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What Does It Mean to Rebel?: Feminist Critical Theory, Agency, and Working-Class Women

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As Claudia Leeb says in her rigorous and thoughtful new book, “For the feminist movement to invite different women (and men) in, which is necessary to strengthen itself, we must opt for a politics beyond identification” (165). Leeb argues that neither a fantasy of agentic wholeness nor a post-structural view of a fluid self can adequately provide a conceptual ground for social transformation of a feminist, intersectional, and materialist nature. However, Leeb suggests that “political and feminist theorists cannot give up theorizing the political subject, because without a political subject there is no agent of sociopolitical transformation” (72).

In *Power and Feminist Agency in Capitalism*, Leeb reanimates the relationship among psychoanalysis, critical theory, and feminist theory. She moves readily among thinkers such as Jacques Lacan, Theodor Adorno, Karl Marx, Judith Butler, Slavoj Žižek, and others. Leeb’s work is rightly characterized as feminist critical theory and one that is attuned to the debates within feminism and intersectionality theory.

Leeb characterizes two dominant threads of feminist criticism in this way: on the one hand are thinkers who reject the idea that the task of feminist theorizing is to get the subject of feminism right to address the exclusionary characteristics of much of feminist theory and practice. On the other hand are

those who see critiques of the subject of feminism, that is, women, as a hindrance to political activism that they argue needs an agentic view of political actors. Leeb suggests that her concept of the “political subject-in-outline” is a response to the problems inherent in both camps (5). As Leeb puts it, “my idea of the political subject-in-outline deals with the inherent tension in the political subject—its exclusionary character and its necessity for agency by theorizing a mediated relation between subject and object, universal and particular, as well as mind and body” (64). The “political” modifier of this phrase signals Leeb’s goal of social and political transformation by critiquing and acting against the conditions that create suffering—primarily the conditions of capitalist exploitation of workers, but also the suffering caused by gendered, raced, classed, and able-bodied inequalities as well (10–11, 70–71, 125). Leeb’s goal is an abolitionist one in terms of the transformation of capitalism and gendered violence.

The “subject-in-outline” is an intriguing concept. As one would expect, it does a lot of work in Leeb’s book, most of it persuasive on the ground of thinking philosophically about a subject that moves in tension between coherence and permanent openness (5). I’m sympathetic to Leeb’s sense that in theorizing the subject, it’s necessary to stake out a place politically to say “I” and “we” in terms of political action. I also agree that it’s important to take account of the exclusions, misfires, and other ways in which the enunciation of a political claim in the name of a group or against a particular form of suffering can never fully encompass or end those claims. In this sense, I agree with another leftist psychoanalytically informed political thinker, Cornelius Castoraidis, who says we can’t remain a question mark when we make political claims given that we have to stand somewhere and say something.¹ Or, as an agonistic reading of Hannah Arendt would lead us to say, when you are attacked in terms of a social and political identity, you respond on those grounds. As Arendt says to the command “Step closer Jew!” if you respond, but I am a human being, this for Arendt misses the point of how one is targeted and rendered less than a citizen, person, and human. That is, in the world, identity is political and must be articulated politically. This echoes Leeb’s use of Franz Fanon when he hears “Look, a Negro,” reading this as a sign of how dispossession, or in Leeb’s language, suffering, occurs in a space of racist, colonial power and privilege.

I set this up because in my comments I want to focus on a particular challenge with a subject-centered theory—even one as smart, complex, and attentive to mediation as Leeb’s theory is—namely, that a persistent challenge remains, how to mediate or translate the subject-in-outline with the historical social and political subject. That is, I am interested in the issue of praxis understood as what connects a theory of politics to the action of political transformation of a liberatory sort, and vice versa that is part and parcel of critical

theory and feminist traditions. Or, what is it that makes us rebel? I think Leeb offers a rich language of a political subject-in-outline that attunes us to the fact that there is never a full philosophical account of the subject to ground politics. Nor is there a representative claim that would capture once and for all “all women” or “gender equality” in feminist politics. However, for the sake of conversation, I want to push into the dilemma of how recognizing the political subject-in-outline based on the limit concepts of the Lacanian real and Adorno’s idea of non-identity could translate into sociopolitical transformation. For example, Leeb notes in the chapter “What *Makes Us Rebel*” that “translated into the political domain, it is the pain and suffering that drawing near the holes (the moment of non-identity and the real), which point to the traumatic elements that one could not integrate into one’s history, which allow for the subject to realign for sociopolitical transformation” (134). Further in the text Leeb asks, “Can we theorize the feminist subject who is in a position to not only resist but transform power structures?” (147).

As a subject-in-outline, the idea is that the limit point, the holes in any system of subordination, can be noticed when we have the conceptual tools to see these limits (the unconscious, the real, non-identity). This “non-wholeness” of power is an essential point. Certainly the concept of the subject-in-outline can attune critics and perhaps political actors to how it should be “a *fruitful* moment because it allows all those excluded to enter (or exit) the political collectivity and transform its boundaries” (59, emphasis in original). But the accounting for exclusions can’t be done only philosophically at the level of the concept, but must be done politically in the space and time of action. I don’t think Leeb would disagree. However, my worry is that without more attention to the contingency of political figurations we might too readily think that the philosophical elaboration could secure the political critique, and from there that the mediation between theory and practice is enough to secure an ongoing, critical, creative/destructive process in politics.

One could say Leeb responds to this concern by turning to the figure of the working-class woman. This is a figure who first appears in chapter 1 with an example from Sandra Cisneros’s novel, *The House on Mango Street*. In a section Leeb quotes, a nun passes by a working-class girl’s home, the house on Mango Street. The nun’s disapproval of the house sets up the girl as working-class (25–26). Leeb notes that the label “working-class girl” petrifies her but at the same time allows her to speak as such. “In this example, a subordinated subject, her being able to speak or function does not imply that what she says will lead to resistance or socio-symbolic transformation . . . it is precisely her bodily pain, which can generate a different outcome, where the girl resists her subordination” (26–27). For Cisneros, this is an artistic intervention which relies on an audience who receives this work. But how is that resistance, that rebellion, to be without a political, shared collective figure of resistance?

