Poststructuralist Agency
The Subject in
Twentieth-Century Theory

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That poststructuralist thinkers have offered a number of radical critiques of the subject has long been acknowledged. Their framework has, however, been criticised for seeking to annihilate and/or decentre the subject to the extent that agency – meaning autonomous intentional action – is not possible. This criticism is built on two premises: first, poststructuralist thought decentres the subject to think of it in founded rather than foundational terms. Second, the decentred subject is understood to be a determined effect of pre-personal structures and processes. While I agree that poststructuralist thinking does, indeed, decentre the subject, I argue that this critical process is combined with a regenerative one whereby the founding, constituting subject is replaced by a founded, constituted subject, and crucially that this rethought subject is understood to be merely conditioned, rather than determined, by pre-personal structures and processes. Furthermore, I maintain that poststructuralist thinkers are aware of the implications that this rethinking has for the question of agency and offer substantial and heterogeneous proposals to resolve it.

From this, I defend four fundamental claims: 1) The question of the subject is central to poststructuralist thinking by virtue of its attempt to decentre the subject from the foundational status it has long had within Western philosophy. 2) Poststructuralist thinkers are aware of the implications that this rethinking has for the question of agency and propose heterogeneous ‘solutions’ to account for it. 3) It is those poststructuralists inspired by (Lacanian) psychoanalysis who offer the most logically sophisticated and subtle rethinking of the founded subject as it relates to the question of agency, with 4) Cornelius Castoriadis providing the most detailed account by virtue of his insistence that it be thought in terms of a nexus of ever-changing configurations of social, symbolic and psychic components.
With this, I contribute to our understanding of poststructuralism and each of the thinkers engaged with, show the important role that psychoanalytic theory plays within poststructuralist thought, and demonstrate that poststructuralist thought is able to decentre the subject while coherently explaining how agency is possible.

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Introduction

The poststructuralist paradigm has become one of the dominant modes of inquiry in the humanities and social sciences, to the extent that, as Françoise Dosse explains, ‘it is no longer even possible to think without taking the structuralist revolution into account’.1 This is not to say that it has been universally accepted. Among mainstream theorists, poststructuralism is often associated with contradiction, hyperbole, lack of clarity and vacuity. Although it is true that poststructuralist writers are unlikely to win any praise for their writing style,2 a large part of this is due to the challenge that these writers set themselves; namely, to contest many of the foundational assumptions upon which much mainstream Western (political) philosophical thought is and has been based. To do so, they do not simply reconfigure pre-existing concepts, but go further by disrupting and undermining the concepts, categories and ways of thinking that have long dominated. For those trained in and focused on traditional forms of thought, this can be too much. One of the sub-aims of this book, however, is to show that if we are willing to delve patiently into the works of various poststructuralist thinkers, not only is their position subtle and developed, but it tends to be able to provide a sophisticated response to many of the queries and questions raised against them.

As its name suggests, poststructuralism developed out of debates taking place within 1960s French structuralism, itself a development from linguistics and, in particular, Ferdinand de Saussure’s General Course in Linguistics, published posthumously by his students in 1916.3 Saussure’s linguistic theory is complicated, but the pertinent point for us is the emphasis it places on the relationships inherent in the generation of meaning. Rather than hold that meaning is ahistoric, tied substantially to each signifier, or simply representative of an external object, Saussure argues that meaning is generated from the relations between two signifiers and, crucially, that
this relation is not grounded in a third mediating moment. Instead, he explains that

in the language itself, there are only differences. Even more important than that is the fact that, although in general a difference presupposes positive terms between which the difference holds, in a language there are only differences, and no positive terms. Whether we take the signification or the signal, the language includes neither ideas nor sounds existing prior to the linguistic system, but only conceptual and phonetic differences arising out of that system. In a sign, what matters more than any idea or sound associated with it is what other signs surround it. The proof of this lies in the fact that the value of a sign may change without affecting either meaning or sound, simply because some neighbouring sign has undergone a change.4

As Lionel Bailly explains, for Saussure, ‘it is the relation of the Sign (the word) to the code of signification (the language) that accords it meaning, rather than a simple correspondence with an external object’,5 a position that emphasises the immateriality, or abstract nature, of the linguistic signifier. For Saussurean linguistics, therefore, meaning is generated from the nature and structure of the relations between signs.

