

The limits of Amy Allen's analysis of gender subordination in *The Politics of Our Selves*

Os limites da análise de Amy Allen sobre a subordinação de gênero em *The Politics of Our Selves*

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Abstract: In this article, I argue that Amy Allen's approach of gender issues in *The Politics of Our Selves* is precarious and partial insofar as it is focused on an analysis of subjection aiming to explain "how subordinated individuals come to be psychically invested in and attached to their subordination"². Although this is an undeniable aspect of gender subordination, it does not tackle the complexity of its symbolic and material causes. My main thesis is that Allen does not offer the best model for feminist Critical Theory in light of the complexities of capitalist societies, much less to the feminist struggles in the Global South, deeply marked by poverty, social inequality, racism and all sorts of violence against women.

Key-words: Amy Allen, Gender Subordination, Critical Theory, Habermas, Foucault

Resumo: Neste artigo, argumento que a abordagem de Amy Allen a respeito da questão de gênero em *The Politics of Our Selves* é precária e parcial na medida em que é focada em uma análise da sujeição que visa explicar "como indivíduos subordinados se tornam psicologicamente atados a sua própria subordinação". Embora este seja um aspecto inegável da subordinação de gênero, não expressa a complexidade das suas causas materiais e simbólicas. A minha tese central é a de que Allen não oferece o melhor modelo para a Teoria Crítica feminista à luz das complexidades das sociedades capitalistas, muito menos, ousar dizer, para as lutas feministas no Sul Global, profundamente marcado pela pobreza, pela desigualdade social, pelo racismo e outros tipos de violência contra a mulher.

Palavras-chave: Amy Allen, Subordinação de Gênero, Teoria Crítica, Habermas, Foucault

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² Allen, *The Politics of Our Selves*, p. 174

The main contribution of Amy Allen's *The Politics of Our Selves* lies in an engaged attempt to combine Foucault and Habermas in a very single manner in order to clarify the two principal aims of critical theory: 1) "to offer an empirically grounded diagnosis of the central crises tendencies and injustices of the present age"; 2) "to chart paths of progressive social transformation"³. According to Allen, "accomplishing the first task requires *the development of an account of power in all its depth and complexity*, including how it functions through the mechanism of subjection to constitute subordinating modes of subjectivity and identity"⁴. Accomplishing the second task "requires the development of an account of autonomy, understood both as the capacity for critical reflection on the power relations that constitute us and as the capacity for self-transformation"⁵. In accordance with a particular reading of Foucault, Allen insists on the thesis that "subjection and autonomy are the two sides of the politics of our selves". Although Foucauldian and Habermasian theorists have the tendency to exalt one aspect over the other, Allen advocates – which is commendable – a "framework that theorizes subjection without sacrificing the possibility of autonomy and that theorizes autonomy without denying the reality of subjection"⁶.

In this article I propose to take into account Allen's project of analyzing power "in all its depth and complexity", which is why she integrates Foucault (and Butler) into her critical project. I argue that her approach of gender issues/domination is precarious and partial insofar as it is focused on an analysis of subjection aiming to explain "how subordinated individuals come to be psychologically invested in and attached to their subordination"⁷. Although this is an undeniable aspect of gender subordination, it does not tackle the complexity of its symbolic and material causes. In this sense, it seems that Allen is not immune to the objection she raises to Benhabib and Habermas, in her work of 2007, of being blind to the complexity of power relations⁸.

³ Allen, *The Politics of Our Selves*, p. 172

⁴ Allen, *The Politics of Our Selves*, p. 172, my emphasis.

⁵ Allen, *The Politics of Our Selves*, p. 172.

⁶ Allen, *The Politics of Our Selves*, p. 173.

⁷ Allen, *The Politics of Our Selves*, p. 174.

⁸ Cf. Allen, *The Politics of Our Selves*, p. 172.