How does individual pain become translated into political critique? How does the working class girl become resignified through her pain? What allows for rebellion?

In chapter 4 Leeb returns to Marx and persuasively makes the case that for revolutionary activity to succeed theory is needed (84, 86, 88). Like other critical theorists and activists on the left, Leeb shows that “class” is about your place in capitalist production *and* consciousness. Moreover, she further insists that the proletariat must be rethought (107). But how so? Leeb rejects as inadequate the more recent concept of the precariat. Leeb references David Harvey and Saskia Sassen, but Guy Standing’s work also explicitly pays attention to gender among other structures of power and privilege to think about a more fluid worker in the time of neoliberalism, what he calls the precariat as well.² Why isn’t this a productive rethinking of the proletariat attuned to working women in differently situated global locations? That is, I invite Leeb to say more about how a class analysis attentive to gender should keep the category of the proletariat even in a revised form.

To push more my concern with praxis and how the concept of the subject-in-outline may be linked politically to a collective figure such as the working-class woman, let me turn to one of my favorite chapters in the book, chapter 7 “The Working-Class Woman and Marx.” I frame my interest with a question Leeb raises in the following chapter on Adorno; “What would happen if the working class woman interrupts his fantasy?” (203). Marx and Adorno both have fantasies of working-class women that leave them out of the revolutionary struggle as workers and relegate them to the home and to the sexualized, exploited bodies of capitalist exchange. Leeb suggests that the “moment of the limit [non-identity] is the moment that allows the working-class woman to interrupt instrumental rationality or identity thinking” (203). But is it enough to be attuned to this disruption because of the limit concepts of the real or non-identity, that is, the “ontological” holes Leeb talks about? Or is this better thought about as the necessity of a new figuration that relies on that necessary incompleteness, but that also requires a creative social imaginary or new political version of the working-class woman to make it politically transformative in time and space? Many working-class women know suffering, but in the 2016 presidential election, more white women, many working class, voted for Donald Trump over Democrat Hillary Clinton (53 percent). So, how do we think about an abolitionist form of women’s working-class rebellion and solidarity that seems to require more translation from the experience of suffering than admitted to here?

Leeb is a beautiful reader of Marx. It’s one of the great pleasures of this book. She offers original interpretations of underread texts such as *The Holy*

Family (1844), which she reads from the original German. While I think this chapter could be called “Women: Bourgeois and Working-Class in Marx,” I understand she wants to focus on Marx’s blind spots when it comes to working class women. But the section on how Marx describes the situation of the bourgeois woman is also brilliant. Marx traces three cases where bourgeois women commit suicide by drowning themselves in the Seine because they either violated sexual norms or were subject to sexual violence. Leeb notes they were reduced to their body and treated like objects (169). What gets repeated is “the woman drowns herself in the Seine.” Leeb shows Marx’s critique of bourgeois morality and reveals the irony in his lack of such critical attention to working-class women. Rather, Marx appears to despise working-class women, calling them “hags” (*Weib* not *Frau* as Leeb explains). For this working-class woman to rebel means mediating a left critical theory that props up a gendered division of labor with a feminist critique of male power. But can this be done without collective appropriations and reworkings of a feminist social imaginary and politics? Why isn’t this a moment for theorizing sexist power and violence across class divisions? Is this not quite relevant again with sexual harassment and violence against women (in particular) in the workplace renewed in the public domain by the #metoo movement (started by women of color a decade ago and returned with the newly erupted publicity of sexual abuse by movie producer Harvey Weinstein among other men)? The drowned woman again and again in the Seine, the working-class woman doing double and triple duty in paid and unpaid labor, the division of women by race. That is, it’s not simply that there is a moment of the real or of non-identity here; it is also a gendered critique that activates Marx’s texts with a feminist public purpose to expose and inspire knowledge of the thinkable and the actionable against sexual violence and capitalist exploitation from different class positions. Isn’t this rather a political question of how the working-class woman gets activated in different political moments to counter sexual violence and/or labor exploitation that might not pit her against the middle-class woman who has benefited from liberal rights?

As Leeb notes, her last two chapters in the “Applications” section on Marx and Adorno are qualitatively different from the other chapters in offering close readings of their texts and illustrating how each conceptualized working-class women as despised bodies. Leeb’s reading of their work in this regard is wonderfully done. But it left me craving another chapter in this section, one that could develop more fully the when, who, how, and what of the subject-in-outline in the case of working class women. Certainly Leeb has illustrative examples from novels and historical events of women’s working-class organizing (women sewing machinists in the 1970s in England striking at Ford) among others. I understand there is a value in the

bad examples of how women's suffering as working women under capitalist conditions opens space to think otherwise, but I found myself wanting another case, or close reading, of successes. There are constraints of space and logic with any text, but I'm curious as to what another chapter in the applications section would be if Leeb were to add one given that she has written about working-class women in the academy, cites documentary films, and knows her history of working-class women's struggles in the United States, among other places. Not that it's necessary to have a redemptive moment in a book as rich and thoughtful as this one, but given that there is a utopian call for the abolition of capitalism and sexist oppression, I wonder what a more extensive, good example would that look like? It's to Leeb's credit that her work provokes such timely and relevant concerns both theoretically and practically about the suffering endured with capitalist and gendered violence.

The Power of "the Limit" in Feminist Theory

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In *Power and Feminist Agency in Capitalism*, Claudia Leeb affirms the possibility of meaningful feminist political engagement under capitalism. She does so by insisting that both Lacanian psychoanalysis and Adorno's critical theory have much to offer contemporary feminist thought. Because relatively little work has been done using both thinkers together to critique the reigning neoliberal paradigm, her book represents a milestone in feminist thought by making a strong argument in favor of their collective contribution to the field. Leeb succeeds in connecting Lacanian psychoanalysis to the social sphere and thus to the subject's political agency; similarly, she exonerates Adorno from the long-standing charge that he is an armchair Marxist whose compelling work in critical theory has no real-world implications. She demonstrates that as with Lacan, Adorno's analysis of the doubly mediated relationship between subjective and objective realms indeed has tangible bearing on our ability to critically engage with capitalism's entrenched hold on modern life.