Structuralists took this over to claim that structure is determinate for meaning but finite: the meaning of a sign changes depending on its relation, but there are only so many combinations that it can enter into. As structuralist thought developed philosophically, the limitations of this position became apparent. First, even if it is accepted that meaning is generated from the relations between signs, it is not evident that these are finite. Second, structuralist analyses tended to imply that the relationship between the signifiers is a symmetrical one, with each side being just as important as the other. There was liberating intent behind this: all of a sudden, those aspects that had previously been downgraded were considered to be just as important as those that had previously been privileged. However, it gradually became apparent that it was quite possible for meaning to be generated from an asymmetric relation, wherein the importance or contribution of each side is unequal. This spawned significantly more relational combinations than the symmetric structuralist understanding permitted and, in so doing, destabilised meaning to an even greater degree than the structuralist conception did or could. Third, whereas structuralism was taken to insist on a finite number of possible combinations and, by extension, meanings, the question of the closure inherent in this understanding was increasingly attacked. By emphasising logical (and metaphysical) openness, poststructuralist thinkers insisted that structures change and morph in a multiplicity of ways, not all of which can be foreseen.6
This ties into the fourth major critique of the structuralist position: its fetishisation of structure. As Saul Newman explains,

[the virtue of structuralism was that it avoided essentialist understandings, in which identity and experience were seen as being grounded in an objective intelligible ‘substance’ or ‘reality’ that was internal to it – the ‘thing in itself.’ Structuralism showed that there was no such thing as the ‘thing in itself,’ and this was because the structure was so totalising and determining, it could be seen as a kind of essence in itself. In other words, structuralism came increasingly be seen as a new form of essentialism or foundationalism, in which identity was once again founded on an absolute ground.]

By insisting that meaning is generated by and from relations, which in turn are conditioned by specific structures, structuralist thought usurped the privileged role historically given to essence and subjectivity and replaced it with a privileging of structure. In so doing, however, it simply changed the focus so that rather than insist that the subject constitutes structures, structures were taken to be constitutive of the subject. Therefore, despite its insistence that the fact that meaning is generated relationally undermines any privileging of a singular point or principle, structuralism nevertheless continued to give foundational importance to ‘structure’. It is at this moment that poststructuralism arises.

Instead of overcoming the continuing (implicit) foundationalism inherent in structuralism by returning to a pre-structuralist understanding grounded in a fixed ahistoric essence, poststructuralism took the relationality of structuralism to its radical conclusion: if meaning is generated from (a)symmetric relations, then the structure itself must be radically ever-changing and open-ended. All unity, consistency and stability must be questioned and undermined whenever and wherever it arises. As Todd May explains, instead of continuing to operate through a structure/subject divide, poststructuralism
dissolves the subject/structure dichotomy altogether by substituting for both a concept that might be called ‘practices.’ What is of interest to the poststructuralists is neither the constituting interiority of the subject nor the constituting exteriority of structures, but instead the interlocking networks of contingent practices that produces ‘subjects’ and ‘structures.”

However, instead of simply being a destructive form of thinking, I will show that this negative moment is accompanied by a positive aspect that aims to reconstruct identity and the difference–identity relation in non-essentialist terms.
Of course, that poststructuralist thought rejects essentialism causes the commentator who attempts to define ‘it’ significant problems. The best we can do is point to particular conditions or approaches shared, usually in heterogeneous ways, by thinkers normally associated with poststructuralism. Judith Butler and Joan W. Scott summarise this nicely when they explain that ‘[i]f the reader [tries] to discover what “poststructuralism” is, she will be frustrated and, perhaps, disconcerted. Poststructuralism is not, strictly speaking, a position, but rather a critical interrogation of the exclusionary operations by which “positions” are established.’ 10 Whereas Western philosophical thought has long affirmed a fixed substance to ground its conclusions in ahistoric foundations, poststructuralism offers heterogeneous critiques of this assumption to ground thought in difference or, put more simply, pure change. By attacking the assumptions that have long grounded thought, poststructuralists aim to undermine any claim to permanence, identity or ahistoric truth. This even extends to the label ‘poststructuralist’, which was questioned by many of the thinkers associated with it, and, indeed, included in this study.11

This book is not a history of poststructuralism12 and so I have not aimed to discuss every figure who could potentially be included. However, while this account does not claim to be exhaustive, the thinkers discussed are extensive and demonstrate the heterogeneity of ‘poststructuralism’. There is, however, one figure – Luce Irigaray – whose exclusion perhaps stands out, especially given the inclusion of other feminist poststructuralists such as Judith Butler and Julia Kristeva. The reason for this is simple: as fascinating and important as Irigaray’s work has been and arguably continues to be, she is not included because although she offers an account of subjectivity thought from sexuality, she does not offer an explicit account of agency in the way that the other thinkers included here do.13

