex from which gender performances and completely ignores issues of intersexuality. This category further serves to problematize the assumptions of normative heterosexuality while at the same time always participating in a discourse with a gendered binary as its assumptions. When sexual organs are not instantly recognizable, the power/knowledge discourses that participate in this performative act of gendering are utilized to normalize (usually through surgery) the

imply that this process is necessarily a conscious one. We do not contemplate each and every action to be sure of its accordance with social regulation, although sometimes this is the case. Usually each action is done out of habit, a habit that is the result of repeated performances. Each of these performances is made more and more natural by the performance that preceded it. At some point in our lives, it becomes unnecessary for our parents to demand we act “like a big-boy” or more “lady-like.”

In one reading of the above discussion, it might be possible to accuse Butler of endorsing some foundational subjectivity. After all, much of her discussion, whether of Nietzsche’s will that turns on itself or of her own performativity, seems to endorse a pretty clear picture of how the subject might be produced. My own assumption is that this is not what Butler is trying to show here. However, insightful her discussion of the “hows” of subject formation may be, I believe its purpose is to show that all of these processes of becoming a subject only serve to reveal that the process is never complete. Her engagement with the psychoanalytical perspective is especially helpful. Again recalling the ambivalence produced in melancholia, Butler’s insight is not to reveal the process itself but the incompleteness of the process in constituting the subject. In Freud, ambivalence is the product of the ego’s attempt to both foreclose and continue libidinal desire that leaves the ego’s development incomplete and always open to contingency. The ego must foreclose its desire for the object that has been lost, and it is this foreclosure, this doing away with desire, that constitutes healthy mourning. However, in the melancholic this foreclosure is not successful. Here, the ego begins to identify with the object and adopt its characteristics through identifications. Through this process the ego has brilliantly transcended the need for foreclosure by turning its libidinal desire towards itself as narcissistic-libido. Of course, by identifying with the object of loss and turning the object-libido into narcissistic-libido, the problem of foreclosing desire still exists, and this continued battle between desire and foreclosure is fraught with ambivalence. What this ambivalence reveals, for Butler, is that the ego is never fixed always in the process of constant development--a development susceptible to contingency. Her suggestion is that the ego’s appropriation of these identifications is

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individual within the normative binary. For a discussion of this problem, and its destabilizing possibility see Suzanne J. Kessler’s *Lessons from the Intersexed* (1998).

open to ambivalence and therefore open to the possibility of failure. These identifications “are never fully and finally made; they are incessantly reconstituted and, as such, are subject to the volatile logic of iterability” (1993, 105).

### **From Performativity to Politics**

It is one thing to show that the subject should be conceived of as decentered and still another to show that the decentered subject is useful to contemporary political and social theory. Butler’s subject, so far, has only been able to provide me with an example of the former. Using both the Foucauldian and psychoanalytic perspective, she gives a rather persuasive argument that subjectivity should not be something taken for granted. It is not a given that can be used as a starting point for political conceptualization and action. To have politics, however, we do need starting points, and my argument is that the decentered subject can be used to initiate political action. To provide an example of this I will again turn to Butler’s discussion of ambivalence and the sort of agency it might engender.

As discussed above, Butler’s decentered subject is predicated on the recognition that the process through which one becomes a subject is never fully complete. The turning back that accomplishes such a subjection always seems to elude a “strict identity,” and the relationship between the subject and its constitutive power is always marked by “ambivalence” (198). From this recognition, Butler provides a conception of an agency, or more accurately the possibility of an agency, that starts where the process of subjection leaves off. Essential to this agency is both the recognition of the role of language in producing subjects and the understanding that this language and its ability to produce are imperfect. Althusser describes the role of language in producing subjectivity when talking about the process of interpellation. In his famous example he explains how the hail of a police officer, potentially, calls a subject into existence, guilt of some sort is assumed, and the subject, “through a one-hundred-and-eighty degree physical conversion” turns around (Althusser 1971,163). Ideology, in his terms, has invested in the police the authority to call subjectivity into existence through an act of speech, a utilization of language. As Butler points out, there is more to the story than Althusser

implies. In her reading, it is not only this vocal act of language that evokes this subjectivity but the reiterated performances through which this authority was established in the first place. In Althusser's telling, the power of subjection appears one-dimensional. It moves from the authority of the officer to the subject. This perspective ignores the role that the subject plays in its own subjection. In a sense, it is as if the subject is waiting for the officer to make the hail. It too has to give some authority to the voice that hails it. For this naming to evoke any subjectivity the one being hailed has to agree to be named and to be "assumed guilty" by this naming (Butler 1993, 118). This willing agreement is due to the fact that this name by which it is recognized is essential to the subject's existence. Why else would one turn around?

Butler insists that this process of becoming a subject through language is one that is prone to misfire. Of course, this language is always attempting to name us, but we need not receive the call. It could be the case that we just don't recognize ourselves by the names being used to hail. Potentially, we might not hear the naming to begin with. On the other hand, we might not even have to hear the naming for the interpellation to do its work on us. In the case of being named at birth, whether a proper name or a gendered one, we are not able to understand what this naming means; however, we are still called into the linguistic field in which this name has meaning. Whatever the case, this purely sovereign aspect of naming does not appear to work as Althusser claims. Butler's interest is in what happens when it doesn't. Is there the potential to change the discourse that names us if it doesn't have the impact that it intends? Butler's claim is that "agency begins where sovereignty wanes" (1997b, 16). To imagine such an agency, she adopts J.L. Austin's distinction between illocutionary and perlocutionary speech acts, the former being an act where "saying something, . . . is at the same time doing something;" the latter where "the saying and the consequences are temporally distinct" (17). Again what Butler is doing is suggesting a potential opening in which critical political agency may develop. Who is it after all that decides which side of any specific act of speech has recourse to some sovereign authority. In the illocutionary act, the speaker seems to have a sovereign power that allows the speaker to do the harm intended. What Butler is suggesting is the possibility of reversing this equation in such a way that it becomes possible for the one being spoken to take sovereignty away from the speaker and use this

sovereignty to redirect the harm intended by the speech. This would mean that as receivers of language, whether verbal, social, or otherwise, we may be able to take acts with illocutionary intent and interpret them as perlocutionary thereby providing a sort of catachresis wherein the original meaning of the speech may be altered. By changing the intent of discourse, Butler suggests, the power of discourse to produce our subjectivity is also changed, sometimes in radically subversive ways.

The most insightful example that Butler provides is her discussion of the uses and misuses of the word queer--most importantly the way the word has been used as both a site of exclusion and resistance. Even before it was used to refer to homosexuality, the word queer has always implied something beyond the realm of normality. To be queer, was to be different, peculiar, "deviating from the expected or normal," or something that might spoil the effect of, i.e., "ruin" (American Heritage 1994, 676). Its use as a term to describe homosexuality seems pretty obvious. The homosexual is outside of acceptable discourse. He or she disrupts the normal working of things. Peculiarity or strangeness is implied with the worst connotations in mind. To suggest that one is queer is to create a category of abjection in order to exclude one from social discourse. Given the importance that Butler has put on this idea of social discourse, excluding one from language in this way is, in effect, an attempt to speak them out of existence, to marginalize them to the point of not being at all. Interpellation is taking place not only at the level of speech, but also at every other level of discourse. The context of the spoken word "queer" gains meaning from participation in still a larger contextual field. Already the discourses of power/knowledge, to use Foucault's term, have created categories of exclusion and marginalization that contribute to the context within which the word is used. Homosexuality, more generally, has been set up as a discourse through which we can study and know deviant sexuality. This form of sexuality is queer in the sense that it is outside, different, at risk of spoiling normal sexual relations. This threat to normalcy, originally constituted by the category, is now imposed on the person. It is not only the activity but also the individual that poses such a risk.

