

Claudia Leeb

Power and Feminist Agency in Capitalism: Toward a New Theory of the Political Subject
New York: Oxford University Press, 2017 (ISBN 978-0-190-63989-1)

Reviewed by Christopher Chamberlin, 2018

Feminism vanishes without a subject--or put another way, feminism without a subject is neither theoretical nor political. In *Power and Feminist Agency in Capitalism: Toward a New Theory of the Political Subject*, political philosopher and critical theorist Claudia Leeb puts these axioms to the test, and redresses the disappearance of the subject from contemporary feminist inquiry. To propose in its absence a new and rigorous theory of the political subject, as Leeb does, is significant given two historically recent deaths: that of the subject, and of women. Michel Foucault (and his interpreters) composed what is probably the authoritative obituary of the subject by arguing that modern subjection--the webbing of knowledge and power, discourse and being--bars the notion of a self-determined actor. For Foucault, a critical theory of power requires first retiring this concept of the sovereign subject. In the 1990s, Judith Butler spearheaded a scholarly project that brought this spirit of critique to bear on the concept of "women" as a subject of political representation. The diverse forms that patriarchal oppression takes in global society--including racism, sexism, and homophobia in their difference and overlap--undermines and undoes "women" as a universal identity (Butler 1990/2006). For Butler, queer theory and practice require first discarding the ontological integrity of "women" as the subject of feminism. That both Foucault's and Butler's antisubject positions have caught on in feminist theory would of course be an understatement. Evidence of their popularity can be seen in everything from the equation between Foucault and feminist theory (Brown 1997), to the steady removal of "woman" from the title of North American "gender and/or sexuality studies" departments, usually as part of a campaign to reflect or announce more capacious political themes and theoretical interests. Is the burial of the subject a historical effect of the popularity of these theoretical fields, or a part of their appeal? Leeb's ambitious new work makes it both possible and necessary to pose this question.

What then is the subject, and why is theorizing it necessary? *Power and Feminist Agency* argues that a theory of the political subject is prerequisite to thinking and enacting sociopolitical change, which Leeb sketches out in her synoptic introduction (chapter 1) by outlining the "when," "who," "how," and "what" of historical transformation. Each dimension is subsequently given a chapter-length elaboration in the first half of the book. Overall, Leeb argues that an account of change--whether in the past, or more important, in a potential revolutionary act--cannot be given by the Foucauldian notion of the "dead" subject that is both wholly produced by, and wholly subjected to, the discourse in which it emerges. A giddy liberal account of the self-determined and autonomous subject runs into the equal and opposite problem: it is unable to explain how the subject always-already exists in a webbing of power that restricts radical action. Finally, the postmodern theorization of subjectivity as a plural and shifting identity runs into a third issue, namely, that it is inherently exclusive while it also endorses a form of chameleonic change that the neoliberal mode of flexible accumulation already incites. Leeb's theorization of the "political subject-in-outline," which she describes in depth in chapter 3 as the "who" of sociopolitical change, is a nonwhole notion of subjectivity that avoids the respective paranoia, voluntarism, and irrational exuberance of these positions. The subject-in-outline is both individual and collective, neither determined by power nor enclosed into one or multiple identities. It is a negative point of permanent contestation, an

entity without any essential traits or particular identity, and for that reason, a transformative feminist agency. As Leeb puts it, "The political subject-in-outline moves within the tension of a certain coherence (the subject) necessary to effect change, and permanent openness (the outline) necessary to counter its exclusionary character" (5-6).

In chapter 2, Leeb describes the necessary corollary of this subject-in-outline as the "moment of the limit" (the "when" of historical change) immanent in the objective domain of power, arguing that the nonwhole subject emerges in the "holes" that riddle discourse. Her critical point, which cannot be overstated, is that formations of power, like the political subject, are nonwhole, and therefore cannot conclusively realize themselves. Leeb fashions this and other major insights in her book through a "combinatory reading" of Jacques Lacan and Theodor Adorno, who Leeb rightly notes are rarely systematically translated into each other's conceptual languages. Critical theorists should find this comparative approach enticing, and newcomers to Lacan and Adorno will benefit from a clear exposition of each that draws on both direct readings and relevant secondary literature. Leeb spells out in particular the parallels between Lacan's notion of the "real" and Adorno's notion of "nonidentity," and shows how both thinkers theorize the subject as mediated--rather than determined--by the objective domain of power. In rejecting an ideological notion of the sovereign subject, yet without concluding that all notions of subjectivity are therefore ideological, Leeb argues that feminism can--and must--recover a historical and political subject to avoid the Scylla of Foucauldian determinism and the Charybdis of neoliberal idealism.