On the other hand, the inclusion of Cornelius Castoriadis and Jacques Lacan might also be thought to be contentious. After all, for a long time Lacan was associated with structuralism, an assessment based primarily on the reduction of his thinking to the differential relations inherent in his conception of the symbolic, which were taken to structure all else and form a closed totality. Castoriadis, for example, bases his critique of Lacan on this understanding. The start of the new millennium, however, witnessed a new wave of Lacanian scholarship that criticised this ‘structuralist’ reading for ignoring the third Lacanian register – the real – which emphasises that which cannot be symbolised, and by focusing on this third register concluded that Lacan’s thinking affirms discontinuity, difference, plurality, openness and so on.14 It is this later reading (which
has become the standard one) that brings Lacan into the poststructuralist orbit and so warrants his inclusion here.

In relation to the inclusion of Castoriadis, I follow a long line of commentators who have associated his thinking with (post-)structuralism. Axel Honneth, for example, ties Castoriadis to the structuralist trajectory, albeit negatively, by claiming that ‘Castoriadis . . . follows structuralism [as] a point of departure’, only to subsequently insist that his thought is tied to it because Castoriadis follows the structuralists in holding that social change is ‘an impersonal occurrence’ of anonymous processes.15 Similarly, Jürgen Habermas claims that Castoriadis’s thought ends up as ‘another variant of poststructuralism’.16 While Honneth and Habermas make the association pejoratively, it nevertheless supports the inclusion of Castoriadis in this study. More positively, Suzi Adams insists that Castoriadis joins the poststructuralists because he mirrors their return to Freud ‘to develop his own thoughts’, while Johann Michel recognises the problem but includes Castoriadis within poststructuralism by noting that he remains tied to structuralism, namely through his conflictual bond with Lacanian psychoanalysis, but ‘adopts a strategy of “surpassing without conserving”’ it.17 As such, Castoriadis is ‘post’-structuralist in both a temporal and a conceptual sense in so far as he develops, without strictly adhering to, the fundamental premises of structuralist thought. Warren Breckman, however, helpfully settles the matter by showing the ways in which Castoriadis and other poststructuralist thinkers overlap:

Vehement as Castoriadis’s comments could be, his relationship to [post-]structuralism was in fact not merely a matter of drawing a rigid battle line. Indeed, his work entwined constructively with the broad shift in thinking represented most prominently by Levi-Strauss and Lacan. He too rejected the idea that we have unmediated access to reality; he too rejected the idea of a sovereign conscious subject for whom language is a transcendent medium of expression. He too believed that society is a symbolic construction made up of significations, and he spoke of ‘structures’ shaping the material forms and mentalities of instituted society. That he shared many of the premises of structuralism makes it all the more intriguing, both theoretically and historically, that he worked his way toward such different conclusions.18

Besides the similarities mention by Breckman, I would also point to the common rejection of fixed essence and ahistoricism, and the concomitant emphasis on flux and change. As such, just because Castoriadis comes to different conclusions than other authors normally associated with poststructuralism does not mean that he cannot be associated with them; after
all, the poststructuralist paradigm is highly heterogeneous. Indeed, I will argue that it is precisely because he comes to different conclusions that Castoriadis’s inclusion is valuable.

Another contentious issue that arises relates to the question of what I mean by ‘poststructuralism’. After all, discussing ‘poststructuralist agency’ requires some idea of what ‘poststructuralism’ delineates. This is, however, a complicated topic not only because of the heterogeneity of the positions tied to ‘it’ and because, as noted, a number labelled as ‘poststructuralist’ have openly hesitated about the term, but also because one of the defining features of the poststructuralist paradigm is a rejection of a defining ‘essence’ or ‘identity’. In response, and while I am mindful of the heterogeneity of the positions staked out by the different thinkers included, I simply use the term ‘poststructuralism’ as a hermeneutic tool to engage with and develop the argument of the book: namely, that contrary to long-standing and widespread critiques, poststructuralist thought engages extensively with the problems of the subject and (autonomous, intentional) agency and, in so doing, offers a number of increasingly radical conceptions of the subject to rethink (intentional) agency in historical non-essentialist terms. For this reason, I will not treat poststructuralism as offering or describing a definitive homogeneous programme orientated towards a particular end, but as a style of thinking, adopted, to different degrees and in different ways, by thinkers who engage with the question of ontological identity and presence to call their privileging into question. As a rough starting point, this manner of thinking aims to affirm radical heterogeneity and change over homogeneity and ahistoricism.