Here the utterance, and subsequent interpellation is the opposite of what Althusser explains. In his view, the speech act works because it calls the subjectivity of the other into existence. Here the inverse is true; the intention is not to call but to silence the other

through excluding its subject position altogether. However, as Butler has exhaustively pointed out, these acts through which subjectivity is evoked—whether it be Freud’s melancholia, Nietzsche’s will, or Althusser’s interpellation—do not always go as planned. A rather strange equation is at work in such an attempt to exclude by subjection. In order for speech to do the work it is intended to do, subjects must recognize the speech as applying to them. Or even more problematic, the context that gives the speaker its presumed power to exclude must also be the same context that the addressee uses to recognize itself through language. In other words, if the word queer means something different to the addressee than it does to the speaker, then the attempted act of excluding by naming seems to fail. The very act of naming to exclude depends on recognition by the one who is named; however, recognition is the enemy of exclusion. And if this act of naming is interpreted as a perlocutionary, not an illocutionary speech act, the recognition that initiates subjectivity on the part of the one being named also opens up the possibility for changing the context of the naming. As in the case of queer, shifting the context opens up the political space necessary for re-signifying the terms that were intended to exclude. Before the original naming, the attempted act of exclusion, such a space may have been non-existent.

The notion of a decentered subject is important here because it can be used as the conceptual framework that makes such a re-signification possible. As more traditional approaches to identity politics show, political space for one’s identity has to be opened before political demands can be articulated. In this case, the political aims of homosexuals can be valued only after they have established themselves as participating on the same level of subjectivity as everybody else. Usually, this takes the guise of the rights bearing individual, and as recent developments in the areas of gay bashing and same sex marriages have shown, gaining recognition under these conditions is difficult. As Wendy Brown explains, rights discourse creates a paradox whereby the identity of the individual seeking representation is depoliticized so that the individual itself can become part of the collective community of “we.” In the case of homosexuals, their demand for recognition is predicated on the assumption of an abstract individual who is “just like everyone else except for who [s/he] sleeps with” (Brown 1995, 56). From this perspective, the difference that demanded the protection of rights in the first place

becomes non-existent and the concerns of homosexuals irrelevant. Using a decentered notion of subjectivity provides the possibility of reversing the emphasis to more accurately account for such differences. Where in the traditional case representation must be extended from universal principle onto those who are worthy, in the case Butler outlines, the discourse that establishes such exclusive universals is no longer fully in control. As the discussion of the word queer shows, it is this loss of control that allows the discourse to be “twisted, queered from prior usage” by those who it was meant to exclude, and this twisting radically subverts the intended effects of the discourse by becoming used “in the direction of urgent and expanding political purposes” (Butler 1993, 228). Put differently, this queering of the discourse, if you will, is used to evoke an alternative discursive identity, a sense of community, and from this community political action can follow.<sup>3</sup>

As Jeffrey Nealon explains, Butler’s critical agency, as outlined in the above example, is less an agency in the traditional sense and more a moment of recognition and the possibility of subversive “*response* to already given codes” (1998, 23). Neither the recognition nor the response is necessarily political. However, the purpose of this chapter was not to provide a theory of subjectivity that is always politically preferable, it was only to give an account of a decentered subjectivity that might be helpful in engaging the political when those occasions arise. As Butler herself puts it, none of these insights in themselves provide a revolutionary politics; however, “no political revolution is possible without a radical shift in one’s notion of the possible . . .” (1999, xxiii). In the next chapter, I will clarify this point further. Using William Connolly’s already established commitment to the concept of the decentered subject, I will attempt to show further the applicability of the sort of subjectivity envisioned by Butler. To do this, I will use the above discussion of gay identities and the subversion of the word queer in order to evoke a political community as a sort of case study. This example, I believe, resonates for a couple of reasons. First, both Butler and Connolly continuously use the examples of

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<sup>3</sup> For another example of the way subversive discourse can be used to evoke a sense of community and subsequent political action see Omar Swartz’s *The View from On the Road: The Rhetorical Vision of Jack Kerouac* (1999). Through the use of the term “beat,” (for which he provides three interrelated meanings) Swartz suggests, Kerouac and his colleagues evoked a sense of community for those who existed outside the 1950s vision of morality. This community, his argument follows, provided an alternate vision to the

gay and lesbian identities, so it is easy to make connections between the two. Likewise, the plight of these identities is among the most salient in contemporary society and therefore provide a relevant example. Seeking affinities between Connolly's understanding of the interrelationship between identity and difference and Butler's performative subjectivity, I will argue that it is possible to gain a better of the understanding of the way that discourse shapes the subject politically. Furthermore, I will show one can be used to subvert the other in a way that not only promotes a sense of democracy but also a sense of ethics.

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materialism of middle century America and eventually served as an important catalyst for the social movement of the 1960s.

### Chapter 3

#### William Connolly's Political Theory of the Subject

Butler's importance, I have already suggested, comes from her willingness to think both the fictive nature as well as the necessity of subjectivity for being-in-world. Furthermore, using this fictive necessity as her starting point, she also seeks to explore the potential for critical agency that come from such a decentered notion of subjectivity. Unfortunately, when attempting to push past these questions of necessity and agency to explore the political implications that come from the interaction of particular identities, Butler becomes less helpful.

To assist me in the move from the level of abstract subjectivity to the level of particular identity I will enlist the help of William Connolly. Unlike Butler, Connolly's work, although wide-ranging in scope, continually returns to the traditional problems of democratic politics. In this chapter I will consider Butler's insights regarding the decentered subject in light of Connolly's specific attempts to show the applicability of such subjectivity to concrete political concerns. My focus will be directed on the interrelated spheres of ethics and democracy. Following Connolly I will suggest that approaching the subject from a perspective that refuses to assume a centeredness or essence allows for rethinking ethics and democracy in a way that reinvigorates the meaning of both. To do this I will consider how Connolly's own notion of a decentered subject helps to give substance to Butler's necessary subjectivity. Butler, it seems, is sometimes quite suspicious of the role of particular identity, and this skepticism often results in her stopping short of explaining how the theory of subjectivity and critical agency she endorses relates to the ways that we see ourselves as bearers of particular identities. Connolly, in contrast, starts explicitly from the level of these particular identities and how we use them to generate the organizing political principles from which we get our sense of place in the world. This grounding in the explicitly political terrain of identity makes it possible to move to more concrete considerations of how human beings express their varying senses of identity when interacting with other. Where Butler, at best, only alludes to how a new sense of democracy could be engendered by such an approach to subjectivity, Connolly uses this grounding in particular identity to

invoke a democratic ethos that provides for a critical rethinking of intersubjective relations.

### **Identity, Difference, and Subjectivity**

Connolly's attempt to engage both the question of ethics and the possibility of democracy is particularly interesting in light of what has already been mentioned in the discussion of Judith Butler. Like Butler, the starting point for Connolly's rethinking of subjectivity comes from his critique of those theories that insist on some essential grounding on which subjectivity can be founded. Connolly calls such an approach "ontotheological," implying that the foundations that these theories rest on owe more to faith than to any demonstrable certainty about the "ultimate answer to the question of being" (1991, 71).<sup>4</sup> Taking as his interlocutors a range of political thinkers ranging from Hobbes and Rousseau to Taylor and Walzer, Connolly exposes what he sees as some exclusionary dangers present when strict foundations are evoked as the source of legitimate political authority. Connolly also relies heavily on a Nietzschean skepticism regarding the certainty that is achievable in political or social theory. Lodging his most pointed criticism against theories that seek to describe once and for all the make-up of the liberal individual, Connolly suggests that philosophy, so far, has fallen quite short of proving beyond the shadow of a doubt that human beings fit naturally into "the shape assumed by the modern normal individual." Attempts to do so, he argues, become increasingly problematic and exclusionary. In light of the pressures to conform to this or that model of individualism, pressures that come from both state bureaucracies and general social expectations, this notion of a normal individual cannot be "forged and maintained each generation without imposing cruelty upon those who adjust to its dictates as well as those who are unable or unwilling . . . to do so" (80).