Tuned to Foucault's and also Butler's analysis of subjection – which seeks to explain “how subordinated individuals come to be psychically invested in and attached to their subordination”⁹ – Amy Allen criticizes, in *The Politics of Our Selves*, strong and overly rationalistic concepts of autonomy that, according to her, are usually sustained by authors connected to Critical Theory since Habermas. In her opinion, Habermas maintains a very “robust” conception of autonomy insofar as it disregards the role that power “necessarily plays in the formation of the autonomous individual”¹⁰. Although he has the advantages (in relation to Foucault) of sustaining a broader view of the social that encompasses both strategic and communicative interactions and of assigning a central role to autonomy, Habermas fails where Foucault does not: in considering power in all its depth and complexity, which makes the Habermasian conception of autonomy overly rational and inadequate for the gender issue. Seyla Benhabib would not escape from the same error and, after all, for the same reason. Although she was willing to correct Habermas's rationalistic excesses, and though her notion of interactive universalism is more sensitive to particularities and to a more concrete and situated explanation of the self – and, therefore, more compatible with feminist theory – the narrative conception of the self held by Benhabib retains a problematic rationalist residue¹¹, which must be eliminated to account for the issue of gender subordination. If the notion of autonomy held by Benhabib is very strong, this is due to its definition as “the capacity to exercise choice and agency over the conditions of one's narrative identifications”¹². According to Allen, Benhabib “is able to provide such a strong conception of practical autonomy only by downplaying the depth of the hold that gendered modes of subjection have on individuals who are thrown into societies structured by pervasive gender subordination”¹³. In contrast, Allen argues that the self is already gendered and that power not

⁹ Allen, *The Politics of Our Selves*, p. 174.

¹⁰ Allen, *The Politics of Our Selves*, p. 175.

¹¹ Allen, *The Politics of Our Selves*, p. 177.

¹² Cf. Benhabib, *S. Claims of culture*, p. 16 e Allen, A. *The Politics of our selves*, p. 163.

¹³ Allen, *The Politics of Our Selves*, p. 163.

only structures the available options from which we choose when constructing our gendered life stories, but it goes deeper into the self “structuring the very I who chooses how to enact his or her gender”¹⁴. For Allen, therefore, one must admit that “gender is a cultural and social precondition for telling any narrative whatsoever”¹⁵.

To give support to the thesis that gender is a cultural and social precondition of any narrative, Allen resorts to developmental psychology, which indicates that the source of our sense of ourselves as gendered beings may extend all the way into infancy¹⁶, and that gender becomes salient “long before children have developed the kind of narrative abilities that Benhabib considers to be necessary conditions for selfhood”¹⁷. Based on studies that indicate the interaction of caregivers with children carries gender stereotypes and tend to reinforce women’s subordination, Allen concludes that the “idea of gender as narrative and the related assumption of a nongendered core self that has the ability to *autonomously choose* whether and how to take up gender narratives are implausible”¹⁸.

In this text, I do not intend to analyze these criticisms to Seyla Benhabib and to her narrative conception of self, but rather to show that, first, Allen's analysis of gender subordination and identity formation imposes serious difficulties for a reflection on political agency; secondly, that her analysis is precarious for a more in-depth approach to the causes of gender domination; and, finally, that it does not take social transformation into consideration¹⁹. First of all, we must question which

¹⁴ Allen, *The Politics of Our Selves*, p. 165.

¹⁵ Allen, *The Politics of Our Selves*, p. 165.

¹⁶ Allen, *The Politics of Our Selves*, p. 166.

¹⁷ Allen, *The Politics of Our Selves*, p. 166-7.

¹⁸ Allen, *The Politics of Our Selves*, p. 168, my emphasis.