This has implications for all areas of thought, but to get started it will be helpful to mention three. First, poststructuralism, broadly understood, insists that reality is a historical construction resulting from alterations in the pre-personal, anonymous structures and processes subtending the manifestations of the phenomenal world. Rather than adopt a two-world approach, wherein the world of appearance is grounded in a hidden essential one, poststructuralist thinkers emphasise that thinking occurs immanently to historically contingent (pre-personal) forces and structures. Therefore, to understand an issue requires that we take a close and very particular look at its actual appearance, which will, so they contend, reveal it to be shaped by constantly changing differential forces or processes. To understand an ‘entity’ requires that we comprehend the composition of those ever-changing differential forces and the relationship between them.

Second, poststructuralists take over the structuralist affirmation of relationality but radicalise it by recognising that relations are asymmetric, with their unequal distribution bringing forth the question of power. Rather
than think of power, or force, as a possession of an agent, poststructuralist thought implicitly takes over the Nietzschean premise that the world is a

[m]onster of energy, without beginning, without end; a firm, iron magnitude of force that does not grow bigger or smaller, that does not expend itself but only transforms itself; as a whole, of unalterable size, a household without expenses or losses, but likewise without increase or income; enclosed by ‘nothingness’ as by a boundary; not something blurry or wasted, not something endlessly extended, but set in a definitive space as a definite force, and not a space that might be ‘empty’ here or there, but rather as force throughout, as a play of forces and waves of force, at the same time one and many, increasing here and at the same time decreasing there; a sea of forces flowing and rushing together, eternally changing, eternally flooding back, with tremendous years of recurrence, with an ebb and a flood of its forms; out of the simplest forms striving toward the most complex, out of the stilllest, most rigid, coldest forms toward the hottest, most turbulent, most self-contradictory . . . as a becoming that knows no satiety, no disgust, no weariness.19

The basic idea is that struggle and contestation are constitutive of the ontological structures of reality. This struggle may not be apparent, but it is always rumbling away in the background, shaping and reshaping reality. So, whereas Western anthropocentrism20 has tended to maintain that individual agents are the ground of things, poststructuralists maintain that we have to turn away from this anthropocentrism to recognise that things and individual actions are effects of the pre-personal forces and structures subtending them.

Third, the most obvious ways in which poststructuralist thought challenges traditional thinking is found in its analysis of subjectivity. Rather than a substantial being that precedes its actions, choosing how and when to act, poststructuralism affirms that the subject is an effect of pre-personal, differential structures. This undermines the conception of the subject (defined by essentialist traits, egoism and unencumbered autonomy) dominant in Western (modern) thinking because, as Adriana Cavarero explains, it ‘causes the isolated, sealed, perfect shape of the ego to collapse into the vortex of multiple fragments that succeed in nullifying all of the possible spatial patterns of the scene (there is no centre nor periphery any longer)’.21 Again, the ways in which this takes place are heterogeneous depending on the thinker in question, but all poststructuralists agree that the subject must be displaced from the foundational status long afforded it and rethought from and through the differential structures and processes subtending it. Whereas this offers a radical critique of past thinking on the subject, it
also brings forth the question that motivates this book: are poststructuralists able to offer a coherent account of autonomous, intentional agency to complement their radical critiques of the foundational subject?

The Problem of Poststructuralist Agency

Although accepting that poststructuralists offer radical critiques of the subject, various criticisms from different schools of thought have long argued that they do so by sacrificing agential autonomy. From an existentialist perspective, for example, Jean-Paul Sartre continuously rejected structuralist critiques of humanism and binary logic, suggesting in a 1966 interview published in *L’Arc* that they had emptied their analyses of what he considered to be essential: a certain emphasising of the subject and approach to history, and a confrontation with traditional philosophy on its terms. In contrast, Sartre continues to insist on the primacy of the subject who chooses how to interact with a more or less conditioning world. The implicit point for him is that without this primary position, resistance or political action is simply not possible.