The affinities between Connolly and Butler become obvious at this point. Both share a commitment to the post-Nietzschean tradition in political and social discourse. Likewise, they both insist that a theory of decentered subjectivity that comes out of this

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<sup>4</sup> For a detailed analysis of this "ontotheological" tradition in political thought see Connolly's *Political Theory and Modernity* (1993).

tradition has concrete and affirmative implications for politics and political action. However, unlike Butler, who comes up short on the political implications of her thinking, Connolly's notion of the subject is at its core a political being. Both Connolly's critique and subsequent analysis of intersubjective relationships remain firmly at the level of particular identity and the concrete implications that this identity has regarding politics. Butler's importance, I argued previously, comes from the fact that she insists on the subject as an existential necessity. She also insists that this subject is one capable of critical action. Subjectivity gives the human being a sense of its place in the world, and this desire for place determines one's social existence, if not existence per se. The insight here is the recognition of how human beings become complicit in those social terms that are not of their own making, and they do this even at the expense of giving up possible modes of social existence that they potentially have more control over. The recognition provided by such terms of existence is of ultimate importance here, and the insistent desire for these terms of recognition results in the foreclosure of other possibilities.

In contrast, Connolly's focus is on the political implications of particular identities. In his view identity is as essential as Butler's desire to desire the terms of one's recognition as a subject. In fact, for Butler it could be argued that subjectivity is indeed necessary; however, this necessity takes on a somewhat negative connotation that looks more like a necessary evil. In Butler's view, subjectivity itself is rather flexible. As explained in the previous chapter, Butler's focus is directed at those spaces between subject-producing discourse and the eventual subjectivity produced by such discourse. It is within these spaces that she sees the potential for subverting discourse and redirecting power; therefore, Butler positions her critical subjectivity as capable of taking advantage of the "fluidity of identities that suggests an openness to resignification and recontextualization" (Butler 1990, 338). With this in mind, one can imagine why Butler is skeptical of any attempt to embrace a particular identity or subject position. Such an embrace would come at the foreclosure of other possibilities of being, and ultimately, such foreclosures for Butler are practices that would bring an end to the subversive possibility of resignification. Therefore, for Butler, embracing any particular identity is analogous to the adopting one ontological category of existence at the expense of another and thereby engendering exclusion.

If pushed, I would imagine that Butler would be much more sympathetic to the importance of particular identity than might be implied. However, Butler's resistance to adopting any position that could be construed as foundational makes such speculation problematic. With William Connolly this is not the case because he provides a much more affirmative orientation toward our particular identities. Here it is not only the general necessity of subjectivity that is important but also the much more affirmative recognition that it is "surely undesirable to be human without some sort of implication in a particular identity" (9). Not only is it necessary to be something, but something in particular--in fact, *somebody* in particular. In Butler's world, there is this vague notion of subjective spirits capable of action; in Connolly's there are people with concrete identities that bring order to their worlds and organize the way that they act in these worlds. The same identities, however, also come into conflict. That's where politics comes in.

For Connolly, there is more to the story than the necessity of identity. There is also the necessity of difference. Identity from his perspective is dependent on difference to exist. In fact, "the definition of difference is a requirement built into the logic of identity" (9). This formulation of identity/difference is very much indebted to Nietzsche. A concrete identity only becomes concrete through a process of self-definition. This is done by a constitutive contrast to what the self is not, what it is different from. Categories of difference are then rendered dubious in an attempt to shore up the certainty of identity. To use the example of sexuality, for instance, the category of the homosexual is set up as a deviant and abject category of sexuality. Heterosexuality is the normal sexual identity. To reinforce the normalness, and furthermore to produce the naturalness of this identity, multiple categories of abject identities are engendered. The homosexual is the most notable; however, a variety of categories also fall into those of perverse and unrealizable sexual identities.

This discussion reveals the danger present in this relationship of identity to difference. To exist, an identity needs difference. This difference provides the contrast through which an identity can define itself. However, this definition is also one that assumes some sort of exclusion because the identity that recognizes itself in contrast to such a difference often "converts this difference into otherness in order to secure its own

self-certainty” (64). Regarding the above example, the categories of perverse sexuality are not just abject and abnormal, they are sicknesses that have to be cured or quarantined. Those who suffer from such afflictions have to be removed from society. The initial reaction to AIDS as a “gay disease” is a perfect example. In this case, what for was some a terminal illness was, for others, the natural result of unnatural actions. For those who insist that heterosexuality is the only legitimate form of sexuality, the fact that AIDS, at one time, was thought to only affect the gay male community provided final proof (empirical, divine, moral, etc.) of the biological deviance of homosexuality. Leaving aside commentary on the vicious nature of such opinions, it is clear that these opinions provide an important reassurance that the normative idea of natural heterosexuality must be based on some truth.

### **Political Liberalism and Difference**

Of course, some might argue that political liberalism offers a perspective that is already able to steer clear of charges of essentialism and to accommodate difference. To some extent this is true; however, in their attempt to avoid endorsing one sort of subjectivity over another, political liberals have often ignored the complex relationship between identity and difference and have de-politicized the processes by which the two come to constitute one another. In doing so, I would argue, it also makes it possible for more essentialist forms of liberalism to creep back into the equation and does, in fact, allow for the endorsement of some forms of the good life over others.

A political liberal's argument against being cast as a form of essentialism would go something like this: Political liberalism is opposed the traditional liberal conception, following Locke and to a lesser extent Mill, that there is some essential notion of the personhood that we can ultimately fall back on in establishing true notions of justice and freedom (Larmore 51). Political liberals find such an argument unacceptable and insist on making an important distinction between a theory of individualism that attempts to establish the rational, autonomous individual as some truer form of being, and a theory that establishes the neutral space for reasonable conversation about what constitutes the good. Neutrality of the state is essential to this latter notion because it allows for fair arbitration. The neutral liberal state, according to this strain of liberalism, provides the

demarcating line between the conception of the private, in which differing conceptions of the good life are allowed to flourish, and the public where differing conceptions of the good are held in check by the state's purported neutrality.

The neutrality of the state, then, for political liberals is the reasonable public "response" to the differing conceptions of the good that are privately held. The state itself endorses no such conception of what is good and true, and it "should not seek to promote any particular conception of the good life because of its presumed *intrinsic* superiority" (43). The state will remain neutral on this matter and allow private institutions, e.g., the market, the church, etc., the freedom to endorse whatever conception of the good life that they see fit. The state's job in all of this, it seems, is to provide the neutral space in which conflicts over differing claims about the good life can be resolved. Ultimately, this view comes down to the providing a "neutral ground" on which a conversation about these differing conceptions of the good life can take place. This ground, according to political liberals, is one on which it is possible for the participants to abstract from their own beliefs about what is good and just, and rationally converse with each other to achieve the goal of resolving their differences or, if such a resolution is not possible, "bypassing" the differences altogether (53).

Of course, the political liberal recognizes that absolute neutrality may be a practical impossibility given the complexity of the modern state and contemporary society. States ultimately have to make decisions, and neutrality is essential in assuring that these decisions are fair; however, some decisions of the state are made more easily than others, and, at some point, the state may find its decisions more attuned to some conceptions of the good life than to others. As Charles Larmore points out, there may have to be "tradeoffs" between neutrality and the governing principles of a state and such tradeoffs may necessitate that neutrality be "made more restrictive" (68). In cases of decisions that infringe on state neutrality, Larmore provides some important criteria for determining exactly when this infringement may be allowed. The best-case scenario would be that those notions of the good life adopted into state policy would be those that constitute the "least central" beliefs to that particular conception of the good life. Presumably, this means that those conceptions of the good adopted into state policy are those that are least relevant to the particular conception of the good from which they are

drawn. When this is not possible, however, Larmore does accept the fact that it might be necessary to adopt those conceptions of the good life that "the least number of people do not hold" presumably in an attempt to avert as much injury as possible resulting from such an adoption on the part of the state.