In making her case, Leeb employs two crucial concepts: the Lacanian real and Adorno's notion of non-identity that together hold points of overlap that speak directly to the contrapuntal, a-systematic energies of feminist theory. Leeb deftly explains how the overlap of these two terms proves useful to feminist political theorizing given their ability to underscore the residual room for maneuver that plagues the totalizing, appropriating aspects of any

cultural configuration. The power of the unconscious mind and of critical reasoning always allows for something as yet unexperienced or unexplored; for Lacan, the Other always has a hole, a weakness that undermines its reach; for Adorno, identity claims always lend themselves to the power of negative dialectics that suggests alternative truths. Leeb skillfully demonstrates how this empowering, residual space proves strategically beneficial as it militates against the domesticating, colonizing impact of capitalism. As she unpacks the dynamic of this residual space, she affirms our ability to bring about meaningful change.

In the realms of both psychic and social reality, a remnant plagues efforts at closure such that all praxis comprehends the “tension of a certain coherence” (163) and retains an opening for reinterpretation. Thus, the extent to which both Lacan and Adorno’s writings militate against a totalizing world view, even under the consuming, consumerist powers of capitalism, is precisely what renders them useful to feminist theory. Both offer what Leeb terms “the limit,” that is, the realization that all efforts at philosophizing the world (subjective reality) and changing it (objective reality) contain gaps that demand constant renegotiation. It is precisely the mediated, dynamic interrelationship between subjective and objective realities—what Adorno terms “double mediation”—that offers hope that things can be different. Leeb is careful and thorough in her demonstration of how both the Lacanian real and Adorno’s non-identity prove useful in the task that animates left-leaning politics, the task of not just interpreting the neoliberal world order but changing it.

Insisting on double mediation distinguishes Leeb’s feminist theorizing from scholars who decry the subject’s coherence. Much leading feminist scholarship has argued that efforts to theorize a coherent feminine subject only prove counterproductive, for such efforts impose an artificial monolith on women’s experience, introduce a false sense of female solidarity, and fail to account for the important differences that separate women from one another. Leeb identifies Wendy Brown and Linda Zerilli as examples of prominent, serious scholars eager to move away from theorizing the subject in order to subsequently focus on the problems of capitalist alienation. Yet such well-intentioned projects turn back on themselves, Leeb insists, for they reinforce a dichotomy between subjective and objective realities. Leeb denies this dichotomy; drawing on the conceptual room for maneuver that double mediation and the real allow, she posits the “subject-in-outline” whose real-world experience maintains an oppositional, affirmative unconscious space. Leeb suggests “a political subject in a position to not only challenge but to transform the status quo”(5).

“Capitalism:” Local, Specific, and Grounded

Thanks to Leeb’s knowledge of feminist theory, Lacanian psychoanalysis, and Adorno’s critical theory, the book is a tour de force in arguing its case. Still, a few problems arise in its elaboration. One has to do with the need to unpack, historicize, and lend locality to the word “capitalism” in ways that would be consistent with Leeb’s overall argument. So much of her analysis relies on the assertion that homogenizing interpretations play into the neo-liberal status quo; by contrast, locality and specificity affirm a conceptual escape hatch. The co-opting power of discourses that orient the neo-liberal world (e.g., “the working class woman,” “the Black man,” “the homosexual”) as well as the ability of the Symbolic Other to construct our desire (“buy this product and your life will be made complete”) constitute the targets that Leeb’s “subject-in-outline” is designed to oppose. Leeb painstakingly explains how her two theorists deconstruct a unified notion of the subject in ways that will in turn deconstruct a calcified, static understanding of the social sphere: both poles of reality are subject to reinterpretation since “power is not all-powerful” (38) and the thinking subject can renegotiate empirical givens. It is for this reason that the term “capitalism” itself could use unpacking, qualifying, and localizing in order to bring it more fully into line with the ambitions of the book. Just as the subject’s self-understanding should never succumb to identity thinking which accords too much authority to the Other as currently constituted, neither should the Other—here capitalism, the neo-liberal order—be conceived as an ahistorical, static entity whose expression is unchanging over time.

This criticism is especially pertinent given Leeb’s grounding in Marxist theory, for the reader wonders whether less orthodox expressions of leftist politics such as social democracy would offer a clearer and more variegated picture of the suffering that is central to the analysis. It is refreshing to read a text that draws so carefully upon Marx’s original writings and that is sensitive to his language (this, thanks to Leeb’s command of her native German). Yet given the text’s theoretical armature, the term “capitalism” and its concomitant suffering demands scrutiny by the real and non-identity on which Leeb relies. If there is always “a hole in the Other” (35), and if subject and object are mutually constituting in a historical, socially mediated manner, then capitalism itself is as prone to variegation as is the thinking subject. Leeb is clear that her concern lies with the neo-liberal order of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries rather than with Marx’s nineteenth-century capitalism; still, the category “capitalism” often cited throughout the book could benefit from the methods of scrutiny that are central to its analytic framework. If it could be localized, specified, and more historically grounded then Leeb’s analysis

would take on deeper meaning. It must be acknowledged that Leeb does at times allow the term to take on specified meanings: for instance, in her discussion of the Arab Spring. Yet further development would be welcome, since the co-opting power of language as seen in the term “capitalism” attenuates the text’s grounding in Lacanian and critical theories.