Luc Ferry and Alain Renaut take a slightly different line of attack that questions the totalising nature of the poststructuralist critique of the subject: ‘the error or illusion shared by all the philosophical currents to which the ideal type of the sixties can be applied, the error of assimilating those forms of subjectivity and of believing it could massively denounce all subjectivity or all humanism’. Their point is twofold: the poststructuralist critique is mistaken in prophesying the coming end of the subject and, linked to this, poststructuralist thought continues to depend upon a certain conception of subjectivity. It therefore fails in its stated aim of overcoming the subject to offer an ontological analysis based on pre-personal differential relations. With this, Ferry and Renaut defend a similar point to the one that motivates this book; the difference, however, is that they understand that poststructuralism aims to overcome *all* forms of subjectivity to focus solely on the pre-personal differential ontological relations subtending entities and so criticise the continuing dependence and affirmation of subjectivity. In contrast, I argue that this is a mistaken, though often repeated, understanding of the purpose behind poststructuralist thought, which does not so much aim to overcome all forms of subjectivity as rethink a certain conception of the constituting foundational subject to offer an alternative based on a ‘prior’ foundation.
Nevertheless, a variety of thinkers from critical theory and feminism have also questioned the reconceptualised notion of the subject offered, claiming that it is inadequate and/or is not logically permitted by the post-structuralist critique of the constituting founding subject. Jürgen Habermas, for example, engages with Foucault and Castoriadis, claiming that the former’s conception of power is badly flawed, in so far as it is constructed around the same binary opposition as the tradition rejected, but simply inverts the aspect traditionally privileged:

Foucault abruptly reverses power’s truth-dependency into the power-dependency of truth. Then foundational power no longer need be bound to the competences of acting and judging subjects – power becomes subjectless. But no one can escape the strategic constraints of the philosophy of the subject merely by performing operations of reversal upon its basic concepts.25

Based on this, Habermas concludes that ‘Foucault cannot do away with all the aporias he attributes to the philosophy of the subject by means of a concept of power borrowed from the philosophy of the subject itself.’26 By providing a subjectless conception of power, Habermas charges that Foucault provides no means for effecting social change: ‘the danger of anthropocentrism is banished only when under the incorruptible gaze of genealogy, discourses emerge and pop up like glittering bubbles from a swamp of anonymous processes of subjugation’.27 On this reading, Foucault’s conception of power does away with any form of political action, which is held to be an effect of random alterations to the underlying power relations.

Even when poststructuralists do offer conceptions of autonomous agency, Habermas critically questions them. For example, he recognises that Castoriadis affirms a notion of autonomy, but rejects it because he thinks that it is too individually orientated, leaving ‘no room for an intersubjective praxis for which socialized individuals are accountable. In the end, social praxis disappears in the anonymous hurly-burly of the institutionalization of ever new worlds from the imaginary dimension.’28 Although I will argue that this conclusion is based on a simplification and erroneous presentation of Castoriadis’s position, Habermas suggests that Castoriadis gets round the problem of agency by simply reaffirming a monadic substance-based conception of subjectivity, before criticising Castoriadis for ignoring the social constitution of individual agency.

Axel Honneth has been somewhat more sympathetic to poststructuralist thought, specifically in its Derridean form, for its so-called ethical turn towards
justice and, indeed, uses it to criticise Habermas’s discourse ethics, but he has been a vociferous critique of other aspects of poststructuralist thought. For example, he repeats Habermas’s critique of the role that the Foucaultian subject is capable of playing to bring about change:

Since [Foucault] wanted to describe the genesis of structure of thought from the estranged perspective of structuralism as an anonymous activity of the formation of identity, as a subjectless appearance and disappearance of scientific discourses, he had to leave unanswered the question whether the constitution of new contents of knowledge and forms of thought is to be derived from the chance impulses of a blind history of events or from the specific constellation of a historical situation.

Indeed, Honneth goes further by claiming to identify a tension that runs throughout Foucault’s analysis, which, on the one hand, makes the subject a ‘fictive unity generated either by anonymous rules of discourse or produced by violent strategies of domination’, while, on the other hand, continuing to emphasise the suffering, domination and harm imposed on the subject by repressive historical structures. Honneth argues that the first ontological position cancels out the possibility of the second ethical critique: ‘although everything in his critique of the modern age appears concentrated on the suffering of the human body under the disciplinary action of the modern apparatus of power, there is nothing in his theory which could articulate this suffering as suffering’. Having emptied the subject of all properties to make it an effect of ever-changing power relations, there is, strictly speaking, nothing unified that suffers. On this argument, the choice facing poststructuralism is a stark one: either reconceptualise the subject around some form of identity and so weaken, if not abandon, its ontological focus on differential processes, or affirm its ontological analysis and so abandon ‘the idea of individual autonomy because one can no longer simply state in what way the subject is to attain a higher degree of self-determination or transparency’.