The next two chapters describe the method and ethics of this subject-in-outline, respectively. Leeb suggests "how" to transform power in chapter 4, which involves putting theory (as "interpretation") and practice (as "change") on equal and dialectical footing within a "practical-critical activity." One could quibble with the equation between theory, interpretation, and understanding that Leeb imports from her reading of the Frankfurt School tradition because it risks putting too many forms of critical interrogation in the same basket, but her broader point is still well taken. A compelling close reading of Karl Marx's and Adorno's remarks on the relation between philosophy and practice follows, and expands into a critique of contemporary political and feminist thought that reproduces a hierarchical opposition between interpretation and change. Leeb importantly shows how the ongoing devaluation of critical theory is but a sibling phenomenon of the hero worship of "unmediated" practice and direct political agency. In her estimation, the very abstraction of the one (theory) from the other (practice), regardless of their relative value, is the sine qua non of capitalist alienation. Accordingly, political theorizing and political activity must be understood in a dialectical tension, each open, nonwhole, and relatively independent with regard to the other.

In chapter 5, Leeb moves on to address the subject's suffering, the bodily agony of capitalist isolation and exploitation, as "what" both justifies and potentially causes sociopolitical change. Leeb again toes a dialectical line of agreeing and disagreeing with two (and sometimes three) "camps" of thought, a method that serves her throughout the book. She affirms with Wendy Brown that the focus on "particularized" forms of racialized and gendered suffering creates a politics of victimization that abducts a critique of capital, while also affirming with Lois McNay that a postidentity politics can only critique capital abstractly, as if there were no subjects involved in its process. One oversubjectivizes capitalist power, the other overobjectifies it. Through reader-friendly summaries of some of his lesser-known writings, including *The Holy Family* and "Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844," Leeb turns again to Marx as not just a thinker of how capitalism produces economic alienation, with which many readers will be more acquainted, but of linguistic or subjective suffering too. This is a clever contribution to

Marxist thought in its own right. Subjects are alienated from their minds and bodies in productive activity, yes, but capital also fetishizes a process of abstraction (of mind from body) and hierarchization (of mind over body) into gendered and racialized signifiers that constitute subordinated subjects in the symbolic realm. These signifiers are experienced in brief brushes of "bodily suffering" that Leeb likens to an irruption of the Real, delivering a somatic message that "things should be different" (131). From her Lacanian footing--and in a manner refreshingly free of the caricature that often accompanies this specific engagement--she also critiques Slavoj Žižek's elevation of "subjective destitution" and "symbolic suicide" to revolutionary acts, which Leeb shows cannot account for her conceptualization of bodily suffering.

If the first half of the book proceeds as a theoretical exegesis, with only brief historical and cultural examples scattered throughout, the three chapters that follow in the second half--collectively titled "Applications"--slightly shift their focus to the resistances that emerge to thinking the subject-in-outline in three theorists of power: Judith Butler, Marx, and Adorno. In chapter 6, Leeb treads some well-covered ground when she critiques Butler's misappropriation of Lacanian psychoanalysis, particularly for focusing on the politics of (mis)recognition, conflating the "ego" and the "subject," and dismissing Lacan's notion of the Real, which Leeb argues is necessary for conceptualizing historical change (see similar accounts in Copjec 1994/2015; Dean 2000; Shepherdson 2000). Chapter 7 addresses Marx's failure to dispel a certain hierarchical thinking in his own thought that fetishizes the abjectness of working-class women, despite his political philosophy's dialectical undercutting of identity. Although Leeb again draws on some of Marx's lesser-known texts to think the "unconsciously gendered and classed" structure of capitalism, she concedes that its "sexed and raced" dimensions are "important work that still needs to be accomplished" (168, n. 6). Chapter 8 produces a similar analysis of the symptomatic figure of the working-class woman, this time in Adorno's theoretical itinerary. Together, these final chapters act as a proving ground for the theory of the subject introduced in the first part of the book, and to that extent will appeal primarily to those with special interests in the surveyed figures.