¹⁹ Although I do not propose, in this article, to carefully analyze Amy Allen's criticisms to Seyla Benhabib in *The Politics of Our Selves* (what I will do in another article), it should be noted that, in my opinion, Benhabib solves better than Allen both aspects of Critical Theory: the explanatory-diagnostic and the anticipatory-utopian, and for this reason she is more interesting for feminist Critical Theory. This is due to at least two factors: her narrative conception of self and the notion of democratic iterations (supported by a broader theory of deliberative democracy). In regard to the narrative conception of self, Allen is mistaken in her interpretation: Benhabib doesn't render identity formation inimical to power relations, on the contrary, she takes these relations seriously into consideration when she admits that we are constituted by discourse, though not *determined* by it. Benhabib doesn't think that identity is established by an “I” that preexists signification, what she doesn't accept is that the individual is merely “a blank slate upon whom are inscribed the codes of a

is the place left to agency, to autonomy and to empowerment: where actually lies the “subject's capacity for critical reflection and self-transformation” since adherence to Foucault's theory of subjection – as well as adherence to Butler's psychoanalytic approach – leads Allen to reduce very significantly the autonomy of individuals and their ability to choose? The attempt to save a place for agency and autonomy is threatened by an analysis of subjection which aims to capture the ways in which power constitutes forms of identity that constrain subordinated subjects by *compelling* them to take up subordinating norms²⁰.

Certainly Allen is correct in asserting that individuals are thrown into societies structured by pervasive gender subordination. However, the assimilation of the Foucauldian thesis that there is no outside to power and the analysis of subjection based on Foucault and on Butler creates some problems, which may not be marginal, for the purpose assumed by Allen to clarify both aspects of Critical Theory: the “explanatory-diagnostic” and the “utopian-anticipatory” aspects. Her analysis of the gender issue is excessively focused on the individual (some individuals) and on the internalization of subordinating norms. This leads to a precarious and insufficient evaluation both of the causes of female domination and of the emancipatory potentials inscribed in the present. As a result, at most Allen reaches a reflection on self-transformation (which she identifies with autonomy), without clarifying in what terms it

culture, a kind of a Lockean *tabula rasa* in later-day Foucaultian garb!” (Benhabib, *Situating the Self*, p. 217). I believe this safeguards a wider locus for agency, for autonomy and also for the transformation of rooted forms of domination. Autonomy, to Benhabib, doesn't mean autarchy, as Allen seems to assume, but it means the “ability to distance oneself from the one's social roles, traditions, history and even deepest commitments and to take a universalistic attitude of hypothetical questioning towards them” (Benhabib, “Sexual Difference and collective identities”, p. 353-4, note 13). One should try to understand this notion of autonomy not as rehabilitation of Kantian “noumenal self” (like Allen does), but also in the light of democratic iterations, which are “complex processes of public argument, deliberation, and exchange through which universalist rights claims and principles are contested and contextualized, invoked and revoked, posited and positioned, throughout legal and political institutions, as well as in the associations of civil society...[which] can take place in the ‘strong’ public bodies of legislatures, the judiciary, and the executive, as well as in the informal and ‘weak’ publics of civil society associations and the media” (Benhabib, *The Right of Others*, p. 179). I shall expand on these aspects of Seyla Benhabib's theory in another text in order to show (1) the misconceptions of Allen's interpretation of the narrative conception of self; and (2) that Benhabib's theory, compared to Allen's, is better able to take into account the complexity and depth of power relations and at the same time to relate self-transformation to social transformation.

²⁰ Allen, *The Politics of Our Selves*, p. 72.

is linked to and dependent on social transformation. This is due to the almost exclusive attention to the way in which power constitutes forms of identity by *compelling* subjects to assimilate the norms that subordinate them. Thus, the multiple and overlapping causes of gender domination are lost, as if their main cause were the assimilation of subordinating norms and standards of life. It's also lost that emancipation requires more than self-transformation and autonomy, understood as capacity for reflecting on power relations and as ability to transform one's desire. In other words, her analysis of subjection undermines both the proposal of (1) offering a diagnosis of present-day crises and injustices, and of (2) designing ways for social transformation.