To the extent that political liberalism is attempting to imagine a political order where state neutrality allows for differing conceptions of the good life to flourish, it should be lauded. State neutrality is, indeed, desirable when it comes to negotiating the complex web of identity and difference that constitutes a contemporary pluralist society such as the US. However, political liberalism also makes some dangerous oversights regarding the complexity of this very negotiation of identity and difference. As Connolly points out, "liberal strategies against fundamentalism too often track too closely to the fundamentalist formula they condemn" for them to be entirely neutral (Connolly 1995, 129). It sometimes seems like the notion of state neutrality itself is established as a fundamentally sound position not in need of its own problematization. This suggests that as much as the neutrality of the state provides for a flourishing of different perspectives it also "misrecognizes the partisanship on which it rests" regarding its own constitution as the realization of certain perspectives of the good life. What the political liberals fail to consider here is that the very conception of the neutral state itself is bound up with certain presumptions about what is just or good. When it comes to providing the neutral ground on which its own conception can be challenged, political liberals, as Connolly puts it, ask their interlocutors to "leave their bags of faith at the door" while those who endorse the liberal conception of the good life "are allowed to bring several suitcases with them" (1995, 124). The antagonism that the religious right feels as a result of secular state policies provides a useful example. From the perspective of political liberalism, the religious organizations in question are allowed their conception of the good life; however, they must not be reflected in state policy. For the religious right, however, this does not reflect state neutrality. In this case the state's neutrality is called into question because it is imposing its own conception of the good life on another. In this case the neutral ground of negotiation is not available. The neutral state that was purported to provide such neutral ground is now one of those who, in the liberal formulation, is asked to abstract itself from its own conception of the good. Unfortunately, this is impossible

because the neutrality that provides for such an abstraction is the very thing that is in question. Furthermore, simply bypassing the problem does not solve anything; the religious right is still having its conception of the good life threatened by the liberal state.

As this discussion reveals, there is a sort of essentialism at work in this strain of liberalism that political liberals themselves seem to be unaware of. Admittedly, this is not a strong case of insistence on one form of being over another; however, it does seem to be the case that the requirements of political liberalism, one's ability to abstract from his or her identity, is easier for those endorsing some conceptions of the good than for others. Therefore, it could be suggested that political liberalism, although recognizing the flaws of its more essentialist ancestors, does still allow some forms of being primacy over others and to the extent this is reflected in public policy, identities that are easily commensurable with the liberal way of life are institutionally normalized while other conceptions of the good life are marginalized.

The insistence on distinctly public and private spheres makes the political liberal conception of neutrality even more problematic. Even if the state could be neutral, there is no such demand made on other significant societal institutions. And the firm distinction between public and private does not adequately explore the ways in which the two inform each other. Again Connolly provides an example of how this becomes problematic as "the apolitics of liberal individuality is too easily squeezed to death" by the proliferation of private institutions of normalization acting freely under this or that conception of the good life (1991, 85). In a contemporary society, he suggests, a host of institutions work together to normalize individuals. The demands of succeeding in a free market, holding a steady job, negotiating complex bureaucracies, gaining social acceptance, etc. all provide the means to normalize certain conceptions of the liberal individual over others. The process through which such normalization is accomplished is not politicized in the liberal model since that outcome is largely the result of private life. Furthermore, the extents to which these "apolitical" features of the normal individual inform state policy are never considered.

At the risk of belaboring the example, I will again turn to gay and lesbian identities to reveal the limitation of political liberalism when it comes to negotiating difference. The demand for marriage rights seems exemplary. In this case, the liberal

state, if it were indeed neutral would have no interest allowing the right of marriage to some and denying it to others. Marriage itself would be a neutral matter; however, this is not the case. The concept of marriage itself is bound up with a host of already existing presumptions about religion, morality, sexuality, and the way that the laws of the liberal state should reflect these aspects of culture. There might have been a time when the legal right to marriage was unproblematic because all of those who were allowed such a right shared the same cultural beliefs, i.e., some Christian notion of morality. However, in the contemporary state this is no longer the case and the state is constantly asked to make decisions on whether or not the rights already granted to one constituency should also be granted to another. Rights such as that of marriage are not neutrally applicable; therefore, solving the problem by simply expanding those constituencies that have a claim to such rights is problematic at best. In the case of gays and lesbians denial of the right to marry is grounded explicitly in the state's endorsement of one conception of the good over another. In this case, it is not the neutrality of the state that is adverse to some conception of the good, but a conception of the good, i.e., some brand of Christian morality that has infused state policy. This has resulted in the denial of rights to one constituency while reinforcing the primacy of another. Even where the liberal neutrality has attempted to negotiate the question of gay marriages the non-neutral concept of marriage itself has proven problematic. In Vermont, for instance, gays and lesbians have been granted civil unions, which give them the same rights as married couples, but their ability to actually marry is still denied. As the argument goes, there is a certain sanctity to marriage that is not reflected in the union of a homosexual couple. Although legally, a compromise has been reached, such a compromise allows the state to imply the recognition of some conception of religious sanctity in the case of heterosexuals that it does not allow to be implied in the civil union of a homosexual couple.

Connolly recognizes this inherent tension in the neutral state when he talks about secularism and the idea of the nation. Nations, he believes, are held together by three interrelated elements: unity, identification, and communication. What interconnects these elements is some notion of a cohesive cultural center which can serve as an organizational core of the state(1999, 90-1). For the liberal state, the idea of nationhood would assume some cultural core around which a multitude of minority conception of the

good would be tolerated as long as they did not disrupt the center, i.e., the cultural core of the neutral state. However, the notion of a cultural core is a threat to neutrality; to solve such a contradiction the political liberal would endorse "*pulling more and more elements out of the center*" as a way of getting more neutrality. In Connolly's reading, nationalism and the secularism that informs this notion of neutrality seem to come into conflict here. As the state embodies fewer and fewer aspect of the majority's interpretation of the good, the neutral state itself looks more and more as an opposing force to its citizens ability to realize their particular notion of what the good life is. As the above example shows, there are points when representatives of the liberal state recognize this and place limitations on what they are willing to pull out of the center. In this case, some Christian notion of sexual morality seems to be one of the things that remain.

Political liberalism offers an approach to negotiating identity and difference that attempts to overcome the need for a notion of essential subjectivity by insisting on the neutrality of the state regarding interpretations of the good life. To the extent that this allows for differing conceptions of identity to flourish, some strain of this thinking may, in fact, be desirable. However there are also strict limitations on how accommodating such a liberalism can be and in what follows I will attempt to push past these limitations. As I have suggested, the liberal state's ability to be neutral is problematic because liberalism itself may be conceived of as an interpretation of the good, thereby becoming unresponsive to critics of liberalism itself. Likewise the insistence on an apolitical private sphere does little to problematize how these conceptions of the good life come into being in the first place, and it also fails to recognize how such private conceptions of the good may influence the public sphere and skew the supposed neutrality of the state. It also seems that this way of thinking is much more useful for negotiating between already existing identities and conceptions of the good than it is at allowing new identities and interpretations of the good to come into being. Relegating such concerns to the private sphere leave emerging identities at the mercy of already existing ones, and allow them to be cast as otherness in attempts to exclude them.

To overcome such problems, I believe, what is needed is a repoliticization of the processes through which claims to the good life are brought into being and the exclusion that each interpretation, potentially, engenders. This implies not only state neutrality,

although this too may be desirable, but an overarching democratic ethos that respects the differences that constitute identity and allows the space in which new identities and differences may emerge. William Connolly provides such an approach by insisting on an ethos of critical responsiveness that opens these spaces.

### **From Agonism to Ethics**

From Connolly's perspective, the negotiation of identity and difference has become especially dangerous in the contemporary period that he calls late modernity. Using the liberal-individual as his example of the normal identity, he argues that the pressures of contemporary life make it increasingly hard to live up to the expectations of normality. Outlining what he calls a "normalizing society," Connolly explains that these societies not only set institutional norms that privilege one identity over another:

It is also to say that those who endorse these norms tout them as natural or intrinsically true standards. They claim that the self, the group, the nation, and/or the world would endorse these standards once they acquired the experience of their intrinsic truth.