Fluidity versus Nonidentity/the Real

Another topic that warrants deeper clarification is the distinction between the fluid postmodern subject and the subject-in-outline informed by Lacan and Adorno’s writings. Throughout the text, Leeb assigns the postmodern individual an instability that she argues is unwittingly complicitous in neo-liberal exploitation and alienation. Like Jürgen Habermas, she discerns a conservative strain in what presents itself as cutting edge, and deplores the support for the status quo that this school of thought breeds. Arguing that “constant fluidity leads to closure” (67), she suggests that the postmodern subject experiences a political disempowerment thanks to her signature lack of stability: an unwillingness to claim fixity due to one’s awareness of the discursive, malleable foundation of identity. Although Leeb is clearly familiar with the seminal texts in postmodern theory and deftly explains their arguments, it remains slightly unclear why *fluidity* proves disempowering while non-identity and the real offer ballast and thus traction to political actors. Texts such as Derrida’s *Specters of Marx* or *Derrida and the Time of the Political*, edited by Pheng Cheah and Suzanne Guerlac, offer compelling arguments to the contrary: the deconstructed subject militates against established hierarchies and thus embodies a political agenda. These texts insist that the fluid subject—the individual that does not precede language but is constituted by it, and whose “identity” always comprises a deviant logic—can indeed be politically engaged. In her concern regarding an apolitical postmodern subject, is Leeb perhaps conferring a homogenizing patina on a body of literature that is itself variegated and that in fact overlaps at times with her own intellectual interests? At one point, for instance, Leeb distinguishes “coherence” from “wholeness,” favoring the former over the latter. But does postmodernism advocate wholeness? More elaboration of why fluidity leads to closure and what precludes the postmodern subject from assuming political action is needed.

The Subject-in-Outline’s Point of Departure

The above observations raise the pervasive question of the problematic vantage point from which the subject-in-outline operates. In her engagement with Judith Butler and other contemporary theorists, Leeb takes issue with the

admission that a conservative moment plagues even the most progressive politics, and that efforts to dismantle the status quo always take place within the system they oppose. A deeper understanding of the real and of non-identity could remedy this situation, she suggests. Leeb therefore remains dissatisfied with Butler's claim that the subject always retains some indebtedness to the status quo since it is precisely the signifying system that brings the subject into being in the first place; she disdains the claim that progressive politics are shackled. While she agrees with the Lacanian premise regarding the construction of the speaking subject, she denies that the integral role of language and the Other need bind the subject to its meanings: where is the potential for revolution, for meaningful praxis that doesn't merely interpret the world but change it? Leeb thus laments Butler's assertion that "the becoming of the subject is *always* bound up with subordination" (146), such that a Lacanian interpretation leaves the individual "barely in a position to resist power" (147). Here, there is perhaps an overstatement of the conservative pall cast by Lacan—and by extension Adorno—which results in a slight misreading of Butler's intentions. Neither Lacan nor Adorno posit an unblemished vantage point from which the politically active individual will operate: we are always the by-products of the system that we oppose, and always use tools that come to us within that system. Adorno argues that a conservative residue always "peeps out" from within the revolutionary moment, for even in opposition we restate and thus reaffirm what we fight against. Butler's analysis of repetition captures this point precisely when she argues that repeating something over and over both reaffirms its power and undermines its authority by declaring it unfinished. Drag encapsulates this insight perfectly, for drag both mocks and obediently restates the gendered definitions that it challenges: it operates from *within* the reigning system yet strives to undermine that system's hold on gender. In her insistence on repetition (as with other things), Butler reaffirms that we always work from within the system that we seek to change, the system that constituted us in the first place. Yet our ability to play with the signifying system—to dress in drag and offer a different show every night—surely expresses an affirmative, creative force as it underscores the critical faculty's ongoing engagement with the Other.

This position appears quite consistent with both the real and non-identity, neither of which can be understood without the (conservative) ego on the one hand and the (conservative) politics of identification on the other. Adorno and Lacan certainly acknowledge the reactionary pull that pervades their work: for instance, the atonal music that Adorno promotes exercises its political impact only because it differs so markedly from the harmonious music that we typically enjoy. Its atonality reaffirms the tonal paradigm in music by reminding us of what we generally prefer. It may well be that Leeb is simply

trying to point out that the full revolutionary potential of Lacan's and Adorno's work has never been appreciated since critics insist too heavily on the conservative strain. While she does a fine job of doing so in her analysis of the subject-in-outline, it is important that her point of departure not be tinged with utopian overtones, for even the most renegade among us bear the traces of the reigning culture. Resisting power always comes from within.

Leeb is a fine writer whose prose is clear and crisp. Her carefully crafted insights demonstrate that deep thought indeed speaks directly to real-world political concerns. With *Power and Feminist Agency in Capitalism*, she thus offers a welcome contribution not only to feminist psychoanalytic and critical theories, but to the larger question of praxis as it seeks to resist and indeed dismantle capitalism's far-reaching reign.

Theorizing Feminist Political Subjectivity: A Reply to Caputi and Narach

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I would like to start out by thanking Larie Naranch and Mary Caputi for their inspiring and thought-provoking comments, which helped me to think both about the content and further implications of it. Before responding to their comments, I would like to briefly outline the main themes of the book. My book finds inspiration from Marx's famous thesis eleven in critiquing capitalism—that "philosophers have only interpreted the world in various ways; the important thing, however, is to change it." This thesis raises four interrelated questions that all pertain to rethinking the idea of political subjectivity. First, *when* can we change the world? This question implies rethinking the subject's relation to capitalist power structures to figure out when subjects can change the world despite their being subjected to power. Second, *who* is engaged in changing the world? This question requires us to rethink the idea of the political subject as the agent who engages in transformative acts. Third, *how* can we change the world? This question implies a rethinking of the relationship between theory and practice. Fourth, *what* leads to, or spurs on, social change? This question necessitates a rethinking of the concept of suffering, in particular the suffering capitalism has brought onto the world, as either impeding or leading to social change.