In short, the way Allen assimilates Foucault's thesis that "there is no outside to power", complementing it with Butler's psychoanalytic approach, tends not only to excessively exalt domination at the expense of autonomy, but also tends to exalt the power that subordinates and compels (mainly in psychological terms) to the detriment of the political and of the social, at least regarding gender issues. The two things are related. This is evident in her use of developmental psychology without establishing wider connections and without investigating the cultural, social, economic and political roots of the subjection that she detects in psychological terms. In this sense, Allen departs rather than moves towards the intellectual tradition of the Frankfurt School and what she herself values in this tradition: its emphasis on social theory and on the understanding of the social as the nexus of the political, the cultural, and the individual ²¹. The nexus is missing. Therefore, her attempted correction of Benhabib inspired by Butler leads to a poor diagnosis of gender domination, overly focused on the individual (psychological scope) and emphasizing the desire. The problem is that her use of developmental psychology doesn't explain the complexity of gender domination and its social and historical constitution, "it simply gives us a scheme for its 'reproduction'"²². And even this scheme is problematic because, as Moira Gatens shows, Allen's argument "privileges gender over other equally important markers of selfhood such as race, class, sexuality, ability, age,

²¹ Allen. *The End of Progress*, p. xiii

²² I am paraphrasing Seyla Benhabib in her critique of the psychosexual model of Gilligan and Chodorow (Benhabib, *Situating the Self*, p. 194)

or ethnicity. It also serves to isolate the lived experience of gender from these other components of selves”²³.

However, if we admit, with Nancy Fraser, that injustice against women is economic and cultural and that both are interwoven, in the sense that when sexist and androcentric norms are institutionalized in the state and the economy, the result is the economic disadvantage of women and the restriction of their participation in public life and in the formation of culture, which, in turn, perpetuates androcentric norms and so on; that being the case, we realized that women's subordination is due to *different forms of exercising power*, for instance, the symbolic and the material, and consequently that their emancipation requires different remedies. That is, we would have to engage in the question that Allen does *not* ask about the variety of remedies and political, social and legal solutions that can fight the subordination of women, including in terms of public policy. The multiple causes of contemporary gender domination force us to go from the restricted scope of psychology to the field of politics and economy and give more consideration to the domain of political struggles of our time. The feminist agenda of social movements and of various women's organizations are more reliable to inform us than developmental psychology about the complexity of the exercise of power against women's emancipation. Today we see organized women claiming equal wages, fighting against political under-representation or against domestic violence; black women fighting against structural racism; indigenous women in multi-ethnic networks organized in order to provide better living conditions and gender equality in local communities; Evangelical, Catholic and non-religious women united to claim the right to terminate pregnancy; young women organized against the reproduction of gender stereotypes in schools, within advertising and within the family. The political arena is effective to inform us about the material and symbolic obstacles to women's emancipation and the complexity and depth of the exercise of power that perpetuates gender subordination. However, restricted to the domain of psychological subjection and distanced from the field of political struggle, Allen ends up assigning a very limited role to social movements, which is reduced to provide “alternative possibilities for attachment and sources of recognition that can help individuals to

²³ Gatens, M. “Let's Talk Story: Gender and the Narrative Self”, p. 44.

form less subordinating modes of attachment”²⁴. Certainly, the collective movements are important to the extent that they help individuals to form less subordinating modes of attachment, but this is far from comprising its whole practical and political dimension, which is also manifested in the achievements and struggles of the women’s movements for rights, for intervening in politics and for interfering in public policy formulations attacking the various and overlapping causes of gender subordination.

Nevertheless, Allen’s analysis of the gender issue is focused on the recalcitrance of gender subordination and in its psychological rootedness “in the wake of decades of feminism critique and activism”²⁵. She illustrates this recalcitrance with Jacobs Brumberg book – *The Body Project: an intimate history of American girls*. Brumberg’s research, based on girl’s diaries, intends to capture the shifts in the American girls self-conceptions from the late 1800s to the late 1900s and the author’s main thesis is that “whereas late-nineteenth-century girls tended to understand themselves in terms of their moral character, girls at the end of the twentieth century tended to center their self-conception on their bodies and to view the attainment of bodily perfection as their most important project”²⁶. Thus, the supposed gain in terms of autonomy would be demystified by subjection to pernicious norms of feminine beauty. According to Allen, “the most interesting passages in the book are those in which Brumberg discusses the students in her women’s studies seminar at Cornell University, whom she describes as extremely knowledgeable about feminist theory in the form of sophisticated critiques of cultural images of women and femininity”, but who, nevertheless, internalize the contemporary imperative for a perfect body and come to even hate their own bodies²⁷. This case would demonstrate that subjection and autonomy are deeply intertwined, as well as the “limits of autonomy understood solely as the capacity of rational critique”²⁸.