. . . A normalizing society treats the small set of identities it endorses as if they were intrinsically true; this puts it under tremendous pressure to treat everything that differs from those intrinsic truths to be fundamental threats, deviations, or failures in need of correction, reform, punishment, silencing, or liquidation (1995, 88-9).

This results in a resilient and omnipresent process of self-discipline. To be outside the ranks of normalcy is to be left out. Even in the simplest cases, we are required to live up to expectations. Financial insecurity, for instance, coupled with the pressures of consumerism results in bad credit. Bad credit then results in the inability to engage in a multitude of tasks as more and more goods and services are provided over the Internet where a credit card is essential. Renting a car or booking a hotel becomes impossible. This is not to mention the host of problems engendered by a criminal record, a psychiatric history, etc. To avoid such problems we must, as Connolly points

out, rely on a strict inner discipline to “program one’s life meticulously” (1991,21). Although ostensibly harmless enough, the result of such a programming is a deletion of abnormality within one’s self and, more perniciously, an attempt to delete such abnormalities from society.

The normalizing society raises the stakes of identity and makes being outside of the linguistic terms available for social recognition a precarious place to be. To loosen this insistence on normality, Connolly again turns to a notion of decentered subjectivity to help him develop a renewed sense of ethicality. This new sense of ethics is different from previous understandings. Traditionally, acting in an ethical manner has often meant acting in accordance with some standards or dictates that could be normalizing and exclusionary in their own right. Christianity as an ethical code, for instance, sets up standards of morality that not all can or wish to live up to. Under this code it is ethical and just to punish such individuals through the ultimate exclusion, the denial of heaven. Although appropriate when relating to communities or collectivities that already share the same values and ethical sensibility, this sense of ethics becomes increasingly problematic in intersubjective relationships where opposing values come into conflict. Connolly does not necessarily suggest doing away with more traditional notions of ethics, but he argues that the recognition of the role of difference in constituting subjectivity demands a different approach to ethical sensibility, one that recognizes the contestability of the identities that establish these codes based on their own understandings of themselves and their place in the world.

Butler's understanding of the misfiring of interpellating power is important to seeing how such a renewed sense of ethicality may come into being. As she showed with the word queer, categories of exclusion can sometimes have their meanings twisted in ways that evoke a sense of community. This potential misfiring of power reveals the understanding that we are never quite the subjects that we are claimed to be; there is always a certain possibility in our subjectivity that resists foreclosure. This recognition, coupled with Connolly's formulation of identity/difference, shows the need for an ethical sensibility that considers the role of such contingency in the construction of identity. For Connolly, this very notion of "contingency of identity" can be used to "invoke an agonistic respect for difference" (166). What he means here is quite simple. Human

beings are, among other things, finite, fallible, and our lives are precarious at best. Even if there were such a thing as a true identity, there would always be the question of whether or not we could ever fully experience it. Furthermore, given our imperfect make-up, we could never be certain of whether or not we were right in determining the true from the constructed in the first place. With this recognition, it becomes increasingly difficult to demand that difference be condemned as an abject otherness to be normalized, cured, or excluded. Those who are different from us have as powerful a claim to the truth of their identity as we do to ours. As Connolly's use of the term agonism implies, there is an inherent tension that exists between differing identities. Identities built on difference are bound to clash, but they would do so in a way that is not intent on legitimating some identities only through the exclusion of others. Instead a respectful distance is created between opposing identities. This distance also has to be present in the relationship that each identity has to itself. Here not only would such a distance result in recognizing the contingency of the other's identity but also in the recognition of the contingency in one's own. This "pathos of distance," as Connolly calls it, allows for the circumstances to "unfold whereby each maintains a certain respect for the adversary, partly because the relationship [of one's identity to the other's difference] exposed contingency in the being of both" (179). The fact that one is always implicated in otherness seems to demand an attempt to engage otherness rather than exclude it. Ultimately, then, "the one who construes her identity to be laced with contingency . . . is in a better position to question and resist the drive to convert difference into otherness to be defeated, converted, or marginalized" (181).

In Connolly's perspective, as in mine, the tradition beginning with Nietzsche and running through Foucault is essential for grounding such an ethical sensibility. "Genealogy" for instance, "is indispensable" if such an ethics is to flourish because "it calls theories of intrinsic identity into question" (181). This approach provides a different understanding of what we can know about our world and ourselves. Instead of continuing the search for certainty about self and world, genealogy, according to Foucault, "opposes itself to the search for 'origins'" (Foucault 1984, 77). In the case of identity, this approach would demand a sort of reflection that would reveal "the accidents, the minute deviations—or conversely, the complete reversals—the errors, the

false appraisals, and the faulty calculations that,” paraphrasing Foucault, gave birth to our subjectivity and the value that it continues to have for us (81). The tradition that accepts as its only assumption the decentered character of subjectivity, I believe, is a crucial first step in making such self-questioning possible. Recognition that one's own subjectivity has this constructedness about it leads to one construing its place in the world and its relationship to others quite differently. No longer is difference something that demands exclusion, instead it is something that deserves consideration as a legitimate form of being.

To make this point more clearly, I will again bring in Butler's subversion of discourse as a way to engender political action. In her case, homosexuality was constituted as an outside of discourse, an unintelligible mode of being. However, as the previous discussion of Butler's subversive sense of agency shows, a sense of political community can potentially be evoked through being positioned on the discursive outside. The language that once served to reinforce exclusion can be itself subverted as a point of resistance and bring about a means of recognition. This, of course, is only a beginning. Evoking some sort of discursive community is a far cry from overthrowing the dominant discourse. This is where Connolly comes in. Using the notion of a decentered subject in the way that he does, i.e., insisting on its politicization on the level of identity, would require the discursive inside to recognize the contingent aspects of its own subject position. From Connolly's perspective, the drive to naturalize heterosexuality as the only legitimate form of sexuality must be decentered through genealogy. This sort of reflection would engender the sort of loosening that Connolly sees as necessary. The recognition of the contingency of heterosexuality allows those in the opposite position to make their claim for legitimacy. Although there is no requirement to agree with each and every claim for identity, at the very least, one should agree to make the space available for a variety of possible identities to make such a claim.

Of course, this sense of agonistic respect also has to work in reverse. So far I have privileged the perspective of the previously excluded over those doing the exclusion. Although this approach is somewhat justifiable, the drive to exclusion does not pertain merely to some identities. Often it is the case that those formerly excluded or marginalized, when placed in the position of authority, respond in kind by marginalizing

other identities, especially those who previously held the upper hand. Nietzsche had some sense of this problem when he talked about the development of slave morality where the formerly subjugated peoples sought vengeance by endorsing a form of morality based on their own position as subjects. Here the victors, by establishing the constitutive definitions of good and evil, project their own subject positions as the only morally justifiable position that one can occupy. The politics of *ressentiment*, as Nietzsche called it resulted in "the slave revolt in morality," where difference is castigated and subsequently excluded as a possibility of moral existence. In order to establish one's own position as legitimate, difference is turned into otherness and morality is set up over and above such difference that represents the existence and threat of a "hostile external world" (Nietzsche 1992, 473).

In the example above this might look something like the demand for recognition as a legitimate sexuality being carried to the point where heterosexual identities then become excluded or marginalized. More realistically, the privileged and subversive gay identities exist in exclusive enclaves where heterosexuality is shunned. Although this could be considered more positive than a condition of outright exclusion, the problem of intersubjective relations still exists and difference is still converted into otherness. Avoiding this requires that both sides of the relationship recognize contingency of identity and both may have to make some sacrifices on the level of what identity is allowed to be. Identity can serve both as a means of preserving a hegemony as well as a means of resisting one; however, both sides of such an equation must be willing to politicize their own identity and "see them as entrenchments installed in the self and its world rather than depths that mirror the deepest truths about world and self" (Connolly 1991, 118).