My book brings German (Karl Marx and Theodor W. Adorno) and French (Jacques Lacan) thought into conversation to answer these questions of socio-political change, and thereby develops the idea of the political subject-in-outline. The limit concepts of the real, coined by Lacan, and non-identity,

coined by Adorno, are central in such an enterprise. In the first part of the book, in chapter two, I show that political theories that suggest that the political subject emerges in the moment of subjection to power make it difficult (if not impossible) to envision transformative agency. Instead, my book coins the idea of the “moment of the limit,” which explains those moments *when* power fails to completely subject the working classes, women, racial and sexual minorities, and the political subject, so that transformative agency can emerge. In chapter three, the book challenges contemporary political theories that theorize the subject as “constantly shifting” or suggest that we must do away with the idea of the subject altogether, to counter the subject’s inherently exclusionary character, because without a subject (or with one that constantly shifts) there is no effective agent of change. Instead, it develops the idea of the political subject-in-outline to theorize the *who* of sociopolitical change, which has a certain coherence (the subject) necessary to effect change, and the permanent openness (the outline) necessary to counter the subject’s exclusionary character. In chapter four, the book explains that theory and practice are equally important tools of *how* people can change the world. It furthermore suggests that we must employ the language of theorizing as an ongoing, open-ended process to counter the tendencies of closure in political theories. Finally, in chapter five, I introduce a rethought concept of suffering to theorize *what* spurs on social change, without imprisoning sufferers in victim identities—and so challenge contemporary thinkers who want to get rid of the concept of suffering in contemporary political theorizing. The second part of the book applies the idea of the political-subject-in-outline to concrete examples—the feminist political subject and the working-class woman as a political subjects. In chapter six, I expose the problems inherent in Butler’s theorizing of political subjectivity and explain why my idea of the feminist subject-in-outline offers solutions to such problems. In chapters seven and eight, I expose the ways in which Marx and Adorno engage in identity thinking in their writings on the working-class woman, and explain the ways in which the working-class woman rebels against such thinking.

In her comments, Naranch points out that my book, particularly in part two, clarifies the ways in which the political subject-in-outline translates into political action through the figure of the working-class woman. Referring to the example of the ways in which the working-class girl’s subjectivity is produced as a pathology by the passing-by nun in Sandra Cisneros’s *The House on Mango Street*, Naranch would like me to clarify how the individual figure of the working-class girl can turn into a collective figure of working-class women’s resistance. In her words, “(h)ow does individual pain become translated into political critique? How does the working class girl become resig-nified through her pain?”

To answer this important question, let us return to the scene where a nun passes by the working-class girl's house: "Where do you live? She asked. There, I said pointing up to the third floor. You live *there*? There. I had to look to where she pointed—the third floor, the paint peeling, wooden bars Papa had nailed on the windows so we wouldn't fall out. You live *there*? The way she said it made me feel like *nothing*."³ In my book, in chapter two, I explain that when the nun disapprovingly points at the girl's house, and expresses her surprise that anybody could live in such a house, she reduces the girl to the signifier "working-class girl," which means in liberal capitalist ideology that the girl's class position, expressed in the house she lives, is the result of personal failure for which her parents and by extension she herself is responsible.

Although the nun reduces the girl to the signifier "working-class girl," which generates a petrified pain in the working-class girl, this at the same time allows the girl from now on to speak or function as a subject. However, the subject that is generated in the moment of subjection to the signifier is not a rebellious subject, as Foucauldians or Butlerians would argue. Rather, it is a subordinated subject, here the subordination to and acceptance of the liberal capitalist ideology as it is implied in the signifier "working-class girl," which generates the girl's desire to leave the working class and become bourgeois herself, expressed in her desire to live in a "real house." Nonetheless, the girl is never completely subordinated to liberal capitalist ideology, because of what I call *the moment of the limit* in power.

In this brief moment, to which the moment of the real and non-identity allude, we encounter a hole in the whole of liberal capitalist ideology of personal failure and success, which exposes that the socio-symbolic domain with its signifiers is not all-powerful and cannot fully subordinate the working-class girl. Here the girl can emerge as a *political* subject with the capacity to radically resignify what it means to be working-class and a girl, and with that transform power structures. In chapter five, I further clarify the ways in which the moment of non-identity and the real is connected to the physical moment of suffering and pain, which explains in more detail *what* makes the subordinated rebel.

The nun's disapprovingly pointing at the girl's working-class house, and the expression of her surprise that anybody could live in such a house, created the senseless suffering and pain in the working-class girl that made her feel like nothing. However, the moment of non-identity and the real, insofar as they refer to a physical moment of pain and suffering in the girl, they tell the girl that, as Adorno would put it, "suffering ought not to be, that things *should be different*."⁴ In this physical moment of pain, the working-class girl stops trying to escape the working class and becoming bourgeois herself. Instead

she organizes the gendered, raced, and sexed working class as a *collective* political subject-in-outline to create a different society where the exploitation of the working class and the suffering it creates ceases to exist.

Here it is important to note that although the physical moment of suffering and pain is the most subjective experience, it is not something that is merely subjective. Rather it is connected to the objective domain of power. As Adorno puts it, “the need to lend a voice to suffering is a condition of all truth. For suffering is objectivity that weighs upon the subject; its most subjective experience, its expression, is objectively conveyed.”⁵ The suffering that the gendered, raced, and sexed working classes experience in their daily lives weighs upon them, because it is the result of objective power structures in capitalism that justify and cover over capitalist exploitation with the liberal ideology of “personal failure,” that makes individual subjects responsible for their class position.

As such, individual suffering and pain is not a purely private and personal pain one is feeling, when it is the result of objective power structures, but also a public pain that the working classes can collectively rally around. Insofar as objective oppression is felt as painful for numerous working-class subjects, in the moment of the limit, the pain of senseless suffering translates into reflection about the wrongness of the current state of affairs, which makes them aware that their class position is not their personal failure but the result of objective power structures that have an interest to keep them in their subordinated position. The awareness brought on by the moment of the limit can then generate transformative *collective* political agency, and underlines that the body (suffering) at the same time needs the mind (in critical reflection) for suffering to be effective in transforming the existing inhuman conditions in capitalist societies.