Power and Feminist Agency manages to be simultaneously clear, comprehensive, and complex. In terms of arrangement, each chapter rehearses one or several dimensions of the book's theory of the subject-, power-, and practice-in-outline, and helpfully indexes upfront how each subsequent section will build out Leeb's argument. The book's elliptic structure complements Leeb's dialectical procedure and proves that her oscillating "neither/nor" and "both/and" method of mediating feminist genealogies does not result in a politically toothless middle ground, but demonstrates how various attempts to go "beyond the subject"--by privileging the object over and against the subject, matter over and against consciousness, and so on--only manage to reproduce a binary opposition that (untenably) places the subject outside and apart from a wholly independent world of objects. Needless to say, the impasses that Leeb identifies in this sort of thinking in Butler's and Foucault's projects implicate interlocutors of both scholars, within and beyond the feminist and political theory that are her immediate areas of concern.

Leeb's exemplary method enables--even invites--turning it back on her own writing in the same way that she elaborates the "unconscious links" that "uphold the force of hierarchical oppositions" in Marx and other dialectical thinkers (167). To wit, a striking feature of *Power and Feminist Agency* is the elevation of theory over and against the historical case. Leeb declines to analyze historical political movements or historicize specific fields of power, holding instead that her notion of the political subject-in-outline is a theoretical construct that

awaits its mediation by a practical force to have a revolutionary effect. This leans on a certain fiction of the ivory tower that downplays the status of academic theorizing as a historical practice, one that is enmeshed in capital and has ongoing sociopolitical effects. Moreover, by delaying a dialectical movement between theory and history to a future moment, Leeb resorts to constructing a number of provisional scenarios that have an abstract connection to the complexity of modern power. For example, arguing that the unconscious association between the abject body and "racial minorities" needs to be interrupted, Leeb speculates: "Only when the black, poor woman can do as she pleases without being reduced to perform the work the bourgeois despise, will we have arrived in Marx's future society, where one's work activity ceases to produce one's essence or identity" (121). How well does the reduction to menial labor capture the nature of (racial) subjection, and does freedom understood as "doing as one pleases" square with Leeb's otherwise more considered critique of the cultural logic of neoliberalism? In a word, does the "black, poor woman" exist?

Without theory's mediation by history (and history's mediation by theory), another hierarchical opposition emerges between the "status quo" of capitalist power and the "transformative change" of the political subject-in-outline, a distinction that is spinal to *Power and Feminist Agency*. From the outset, Leeb makes historical agency the exclusive potential of a feminist subject, over and against capitalism. Because her theory of capitalism is unchaperoned by a history of capitalism, it risks being pigeonholed into a number of essential and seemingly invariant traits: hierarchical thinking, the fetishization of wholeness, identity politics, egocentrism, the politics of recognition, wage labor, conceptual abstraction, bodily suffering, alienation, and so on. Historicizing when and under what circumstances these features became capitalist (if, in fact, they all are) would do Leeb's argument a great service, while simultaneously opening a gateway to work in African American studies, and black feminist thought in particular, that historicizes racial slavery and its vicissitudes as a fundamental moment of capital. Historicizing capitalism would furthermore lead to shaking up the opposition between "good" political transformation and "bad" political structure, and ipso facto between the political subject and capital itself. Is it not in the nature of capital, as both Marx and Lacan understood it, to convert every negative limit into a positive boundary, and to slough off all positive characteristics in an interminable revolution? Is capitalism in this precise sense not also a transformative subject? What makes Leeb's work so vital to contemporary feminist thought is the ability to pose a question with such stakes.