### **Democracy and Decentered Subjectivity**

As Connolly's notion of agonistic respect shows, decentering the political subject may indeed open up the terrain of intersubjective relations to a new ethical sensibility. However, I would argue that there also have to be limits to just how open such a terrain can become. Anticipating one of the possible critiques of such an argument I would ask

if by opening up the possibility of taking up previously disallowed subject positions, don't we make it possible for some rather pernicious identities to reveal themselves? Following this, what is to keep these more fundamentalist identities from realizing their drives toward exclusion and marginalization? Fortunately, Connolly begins to answer these concerns and insists on the possibility of an approach to politics that allows a sense of democracy to be developed out of such an ethics.

Using the recognition of the ethos of agonistic respect, the way one envisions the world is also contestable when it comes into contact with those perspectives that see the world differently. In Connolly's view such a democracy must move away from the traditional mode of tolerance for difference, "where one perspective exercising hegemony . . . allows others to exist." Instead, what he sees is a sense of democracy where "agonistic respect" for difference is essential to establishing a political relationship between political constituencies (1995, 92). The result is a renewed politicization of identity that allows multiple identities to stake a claim for legitimacy. Furthermore, a new sense of political community can be engendered that "changes the tone of contention and collaboration between constituencies" (98).

Of course, calling for the politicization of identity only does some of the work required to open up the space available for a new sense of democracy to develop. To negotiate between these coexisting identities in a way that does not allow one to dominate the others, Connolly introduces the concept of "critical responsiveness" that is distinct from the liberal notion of tolerance that:

is typically aimed at minorities whose identity is already stabilized, and it typically flows from those at the cultural center to those on the margins. . . . Critical responsiveness is aimed at constituencies in the process of renegotiating the identities through which they have been culturally recognized and institutionally regulated. Critical responsiveness is bestowed as a new identity is forming through the politics of becoming. Most important, critical responsiveness often involves comparative shifts in the self-identification of the constituencies who offer it. Thus where tolerance implies benevolence toward others amidst stability of ourselves, critical responsiveness involves active work on our current identities in order to modify the terms of relation between us and them (1999, 62).

This idea, which he sees as essential to a sense of democracy built on multiple identities, is the regulative ethos that allows for the opening of the “cultural space through which new possibilities might be enacted “(1995,180). This enactment or, as Connolly refers to it, "the politics of becoming," is the process through which new identities stake their claim for recognition and, ultimately, see such a claim become reality. The movement that brought an end to institutional racial discrimination can provide an example. Here an identity that was previously excluded was able to evoke a collective call for these institutional barriers to be removed. Through political action and civil disobedience, this movement demanded recognition on the same terms as white Americans and much of its success was due to such action. However, some of the success has to be attributed to the fact that many whites were quite ready and willing to recognize and change those institutional standards that privileged whiteness over blackness. In many cases this meant a change in how whites came to see themselves and their identity. The result of this was the willingness to call the naturalness of white privilege into question.

This example also shows why the cultivation of such an ethos is crucial for pluralist democratic politics. In the case of the civil rights movement, indeed, institutional barriers based on race were removed; however, racism wasn't. There are still a large number of white Americans who are unwilling to recognize the legitimacy of competing identities. And it is unclear that further legislation, affirmative action, or any other anti-discrimination policies can do anything to change this. To overcome this problem an ethos of critical responsiveness has to be cultivated at a much broader level in an attempt to reinvigorate what we mean by democracy. When democracy is re-imagined “not only as a particular organization of governance, but also as a distinctive culture in which constituencies have a significant hand in modeling and moving the identities that constitute them” then such an ethos is allowed to envelope a multitude of political arenas (154).

Of course, evoking such an ethos is no simple matter. To do so Connolly draws inspiration from Foucault's later work in which he develops the importance of micro-practices and micro-politics oriented toward and initiated by the self. Connolly's critical responsiveness, then, is the product of an arduous process of self-artistry where one

continually works on the self through recognition and subsequent engagement of one's own identity and its place in its particular cultural world. Through a recognition of one's own complicity in the terms that define it, and the role of difference in constituting those terms, it is possible to work on one's self through a negotiation of how those differing ways of being play essential roles in one's own constitution. In doing so, Connolly argues, it is possible to "render yourself more open to responsive engagement with alternative faiths, sensualities, gender practices, ethnicities, and so on" (146). Such a rendering also allows for such an engagement with difference to take place without immediate recourse to the naturalness of one's own identity in a way that demands that the other conform or be excluded.

Connolly uses the human relation to finitude as an example of how these micro-political practices of the self might work. Those who view death as an act of god or nature may be horrified at the suggestion of doctor-assisted suicide. It may be a violation of faith or just a psychological instinct that convinces you that such practices are wrong. Eventually, however, you may reconsider such a perspective. You may be faced with suffering in your own family or in the family of a friend. This results in your questioning of previous commitments. Other experiences with suffering may follow that engender further consideration. You may imagine yourself as the one to suffers, tied to machines to keep you alive. During this you may go back and forth from question to answer:

Some elements in your experience of nature and morality may now clash more actively with others. Or perhaps you still find your previous conception of nature to be persuasive. But uncertainties and paradoxes attached to it combine with a more intensive appreciation of contemporary medical care to encourage you to try to desanctify that interpretation to a greater degree. You continue to affirm, say, a teleological perspective of nature in which the meaning of death is set, but now you acknowledge how this judgment may be more contestable than you had previously appreciated. And you begin to feel this uncertainty more intensely as a conflict within yourself. You even begin to wonder whether your previous refusal to allow others to die as they determine . . . might have contained a desire to preserve a reassuring interpretation of nature even more than a concern for the ir dignity or well-being. What was heretofore nonnegotiable now gradually become

rethinkable. You know register more actively the importance of giving presumptive respect to the judgment of the sufferer in this domain, even when the cultivation of critical responsiveness to them disturbs your own conception of nature, death, or divinity (147).

Such sets of practices on one register then start to influence similar practices on others. Reconsidering the plight of those suffering from a terminal illness may lead to similar rethinking when unwanted pregnancy is at issue. Likewise, different sexual orientations may be engaged with more openness and generosity. Such movements to affirm identity, it seems, rest on a precarious moment where such an identity could either be recognized or excluded. Participation in the self-practices that cultivate an ethos of critical responsiveness would likely lead one to endorse the former over the latter at this crucial juncture.

In a sense, what Connolly is doing here is giving us an ideal world where if only we would embrace such an ethos, then difference would be allowed to stake its claim for legitimacy without opposing forces trying to hold it back. This ideal assumes some sort of reciprocity of critical responsiveness that would govern intersubjective relationships. To the extent that such reciprocity of critical responsiveness is assumed, one may wonder just where such an ethos would come from. After all, there are a lot of politically desirable ideal worlds out there if only we knew how to snatch them out of the ether. However, the notion of critical responsiveness, as Connolly sees it, is not so much an abstract ideal political world as it is an ideal relationship that one has to have to oneself, and this relationship is not one with which we are unfamiliar. As Connolly points out, many of the identities that we now embrace as legitimate forms of being themselves once stood on the precarious threshold referred to above. The civil rights movement again serves as an example. In this case, white identity was susceptible to change and the space was made available in which these identities were allowed to exist. Of course, here the space had to be opened rather forcibly through political struggle; nonetheless, eventually this space did become available. Critical responsiveness, then, can be brought about by the recognition of the contingent nature of self as it relates to already existing identities of difference. In fact, critical responsiveness, for Connolly, is as much a relation to one's

own identity as it is a relation to difference in another identity. In this sense, the appeal to critical responsiveness is recognition in the self of one's "ambiguous implication in many of the differences" that this self engages (1999, 155). In other words, in difference it is possible to recognize the contingency of one's own identity in such a way that the drive to shore up such contingency is loosened. The recognition of the contestable nature of identity coupled with an ethos of critical responsiveness "presses hegemonic identities, which are always dependent on the very differences they define, to translate this experience of disturbance into a will to modify themselves . . . so that they change enough to open up new possibilities of negotiation and coexistence with new claims to identity" (1995, 181).