I do not intend to question here the central theses (1) that subjection and autonomy are overlapped, (2) that gender domination is extremely

²⁴ Allen, *The Politics of Our Selves*, p. 183

²⁵ Allen, *The Politics of Our Selves*, p. 174

²⁶ Allen, *The Politics of Our Selves*, p. 180-1.

²⁷ Allen, *The Politics of Our Selves*, p. 182.

²⁸ Allen, *The Politics of Our Selves*, p. 183.

resistant to criticism and change; (3) that autonomy cannot be understood solely as the capacity of rational critique. The strength of *The Politics of Our Selves* lies precisely here. But also lies its weakness, for the analysis of women's subordination in terms of its psychic rootedness and of the suffering caused by inadequacy to standards of feminine beauty privileges a certain kind of suffering and subjection to the detriment of other kinds which may not affect North American college activist women to whom Allen is paying attention, but do affect women who suffer and are subjected by poverty and by racism, for instance, and who are outside of this very restricted universe. Although Allen proposes to take power seriously, in all its complexity and depth, she unties gender domination from the others markers of selfhood, such as class and race.

The manner in which Allen theorizes subjection is linked to a negativistic conception of emancipation, developed in the article "Emancipation without utopia. Subjection, modernity and the normative claims of feminist critical theory". According to Allen, the negativistic conception of emancipation, based on Foucault, would have an important advantage over Habermas and post-Habermasian authors (including Seyla Benhabib) by correcting the vulnerability of Critical Theory to the postcolonial feminist critique. First, because Foucault, committed to the idea that there is no outside to power, allows for the rupture with a type of philosophy of history linked to the notion of progress "that views European modernity – and the conceptions of freedom, autonomy, and emancipation that are at its core – as the outcome of a process of historical learning and development"²⁹. Secondly, and in accordance with this, because Foucault doesn't rely on a "positive conception of utopia"³⁰. Hence the productivity of the negativistic conception of emancipation, which no longer needs the projection of a "society itself in a perfected form"³¹, and that instead of signifying the utopia of a power-free society, it indicates the possibility of the transformation in the relations of domination "into a mobile, reversible field of power relations, and thus that does not rest on a positive vision of a power-free utopia". This conception of emancipation,

²⁹ Allen. "Emancipation without Utopia. Subjection, Modernity, and the Normative Claims of Feminist Critical Theory", p. 521.

³⁰ Allen. "Emancipation without Utopia", p. 523.

³¹ Allen. "Emancipation without Utopia", p. 524.

she concludes, “offers the best model for feminist critical theory in light of the complexities and ambivalences of emancipation discourse”³².

The problem is that this negativistic conception of emancipation, while rejecting the supposed utopia of a power-free society (which at first glance seems productive), also abandons the perspective of a more radical and structural critique of contemporary capitalist democracies. Furthermore, it seems that this conception is allied to a feeble conception of political agency, insufficient for the emancipation of women and clearly distant from contemporary aspirations and struggles for recognition, redistribution and deeper structural transformations. If Allen's rejection of utopia confines us to the perspective of a feeble resistance linked to self-transformation and abandons the expectation of a deeper radical social transformation, then she does not offer the best model for feminist critical theory in light of the complexities of contemporary societies, much less, dare I say, to the feminist struggle in the Global South³³.