Let me then return to my opening question, about the historical cause of the disappearance of the woman/subject in mainstream feminist theorizing. "Is the burial of the subject a historical effect of the popularity of these theoretical fields, or a part of their appeal?" Now, I just said that *Power and Feminist Agency* avoids historical cases in favor of a theoretical critique, but this is only half true, as Leeb's primary object--genealogies of feminist theory--are themselves historical formations and fields of power. *Theory has a history*. This history is often periodized through the wave metaphor, but Leeb develops a new and more meaningful analysis that privileges a comparative anatomy of theoretical logics over and against a succession narrative. This is an analytical hierarchy worth endorsing. And this analysis demands dialectically historicizing theory--not periodizing political and theoretical developments, but constructing the *cause* of formations of feminist thought, including those formations that turn against the subject. Because we are not provided the means to understand why the diverse (and often incompatible) adventures of liberal philosophy, identity politics, and Foucauldian theory gained historical traction when they did, nor what motivates the emergence of neoliberalism with which these genealogies are associated, Leeb downplays the significance of her own undertaking. Even so, *Power and Feminist Agency* stands on its own as a dazzling

demonstration of dialectical reading that makes these questions--what is capital? whither the feminist subject?--both inextricable and newly urgent.

References

Brown, Wendy. 1997. The impossibility of women's studies. *Differences* 9 (3): 79-101.

Butler, Judith. 1990/2006. *Gender trouble: Feminism and the subversion of identity*. New York: Routledge.

Copjec, Joan. 1994/2015. *Read my desire: Lacan against the historicists*. London: Verso.

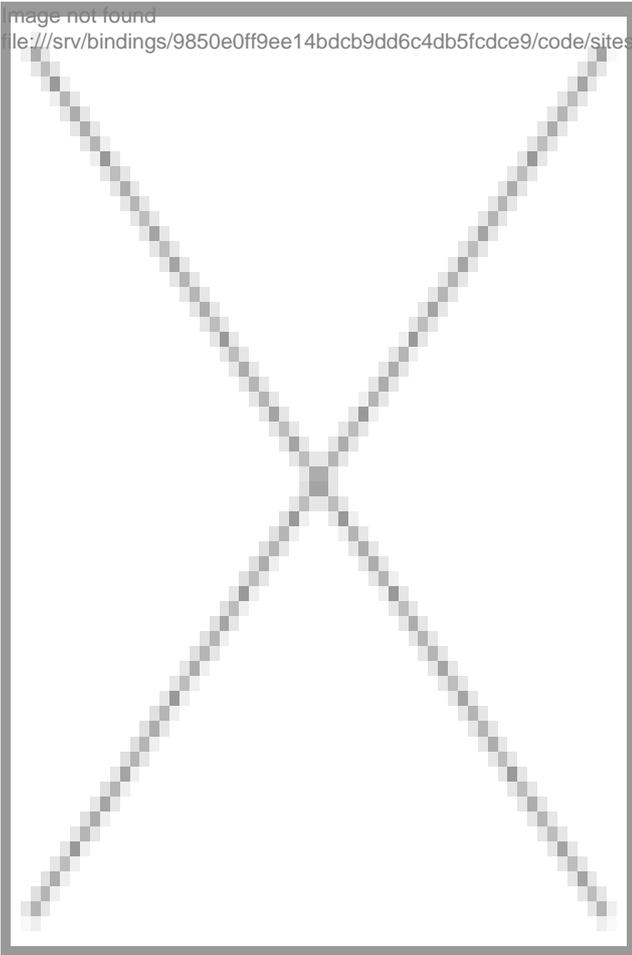
Dean, Tim. 2000. *Beyond sexuality*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Shepherdson, Charles. 2000. *Vital signs: Nature, culture, psychoanalysis*. New York: Routledge.

Christopher Chamberlin is a PhD candidate in the Program in Culture and Theory at the University of California, Irvine. His research explores the nexus of clinical psychoanalysis and black studies, and currently focuses on the history and theory of the antiracist clinic during the Civil Rights Era United States.

Email: cechambe@uci.edu

Website: <https://uci.academia.edu/ChristopherChamberlin>



"Feminism vanishes without a subject--or put another way, feminism without a subject is neither theoretical nor political. In *Power and Feminist Agency in Capitalism: Toward a New Theory of the Political Subject*, political philosopher and critical theorist Claudia Leeb puts these axioms to the test..."

Hypatia Reviews Online
editor@hypatiareviews.org

Website supported by Michael Digital

Source URL: <https://www.hypatiareviews.org/reviews/content/350>