Of course, claiming that identities should be a bit more malleable in their relationship to others is not the same as saying that anyone can be anything anytime. Identity is essential in our understanding of the world around us. The suggestion that this identity could be easily disposed of would assume that we could easily change the terms with which we organize our existence.<sup>5</sup> From this perspective, attempts at radically changing what we are would come as more of an outright threat to the psyche than a form of liberation. The only point here is that offering up your identity for political contestation leads to recognizing its contingency and, therefore, the claims others might have for legitimacy. In the case of gay movements, this recognition on the part of heterosexuals, although by no means loosening their desire to be heterosexual, serves to alleviate the desire to insist on the naturalness of their sexuality. This recognition, in my view, makes it less likely that one whose identity is invested in heterosexuality would discriminate, institutionally or violently, against those who see themselves differently. The sense of democracy that Connolly is envisioning here is quite distinct from the strictly institutional form that usually comes to mind. In this sense, I think, what becomes important is not so much rights or suffrage--although these would both be essential regardless of the overarching ethos at work--but democracy in the form of

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<sup>5</sup> Charles Taylor (1994) provides a good example of the difficulty that one finds in attempting to do away with a previous identity. In his view, identities, even to the point that they are contingent are not the sort of things that the bearer has complete control over. Identities are always dependent on interactions with a number of other identities as well as social institutions that help construct what an identity will look like. Parents, friends, community, etc., all contribute to how we interpret our own identities. Even to the point

opening previously closed options and contesting already established ones. In Connolly's words, "politics now becomes a medium for the enunciation of suppressed alternatives and the contestation of entrenched commonalities" (1991,121). On the level of institutionalized political activity, it seems there would be much more at stake if the organizing principles by which we live become fodder for political contestation. As it stands now, there is little to win or lose by participating in political life. However, when one's existence becomes politically important one may become more likely to participate because those aspects of life that are considered political have been expanded.

Furthermore, the contestability of identity seems to do as much to evoke new senses of commonality as it does to challenge the old. Where political energy is presently directed toward the goals of restricting qualifications for marriage, rights to citizenship, and a host of other issues that take on relevance at the level of identity, debates could instead rage on the role of the state in providing for a level of social welfare and the protection of human and individual rights. Where once such battles were doomed to failure because competing constituencies focused on blaming each other, it may be possible that a multitude of constituencies, who do not share the same sense of identity, could redirect their collective energies toward the achievement of common political goals.

Of course, there is no guarantee that this sense of agonistic democracy would work smoothly. Some would offer criticisms claiming that fragmentation and relativism inevitably lead to dysfunction or anarchy. Here, Connolly's notion of a democratic ethos could be used as a means of providing normative considerations amidst this world of relativistic uncertainty. Indeed, one of the charges most leveled against any sort of problematizing of the idea of universal subjectivity is the charge that it precludes any sort of criteria for establishing legitimate vs. illegitimate modes of being. If we get rid of the subject (which I have already suggested is not the aim here) how are we to judge politically affirmative identities from politically dangerous ones? I would suggest that the sense of democracy outlined above might be of some normative help here. If democracy in this sense is embraced at the level of an ethos, then identities that affirm

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that we can change who we are, we do so with the recognition of our implication in individual as well as collective histories. These histories, and the sense of identity that they provide are not easily discarded.

such an ethos are politically acceptable and should be embraced. On the other hand, more fundamentalist identities may be intent on expressing their own sense of self only at the expense of others. This sense of identity obviously does not accord with a democratic ethos grounded in the contestability of identity and the recognition of difference as legitimate contestation; therefore, it must be resisted politically.

In some ways, the proliferation of possible identities seems to do more to assuage the possibility of one identity existing at the expense and eradication of others than does the drive for solidified identity. Presently, if enough people recognize themselves as participating in some common identity (e.g., normative heterosexuality) it becomes increasingly possible to violently exclude those other identities that do not live up. The treatment of gays in contemporary US society seems to bear this out. As recent cases point out, outright violence against gays has increased in recent years (*Washington Post*, 18 Oct 1998 A1), homophobia seems to be on the rise, and state after state has voted to assure that under no circumstances will gay marriages be validated in their sovereign territory. If Connolly's democratic ethos were invoked, such a hegemonic movement would be much less likely to gain a foothold because the contestability of identity is recognized and the drive to shore up one's identity at another's expense is loosened. Likewise, there is always the chance that any identity could be the next to be excluded, therefore, it seems in the common interest of all to maintain such a decentered and democratic approach to identity and resist any movement toward a hegemonic and authoritarian one. Such an approach would allow movements toward hegemonic identity to be resisted politically without insisting on their outright exclusion. Connolly expresses such an approach to politics when he establishes his own scenario for such a negotiation explaining that the goal should not be to "punish others for a refusal to see identity and responsibility" in the way that is being recommended here. Instead, what is needed is a sense of democracy that allows engagement of such an identity and the means to "strive politically to inhibit them from applying their standards to others as if they correspond to the essence of human being" (Connolly 1991,120).

If subjects are the discursive effects of productive power as Butler and Connolly suggest, there will continue to be, regardless of the decentering of notions of essential subjectivity, a constant production and reproduction of both the inside and outside to any

social discourse. This seems to be the bind that power has us in. What the assumption of a decentered subject implies, however, is that such spaces can be themselves loosened so that identities might more easily transgress such boundaries. The sort of social relations that I am imagining might look something like this: Given this decentering, and the subsequent loosening of the drive to naturalize one's identity, the constant production of boundaries is one fraught with contingency. As gay and lesbian movements demonstrate, at times it is going to be essential that identities use a rather strict definition of what they are as a means of both political and social interaction. However, this rallying of the troops, so to speak, would have to come with the recognition that the borders established by evoking such a community are not fixed and immutable. Even within such communities themselves difference has to be negotiated. Human beings are complicated creatures who identify themselves in a multitude of ways. Although one particular identity may have primacy, we usually see ourselves through a variety of lenses. For instance, one may be, first and foremost, an American; however, that just begins to provide some understanding of their sense of place. In addition, they may be a bisexual, catholic, and a New Jersey native. All of these are important aspects of one's identity, and depending on the context, some of these aspects become more important than others. Furthermore, it will sometimes be the case, that even where the same important sense of identity is shared, some of the other aspects of identity may come into conflict. The category, African-American, for instance, is the source of discord even within the community that identifies itself under this term. For some, the emphasis should be firmly placed on the *African* suggesting some shared pre-slavery heritage. For others, the connection with Africa is more of a background issue and the emphasis is placed on the *American* aspect of their identity. With this understanding, it is necessary that these discursively evoked communities also recognize contingency when it comes to their own membership. Again, drawing from the tradition of Nietzsche and Foucault, the notion of genealogy becomes an important aspect of such democratic ethos. Such identity-oriented communities must, from the outset, be committed to self-criticism in recognizing the contingency of their own subjective identity. Furthermore, such a commitment to self-reflection, when enacted with the spirit of critical responsiveness would allow this ethos to envelop the formal and legal framework of a working democracy. From Connolly's

perspective, institutional frameworks, when infused with such an ethos, could be helpful in the cultivation of a sense of democracy where the institutional barriers and the democratic ethos, although sometimes existing discordantly, also work together to assure that a "productive tension is maintained between governance of a populace through established standards and the periodic interruption" of these standards by "social movements because of the suffering or exclusions that they embody" (1999, 154).