It would be interesting to question, however, whether Allen herself unreservedly maintains (and in what terms) the Foucauldian thesis that “there is no outside to power”. Or, in other words, if she herself does not slip at some point into something close to what she calls – in a critical tone – a “utopia”.

As we have seen, the main project of Amy Allen's *The Politics of Our Selves* lies in an engaged attempt to put Critical Theory into dialogue with Michel Foucault in order to clarify the two principal aims of Critical Theory and in order to advocate a “framework that theorizes subjection

³² Allen. “Emancipation without Utopia”, p. 515.

³³ Allen exaggerates in her critique of Critical Theory (which is too wide, embracing too different authors) regarding its supposed adherence to the utopia of a power-free society in order to justify the productivity of her alliance with Foucault and with the thesis that “there is no outside to power”. It seems to me that Allen “overstates” this criticism, including and perhaps especially in the case of Seyla Benhabib, because Benhabib never defended a notion of utopia based on the total elimination of the relations of power, but rather a notion of utopia linked to the idea of “politics of transfiguration”, which “emphasizes the emergence of qualitatively new needs, social relations, and modes of association, which burst open the utopian potential within the old” (Seyla Benhabib, *Critique, Norm and Utopia*, p. 13). But as I said earlier, I shall leave the analysis of Allen's criticism of Benhabib for another occasion.

without sacrificing the possibility of autonomy and that theorizes autonomy without denying the reality of subjection”³⁴. According to her, Habermas offers a better approach to autonomy, while Foucault better solves the question of subjection, which is why a dialogue between them would be productive. Although the project seems at first glance productive, it is impossible not to note that when she proposes herself to account for the “utopian-anticipatory” aspect of Critical Theory, she is forced to disfigure the Foucauldian base from which she constructs her diagnosis. In this sense, the project of placing Critical Theory into dialogue with Michel Foucault is not fulfilled, at least in *The Politics Of Our selves*.

Even assuming the thesis that there is no outside to power, Allen doesn't refuse a place for mutual recognition and its transformative potential³⁵. In *The Politics of Our Selves*, at the moment she proposes to theorize the possibility of mutual recognition, she clearly distances herself from Butler and Foucault, in the extent that both “rely on an overly narrow conception of the social, one that tends to equate all social relations with strategic relations of power”³⁶. According to her, this undermines their ability “to offer an adequate account of resistance to subjection; specifically, *it makes it difficult for them to adequately distinguish resistance from the reinscription of subordination*”³⁷. Now, to avoid the same problem of identifying resistance to subordination, Allen must then find a place to the notions of normative reciprocity and mutual recognition³⁸. This is why she brings Habermas to her project, since he “offers a broad view of the social that encompasses both strategic and communicative interactions”³⁹ and since his critical social theory gives a central role to the notion of autonomy (although, of course, she considers Habermas' notion of autonomy too robust, as it downplays the role that power necessarily plays in the formation of the autonomous individual).

The notion of recognition compatible with Foucault's thesis that there is no outside to power cannot be identified, of course, “with a

³⁴ Allen, *The Politics of Our Selves*, p. 173.

³⁵ Allen. *The Politics of Our Selves*, p. 174

³⁶ Allen. *The Politics of Our Selves*, p. 174.

³⁷ Allen, *The Politics of Our Selves*, p. 174, my emphasis.

³⁸ Allen, *The Politics of Our Selves*, p. 175.

³⁹ Allen, *The Politics of Our Selves*, p. 175.

possible state of social relations from which power relations have been permanently and completely expunged, but as a permanent though temporarily fleeting possibility within dynamically unfolding human relationships”⁴⁰. In other words, mutual recognition “can be thought of as an ideal that is immanent to social life; it provides a foothold within social practice for normative critique”. It is interesting to note that she herself admits that there is something strange about trying to put these things together: “if I accept that there is no outside to power, then how can I maintain that relations of mutual recognition and normative reciprocity are even possible?”⁴¹.