Naranch further suggests that a rethought concept of the proletariat as “precariat” is more helpful than keeping the idea of the proletariat, as this concept allows us to pay attention to gender among other structures of power. Here Naranch invites me to say more about how a class analysis attentive to gender should keep the category of the proletariat even in a revised form. As I discuss in chapter four, David Harvey replaces the concept of the proletariat with that of the precariat to draw our attention to the fact that “the important and ever-expanding labor market and sustaining urban life is increasingly done by insecure, often part-time and disorganized low-paid labor,” which is largely performed by vulnerable, immigrant, minority women.⁶ Harvey’s idea of the precariat is important, as it brings forward the ways the urban labor force is raced and gendered, which is eradicated in Marx’s traditional conception of the proletariat.

However, I disagree with Harvey’s and Naranch’s suggestion to replace the concept of the proletariat with that of the precariat. The concept of the

proletariat more so than the concept of the precariat implies a radical political imaginary, which is necessary for workers beyond national boundaries and those that sympathize with their struggles to unite and fight against the neoliberal capitalist order. Furthermore, the concept of the proletariat, unlike the new concept of the precariat, refers to a long history of working-class organizing and revolutionary agency of exploited workers, hence its radical political imaginary, which we need to bring back to fight the excesses of global capital. Also, replacing the concept of the proletariat with the precariat might have the unfortunate side effect of pitting the traditional proletariat against the precariat, which is problematic at times when there is an urgency that workers of the world unite.

However, reintroducing the term proletariat does not mean that we necessarily need to also evoke its exclusionary character, and that we cannot rethink this term to counter its problematic aspects as we find it in the traditional conception. In my book I rethink the term in the context of my idea of the political subject-in-outline. I call the revolutionary agent the proletariat-in-outline. The proletariat-in-outline has a certain coherence (the proletariat) necessary to make revolutionary agency on an international scale a possibility. At the same time, it accepts its remaining an outline and with that its permanent openness, which opens up the space for the precariat—mostly immigrant and minority women—to enter the political collectivity and become part of the revolutionary subject without being subsumed by it, which gains with such entry the necessary strength to overthrow capitalism. Furthermore, Naranch suggests that we need to replace the concept of the proletariat with the concept of the precariat, “to think about a more fluid worker in the time of neoliberalism.” As I will further elaborate in my discussion of Caputi’s insistence on the idea of the “fluid subject” below, the idea of the “fluid worker,” instead of allowing us to fight against the ills of neoliberal capitalism, is firmly entrenched in its workings.

Naranch also invites me to say more about why the suffering experienced by working-class women in the United States did not turn into working-class solidarity and rebellion, but instead into the support of Trump. This important question is not one which I address in the book, since it was written before the election, but I do address this in my more recent article.⁷ In this article I show that people in the United States are not just confronted with frustrating economic conditions (which one also finds in other nations), but a liberal capitalist ideology that makes people feel personally responsible for not doing better. In such a scenario people frequently cannot live up to their ego ideal—the internalized standards of liberal capitalist society, that is economic success—which generates narcissistically wounded egos that feel devalued, and which Trump exploited for his electoral success.

People who voted for Trump have replaced their ego ideal with him, which allowed them to get rid of the frustrations of their own self and feel “great again.” Furthermore, people supported him because, as their ego-ideal replacement, he allowed, like in a festival, a more permanent release from the pressures of the ego ideal. Finally, Trump was their chosen candidate, because he lifted moral restrictions of being openly racist, sexist, and classist. Although Trump successfully manipulated conditions of suffering created by liberal capitalist society for his electoral success, which led to a certain breakdown in thinking, the hope remains that the moments of non-identity and the real generate the *feeling* that things are wrong and that things should be different—that one is still living in poverty and exploited and can barely survive. In this moment of suffering and pain one gains the insight that Trump stands for the neo-liberal capitalist order and does everything to further undermine one’s existence.

Naranch, referring to my chapter on Marx and the working-class woman, suggests that we need a reworking of feminist social imaginary and politics to theorize sexist power across class divisions, rather than pitting working class women against bourgeois women. I agree with her on that. The aim of this chapter was not to pit the working-class woman against the bourgeois woman, as Naranch seems to suggest. Rather, in part two of my book, I expose the ways in which Adorno and Marx have problematic imaginations of the working-class woman, which counter their otherwise radical imaginary. In relation to Marx, I show that although his core philosophical project was to challenge hierarchical oppositions, and although he was rather critical of the grim situation of bourgeois women, when taking a closer look at his writing on the working-class woman, he reinforces hierarchical oppositions, and we find her positioned at what constitutes the negative side of hierarchical oppositions.

In relation to Adorno, I show that although he attacked identity thinking, which is a thinking that does away with the moment of non-identity, he reinforces identity thinking in his writings on the working-class woman, who appears in the three figurations of the phallic, the castrating, and the castrated woman. That thinkers whose core philosophical project was to challenge hierarchical oppositions (Marx) and identity thinking (Adorno) managed to reinforce hierarchical opposition and identity thinking brings us back to the challenges the idea of the subject-in-outline poses in practice, insofar as accepting to remain a subject-with-holes generates desires and fears, the desire for wholeness and the fear that such wholeness is impossible, which implicate Marx and Adorno in the very same form of thinking they challenge in their philosophical projects. For the theory and practice of a political subject-in-outline to be able to move within the tension of permanent openness

and a certain coherence, we must successfully deal with the fears and desires that an embrace of the moment of the limit (the real and non-identity) incites.