As this discussion reveals, endorsing a perspective of social theory that assumes a decentered subjectivity is much different than arguing that decentered subjectivity is the only approach to social and political analysis. In this regard, what I might suggest is viewing such a perspective as just that, a perspective that allows insight into many of the questions we ask ourselves as social researchers while at the same time recognizing the contingent nature of our answers. Traditional perspectives on ethics and democracy still remain important; however, the perspective that Connolly gives us seems to both question these traditional perspectives and allow their meanings to be open for reconsideration. Instead of viewing ethics as a set of rules or commands, for instance, what this perspective allows us to do is re-evaluate the concept of ethics altogether. What do we mean by such a concept? And given this interrogation, and potential reevaluation, is there something more ethical about loosening the need for such strict demands than insisting on them? I have argued that assuming a decentered subject can provide a more ethical approach because it loosens the exclusionary drives that are often present in more foundational notions of subjectivity.

Traditional approaches to the study of both democratic institutions and democratic theory provide valuable insight into enhancing contemporary approaches to democracy. However, re-evaluating what we mean by democracy from the perspective outlined above may also serve to enhance the democratic ideal in ways that traditional perspectives have not considered. Here democracy becomes as much an ethos as an institutional means of governance. It is not that institutions and governance are not important aspects of such a democratic ethos; however, the result of such approaches to thinking about democracy has, in many ways, led to the institutional aspects gaining primacy over the democratic ideal itself. The approach that I would endorse places a revalued sense of democracy

squarely in the forefront, and allows for further re-evaluation of what we mean by such a concept.

## CONCLUSION

Throughout this thesis I have argued that the decentered subject is an important conceptual tool for rethinking the basic concepts of political and social theory. Using the work of Judith Butler, I have shown how such an approach can problematize notions of an essential subject and, at the same time, insist on some notion of subjectivity that, ultimately, engenders critical agency. In addition, I have used William Connolly's approach to the decentered subject to show how a reinvigorated democratic ethos may be possible. In doing this, I have consciously avoided allowing myself to be dragged down in debates about the merit of a poststructuralist or postmodern perspective. Partly, this was an outright attempt to avoid getting caught up in some polemic that, ultimately, leads nowhere. Mostly, however, I avoided such arguments because I do not feel that recognizing the theoretical usefulness of the decentered subject is dependent on adopting one tradition of social theory over another.

A few examples illustrate this point quite clearly. Nancy Fraser (1990, 1997), for instance, has sought to use the insights of this perspective while remaining committed to a Marxian critical theory. Joan Scott (1988) reads history through the lens of the decentered notion of subjectivity. Alison Brysk (1995) has used these insights in an attempt to overcome rational actor and economic models of collective action. Henry Giroux (1999, and Aronowitz and Giroux 1991) has developed a critical theory of education from this perspective. This list is far from exhaustive; however, it does give a representation of how the decentered subject has become useful for social and political research. Likewise, it provides an example of how differing theoretical traditions can all gain from such a perspective on subjectivity. Those mentioned above all differ on the degree to which they endorse postmodern or poststructuralist perspectives; however, all benefit from the assumption of a decentered subject.

I would also like to make it clear that adopting this perspective of subjectivity does not, ultimately, require us to discard all of our foundational assumptions. Stephen White, for instance, has endorsed a notion of what he call a "weak ontology" that would provide "the framework of meaning for basic existential realities . . ." while at the same time recognizing that such frameworks are "use[d] both to access *and* construct ourselves

in the world” (1997, 507). This recognition, of course, is also recognition of the contestability of such frameworks as well as the contestability of the subjects that take part in constructing. Likewise, Judith Butler herself has backed off from her original position that implied that such foundations or frameworks should be done away with.<sup>6</sup> From her perspective, the goal of theory is not to do away with foundations--this may be impossible. Instead, she claims, “the task is to interrogate what the theoretical move that establishes foundations *authorizes*, and what precisely it excludes or forecloses” (1992, 7). More recently she has even come to recognize the importance of tentative universals. “Universality” she has recently suggested has an important “strategic use” because it allows political actors to “conjure a reality that does not yet exist” (1999, xxii). The perspective I have endorsed, then, does not demand that foundational or universal categories and assumptions are rendered obsolete. Instead, it insists on a willingness to call such assumptions into question and consider what the effect of such categories might be on contrasting categories of difference. In short, this perspective is intent on loosening the drives to convert such assumptions into the only legitimate foundation.

From my perspective, then, political and social theory would benefit immensely from approaching the subject in the way in which I have suggested. However, for some this may not be a convincing argument. After all, it is not easy to give up those assumptions that so much of our lives revolve around. In the end, however, it is not so much a question of giving up, as it is one of getting over. I use “getting over” in the same sense that one would get over a hurdle or a barricade. In this case, the barricade is one that serves to limit our sense of democratic politics. To bring it back to Nietzsche, I would follow Wendy Brown when she invokes the value that Nietzsche sees in forgetting as a way out of our dependence on a fixed notion of identity (1995, 75).<sup>7</sup> Forgetting, according to Nietzsche, gives us “a little quietness” that “makes room for new things” (Nietzsche 1992, 493-4). However, where the forgetfulness that Brown invokes is located through the possibility re-imagining the psychoanalytic moment before the

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<sup>6</sup> For an insightful discussion of how Judith Butler might live up to the criteria of a weak ontology see White’s “As the World Turns: Ontology and Politics in Judith Butler (1999).

<sup>7</sup> Brown’s invocation of Nietzsche here is a bit more complicated than I make it sound. Although inspired by Nietzsche’s notion of forgetfulness as a way out of the politics of *ressentiment*, Brown, ultimately, questions the usefulness of such a simple forgetting for the complexity of contemporary identity. With this

foreclosure of desire that results in the politics of *ressentiment*, I would draw my influence as much from Nietzsche's wit as from his wisdom and suggest that the best way to preclude the drive to self-certainty is to simply get over it.

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in mind, my call to "get over it" is as much indebted to William Connolly's notion of critical responsiveness, as a long process of work on the self, as it is to Nietzsche's forgetting.

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## Education

- 2000 *MA, Political Science, Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University*
- 1997 *BA, Political Science, State University of NY at Oswego*
- 1995 *AA, Liberal Arts, Jefferson Community College*

## Awards, Fellowships

*Summa Cume Laude*  
SUNY Oswego

*Student Government Outstanding Graduating Senior Award*  
Jefferson Community College

## Positions Held

- Aug-Dec 1998 *Teaching Assistant/Instructor, VPI and SU (World Politics and Economy):*  
Administered three recitation/discussion sections of approximately 45 students each. Was responsible for content of sections, method of evaluation, and recording and calculating of student grades.
- Jan-May 1999 *Teaching Assistant/Recitation Instructor, VPI (Comparative Politics):*  
Administered three recitation/discussion sections of 25-35 students each, participated in the design of exams, make-up of evaluation, was responsible for grading of each student.
- May-Aug 1999 *Research Assistant, VPI:*  
Assisted in development and design of an upper division political science courses entitled "Indigenous People and World Politics." Responsibilities included both primary and secondary research of course materials, reviews of relevant literature, follow-up survey research of Native American tribal governments, contacted a number of relevant NGO's for input on course design, and coordinated the participation of a number of guest speakers.
- Aug-Dec 1999 *Teaching Assistant/Recitation Instructor, VPI (World Politics and Economy):*  
Assisted in course and syllabus design Administered three recitation/discussion sections of 25-35 students each, participated in the design of exams, make-up of evaluation, was responsible for grading of each student.

# George V Davis III

## Publications

Book Review: *A Constructed Peace*, Mark Trachtenburg. *History a Review of Books*  
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## References

Stephen Rosow PhD., Professor, SUNY Oswego

Stephen White PhD., Professor, VPI and SU

Douglas Borer PhD., Professor, VPI and SU

## Fields of Interest

Interests include many facets of Political Science including Political Theory, International Relations, International Political Economy, American Government, and Human Rights. Interests also include contemporary continental philosophy, literary and cultural theory.

## Professional Organizations

*American Political Science Association*

*International Studies Association*