The solution, then, is to soften Foucault’s thesis: the assertion that there is no outside to power “does not mean that power is present in any and all social relationships but instead as the more innocuous contention that power is an ineradicable feature of human social life”⁴². It means, therefore, to admit that there is no social life from which power has been completely eliminated. It is thus noted that the proposal to do justice to both aspects of Critical Theory, combining Habermas with Foucault, is only realized if Foucault’s thesis that there is no perspective outside of power is softened to the point of admitting the possibility of mutual recognition, that is, the possibility of acquiring a point of view outside the relations of power. In this sense, from a Foucauldian perspective, Allen would make the same mistake that she detects in Habermas, which is that he does not take seriously enough the depth with which power relations affect the formation of identity⁴³.

⁴⁰ Allen, *The Politics of Our Selves*, p. 175.

⁴¹ Allen, *The Politics of Our Selves*, p. 178.

⁴² Allen, *The Politics of Our Selves*, p. 179

⁴³ Even having questioned, inspired by Foucault, Habermas’s commitment to the context transcendence of validity claims, Allen doesn’t intend to abandon the possibility of satisfactorily grounding judgments as well. So, to not undermine any and all attempts to make normative judgments and maintaining, at the same time, that validity cannot be insulated from power, she proposes the idea of principled contextualism. Curiously, her solution to this problem it is clearly inspired by Seyla Benhabib, in the sense that “we can rely on the normative ideals of universal respect and egalitarian reciprocity in making normative judgments while at the same time acknowledging that these are ideals are rooted in the context of Western modernity” (*The Politics of Our Selves*, p. 180). But Allen stops there because she can’t accept in any way the context transcendence of any validity claims. So, I detect a certain normative confusion in this project. It seems that she fails to conceive a consistent normative strategy and ends up with a strange amalgam between the idea that

I see the same problem in *The End of Progress* when she proposes to reflect on the relation between power and reason and to find a way of conceptualizing practical reason that is attentive to its impurities – namely, to its entanglements with power – without, however, slipping into irrationalism. Allen harshly criticizes Habermas and Honneth for linking the idea of historical progress to the progressive purification of reason from power relations and remains true to Foucault's perspective that the task of critical thought is to accept the spiral formed by the entanglement of reason and power. The “spiral” argument points to an irreconcilable tension between reason and power and to the fact that we are committed to “a form of rationality that is unfortunately crisscrossed by relations of power and domination”⁴⁴. However, even though she admitted Foucault's spiral against Habermas and Honneth's supposed bet on the progressive purification of reason from power relations, Allen proposes a conception of reason as a social practice (based on Anthony Laden) and casual conversation which identifies the activity of reasoning with the activity of sharing the world. Now, where are the relations of power?

Foucault is the author on which Allen bases herself to question Critical Theory ever since Habermas, who, she claims, disregarded power relations seriously undermining the critical project (which would have made Critical Theory incapable of properly dealing with gender issues, incurring in exaggerated optimism or slipping into the authoritarianism of the “colonizer”). However, at the conclusion of the *The Politics of Our Selves*, when she proposes to find some place for emancipation, she is compelled to depart from Foucault's thesis that there is no outside to power. Despite the project announcing this tension, my interpretation is that Allen does not fulfill the project of putting Critical Theory into dialogue with Michel Foucault: one needs to be silenced so that the other can become visible and have a voice. What happens in *The Politics of Our Selves* is that when she proposes to account for the “utopian-anticipatory” aspect of Critical Theory, Allen is forced to relativize, weaken or even disfigure the “Foucauldian base” from which she constructs her diagnosis. Her theory oscillates between a more or less negative conception of

“there is no outside to power” and the idea that there is an outside to power (the idea that normative criticism is possible based on the ideals of *universal* respect and *egalitarian* reciprocity).

⁴⁴ Allen, *The End of Progress. Decolonizing the Normative Foundations of Critical Theory*, p. 219.

emancipation, and when it proposes to *distinguish resistance from the reinscription of subordination*, it's no longer suited to the analysis of a Foucault and Butler-inspired subjection, although Allen insists on holding on to it.

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