Finally, Naranch wonders what another chapter would look like that shows the successes of working-class women's organizing, which would allow me to introduce a utopian moment of such organizing. Although I believe that utopian thinking needs to have a space in contemporary political theorizing, as a critical feminist theorist I am rather hesitant to provide a utopia of working-class women's resistance. Utopias are often prone to eradicate contradictions and dissonance and as such counter the idea of the political subject-in-outline that leaves contradictions intact and considers dissonance the critical space for theorizing. However, the moment of non-identity and the real, which refer to the physical moment of suffering, allows one a glimpse into a different world, where one is no longer subjected to that suffering, which helps to motivate collective organizing to get rid of domination and exploitation. I have alluded to such possibilities by bringing in collective organizing and rebellion of the raced and gendered working-class in my book. In my recent work, I allude to such a brief moment of non-identity in the United States, where people continue to suffer despite false promises that it will be alleviated, which allows us to envision a scenario where people will start to withdraw their support from Trump.⁸

Here I would like to turn to the questions raised by Caputi. She suggests that I "unpack, qualify and localize" the concept of capitalism to counter an understanding of it that is ahistorical and static, or unchanging over time, which would run counter to my concept of the political subject-in-outline. At one point she further says: "Just as the subject's self-understanding should never succumb to identity thinking which accords too much authority to the Other as currently constituted, neither should the Other—here capitalism, the neo-liberal order—be conceived as an ahistorical, static entity whose expression is unchanging over time" and that "capitalism itself is as prone to variegation as is the thinking subject." I fully agree with Caputi on this point. It seems that Caputi is here applying my theoretical framework of the subject-in-outline to rethink the concept of capitalism itself, rather than rejecting my theoretical framework. Insofar as she is drawing out a further implication of my theorizing, I would like to thank her for showing how the concept of capitalism should be itself rethought in the light of my theoretical framework.

I agree with her point that there are local and specific varieties of capitalism that are at work in different parts of the world, as this would need to inform the practice of resistance in those contexts. For example, in my discussion of the proletariat-in-outline (in chapter 4), I point at the changing nature of capitalism, by exposing the changing nature of who is exploited by capitalism, which is nowadays in Western capitalist societies more and more immigrant and

feminized labor, which by extension shows how capitalism itself changes. However, applying the idea of the subject-in-outline to such a vast project would need more discussion, and it was beyond the bounds of my book to discuss all the varieties of capitalism. The main aim in this book is to bring back the critique of capitalism into feminist political theory, so that feminist theorizing does not merely aim at the inclusion of women, as well as sexual and racial minorities, into capitalist structures, which leaves such structures and the suffering they cause intact. Furthermore, the aim of my book is to bring back the specific suffering caused by capitalism—alienation, exploitation, and isolation—which are concepts that are largely eschewed in contemporary political and feminist theory with its focus on exposing the suffering caused by a gendered, raced, and sexed exclusion from capitalist structures, which ends up contributing to depoliticize the suffering caused by capitalism.

Also, I show that hierarchical oppositions, in particular the mind–body opposition, play a core role in justifying and covering over the suffering capitalism causes. The signifiers “working classes” and “woman” as well as racial and sexual minorities are, mostly unconsciously, linked to what constitutes the negative side of hierarchical oppositions (the despised body, nature, material labor, and the object), which is used to justify and cover over the division of labor and exploitation along class, gender, race and sexual lines. For feminist political theory to fight the ills of capitalism, it must pursue several things in tandem. First, it must expose hierarchical oppositions and make conscious the ways they are unconsciously gendered, classed, raced, and sexed. Second, it must delink groups of people from oppositions to counter the reinforcement of subordination and domination along class, gender, race, and sexual lines. Third, it must establish a mediated relation between oppositions (the subject/object, theory/practice and mind/body), which I aimed at with developing the idea of the political subject-in-outline.

Here it is important to note that the result of the left’s failure to deliver a rigorous critique on capitalism, to which political and feminist theorists also contributed with their eschewal of Marxist thought and their main concern with inclusion/exclusion into capitalist structures, instead of challenging such structures, was seized upon by the Far Right in the United States. By delivering a false critique of capitalism that makes raced Others, mostly immigrants from Mexico and the Middle East, responsible for the suffering caused by capitalism, the Far Right managed to shore up its electoral successes. Caputi’s suggestion that my critique of capitalism is “too orthodox Marxist” seems to be counter-productive in times when we need a rigorous critique of capitalism to counter the rise of the Far Right, insofar as such a suggestion has often been used by (feminist) political theorists to delegitimize Marxist thought and with that to silence any critique of capitalism.

In her second question, Caputi suggests that I need to clarify “why *fluidity* proves disempowering while non-identity and the real offer ballast and thus traction to political actors.” Here she wants me to clarify why I think that the fluid subject does not have agency, and why the subject-in-outline in contrast is needed to act. According to her, Derrida in his *Specters of Marx* and those thinkers that draw on deconstruction show us that the fluid subject can lead to socio-political change.

To begin with I would like to clarify that in my book I did not invoke Derrida’s idea of the subject as the paradigmatic example of the fluid subject of postmodernity, although he is often evoked as such. In a current project of mine, I bring Derrida and Adorno in conversation to rethink political subjectivity and to show that the political subject Derrida invokes in the *Specters of Marx*, the New International, does not lead to any radical socio-political transformations, but leaves the neo-liberal capitalist order intact. In a conversation with Elisabeth Roudinesco, Derrida admitted that he has a “rather dim hope” that the New International leads to any revolution.⁹ However, the problem of the status of the political subject in Derrida’s work does not preclude finding central concepts, such as the concept of *différance* and the event, which parallel the concept of non-identity, and which allow us to rethink subjectivity along the lines of the political subject-in-outline.

My target of the “fluid subjects” are feminist thinkers who draw on post-modernism, in particular Derrida’s deconstruction, to theorize political subjectivity, such as Nancy Fraser. In her work on the politics of recognition she characterizes the political subject as “destabilized, fluid,” and ever-shifting networks, that are “freely elaborated and swiftly deconstructed.”¹⁰ Already Marx showed us that a fluid subject is the hallmark of liberal capitalism with its “everlasting uncertainty,” and where “all that is solid melts into air,”¹¹ which finds its fullest expression in neo-liberal capitalism with its flexible networks and the ideal of the self-fashioning subject. In a recent article, I show that Fraser’s conceptualization of the fluid subject implicates her theorizing in what she calls the “spirit of neoliberal capitalism” rather than providing us with a radical imaginary that allows us to transform neoliberal capitalism.¹² To transform power structures, feminists need a clear break with the idea of the fluid subject, and instead turn their attention to the political subject-in-outline, which is necessary to counter the idea of a whole or centered subject, without promoting the highly problematic notion of a fluid subject.

In connection with her queries on my conceptualization of political subjectivity, Caputi also would like me to clarify why I think that postmodernism’s fluid subject advocates wholeness. In my book I do not suggest that the postmodern subject advocates wholeness. Rather, its insistence on fluidity aims at the opposite. However, I suggest that when the idea of the fluid or “constantly shifting subject” is applied in practice, as in social movements,

such a subject generates anxieties and the desire for wholeness, which leads to a scenario where such movements are not in a position to embrace the moment of the limit in their political subjectivity and remain a political subject-in-outline, but instead opt for wholeness, which leads to an exclusionary political subject that is not in a position to transform the status quo.

In her last question Caputi seems to suggest that the subject-in-outline operates from a problematic vantage point outside power structures. However, at a certain point she also suggests another reading of what I am up to: "It may well be that Leeb is simply trying to point out that the full revolutionary potential of Lacan's and Adorno's work has never been appreciated since critics have insisted too heavily on the conservative strain." In my book, I do not assume a privileged vantage point of the political subject-in-outline outside power structures. As I show in chapter 2, the Lacanian real as well as the Adornian non-identical are not something that exists outside the signifier and the symbolic order. Rather, the real and non-identity allows us to level a critique on power, because they point at the hole within the signifier and the symbolic domain itself. The idea of the political subject-in-outline is then based on Adorno's notion of *immanent critique*. Whereas "transcendent critique" critiques from the outside and based on its own principles, immanent critique proceeds via internal contradictions from the inside, which underlines the ways in which the political subject-in-outline does not assume some privileged vantage point.¹³ I therefore agree with Caputi's suggestion that my book counters conservative readings of Lacan and Adorno and foregrounds the revolutionary potential of these thinkers for political and feminist theorizing.

Caputi also seems to disagree with my reading of Butler. According to her, Butler's work provides a resource for feminist political theorizing because she shows us that the reiteration of norms always reinforces and at the same time undermines them. In chapter six, I argue that Butler ends up with a closed conception of power because of two problems in her theoretical framework. First, she rejects limit concepts (such as the real and non-identity) and, second, because she holds on (albeit ambivalently) to the language of recognition. Butler does not assume or start out with the idea that power is whole. However, her rejection of limit concepts leads to such a result. Since for her there is not a moment of the limit in power, where power fails to fully subordinate us, for Butler agency is reduced to a subversive repetition of norms. However, I show in my discussion of her standard example, that the repetition of gender norms by the drag queen or king does not so much lead to any resistance to, let alone transformation of, power, but rather leads to the reinforcement of gender norms, which is evident in the often painful procedures that drag kings and queens undergo to become "real" men or women.

Furthermore, Butler holds on to Hegelian desire, according to which human desire is essentially a desire for recognition, which makes it difficult if not impossible to envision sociopolitical change in her theoretical framework. Since for Butler we must be recognized by a dominating Other to secure our existence, the moment of becoming a subject is for her *always* bound up with capitulation to one's subordination—which she calls a “sorry bind” that we can only escape through “critical desubjectivation,” or getting rid of the subject altogether, which I consider as a dead end for feminist transformative politics. One does not need to go the route of desubjectivation, however, if one avoids the “sorry bind” that Butler gets herself into. In my book I argue that subject formation does not necessarily imply a capitulation to subordination, if we employ limit concepts in our theorizing and make a clear break with the language of recognition. The moment of the limit, the moment of the real or non-identity, points at the holes or gaps in the Other, the symbolic domain and its signifiers (or oppressive social categories). In this moment the Other does not recognize or misrecognize me, but calls any wholeness of my identity into question. It makes me question who I am, and thus allows the political subject who questions and transforms all pre-determined social categories to emerge.

Notes

1. See Cornelius Castoriadis, *Philosophy, Politics, Autonomy: Essays in Political Philosophy*, ed. David Ames Curtis (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 21.
2. Guy Standing, *The Precariat: A New and Dangerous Class* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2014).
3. Sandra Cisneros, “The House on Mango Street,” in *Calling Home: Working-Class Women's Writings*, ed. J. Zandy (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1990), 68–69, my emphasis.
4. Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E. B. Ashton (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 1981), 203, my emphasis.
5. *Ibid.*, 17–18.
6. David Harvey, *Rebel Cities: From the Right to the City to the Urban Revolution* (London: Verso, 2013), xiv.
7. Claudia Leeb, “A Festival for Frustrated Egos: The Rise of Trump from an Early Frankfurt School Critical Theory Perspective,” in *Trump and Political Philosophy: Patriotism, Cosmopolitanism and Civic Virtue*, ed. Angel Jaramillo and Sable Marc (Palgrave Macmillan, in press).
8. Claudia Leeb, “A Festival for Frustrated Egos: The Rise of Trump from an Early Frankfurt School Critical Theory Perspective,” in *Trump and Political Philosophy: Patriotism, Cosmopolitanism and Civic Virtue*, ed. Angel Jaramillo and Sable Marc (Palgrave Macmillan, in press).

9. Jacques Derrida and Elisabeth Roudinesco, *For What Tomorrow: A Dialogue*, trans. Jeff Fort (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2004), 94.
10. Nancy Fraser, "From Redistribution to Recognition? Dilemmas of Justice in a 'Post-Socialist' Age," *New Left Review* 212, no. 83 (1995): 89–90.
11. Karl Marx, "Manifesto of the Communist Party," in *The Marx-Engels Reader* (New York: Princeton University Press, 1972), 469–500, 476.
12. Claudia Leeb, "Radical or Neoliberal Political Imaginary? Nancy Fraser Revisited," in *The Sage Handbook of Frankfurt School Critical Theory*, ed. Werner Bonefeld, Beverley Best, and Chris O'Kane (New York: Sage, in press).
13. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 5.

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