Commentators from a certain strand of feminist theory – one that insists on the foundational importance of an unbending (sexed) body – have also long attacked poststructuralist analyses, arguing that their focus on pre-personal ontological forces and processes undermines the socio-historical embeddedness of individuals and/or rejects the fundamental sexual difference between men and women. As a consequence, it not only projects a flawed conception of subjective agency, but is also unable to offer a theoretical standpoint from which to fight repression, domination and injustice.
Toril Moi offers one of the earliest types of this critique. Focusing on Foucault, she argues that he offers a conception of power relations that prevents any escape from power and, in so doing, undermines the possibility of a feminist critique of patriarchy. For Moi, Foucault’s conception of power provides a ‘sado-masochistic spiral of power and resistance, which circling endlessly in heterogeneous movement, creates a space in which it will be quite impossible convincingly to argue that women under patriarchy constitute an oppressed group, let alone develop a theory of their liberation’. As I will show, however, this does significant disservice to Foucault’s notion of power, which explicitly distinguishes power from patriarchal forms of domination. While Foucault rejects the notion that it is possible to offer a theory of liberation from power per se, if by this is meant a theory that frees the individual from all forms of power, there is no reason why patriarchal manifestations of power relations cannot be resisted.

Moi’s second critique attacks the Foucaultian locus of resistance: ‘If we return to our original question: “what resists powers?”, it would seem that Foucault can give no answer at all. His celebratory account of the pleasure of power degenerates into a kind of pan-powerism where “power” has becomes a nebulous, mystical element beyond the reach of human reason.’ With this, Moi identifies the crux of the argument that is typically made against the notion of poststructuralist agency: by focusing on subtending power relations and forces, poststructuralist thought is unable to identify the locus of change or, in this case, resistance. As a consequence, political change seems to magically and mystically appear regardless of human action.

Moi’s critique is extended by Nancy Hartsock, who wonders why, just when women are starting to question the rules and norms of patriarchal domination, the notion of the unified subject that permits such a question is suddenly under attack. While denying that she is proposing a conspiracy, Hartsock suggests that poststructuralists do not offer a critique of domination per se, but are part of a continuing aspect of Western thinking that perpetuates subtle and cunning modes of thinking that reestablish patriarchal domination by undermining the categories of ‘men’ and ‘women’ that would permit a critique of such domination. From this general critique of what she takes to be ‘poststructuralism’, she focuses on Foucault’s notion of power to argue that, by insisting that power relations subtend all entities and cannot be thought as a possession or in zero-sum games, it ‘makes it very difficult to locate discrimination, including discrimination in gender relations’. The problem is that ‘his account makes room only for abstract individuals, not women, men, or workers’. Her proposed solution is ‘to engage in the historical, political, and theoretical process of constituting ourselves as subjects as well as objects of history’. Beyond the question of
how this differs from Foucault’s historically informed analysis, the obvious issue arising from Hartsock’s proposal is that it presupposes a foundational (and binary sexed) subject that constitutes itself, thereby denying the need for a historical or theoretical analysis of the conditions accompanying that process. Nevertheless, for Hartsock, the process appears to be an individual one based, presumably, on the agent’s will. It therefore not only simply ignores the poststructuralist critique, but seems to return to a pre-structuralist conception of the foundational subject.

Kate Soper complements these critiques by rejecting the supposed asexuality of the poststructuralist subject. By focusing on pre-personal ontological forces or discourses, she argues that poststructuralists are unable to account for the actual differences between ‘men’ and ‘women’. Whereas poststructuralists argue that these terms are discursive and, to greater or lesser degree, constructed, Soper insists on an ahistoric sexual difference between the two sexes that is based on certain ontological differences. As a consequence, she claims that, whereas men and women may experience events, ‘all men and all women are subject to them differently’. With this, Soper not only (implicitly) reverts to a sex/gender essentialism – in so far as each sex is defined by different ahistoric essential characteristics – but also remains within a binary gender opposition that excludes alternative categories, such as transgender. Soper’s use of a gender essentialism to attack poststructuralist thought reverts, then, to a pre-structuralist understanding and so – despite her affirmation to the contrary – does not engage with poststructuralism on its own terms.

One feminist critique that does aim to engage with poststructuralist thought on its own terms is Seyla Benhabib’s critique of Judith Butler’s work. Benhabib doubts ‘whether Butler’s performative theory of the constitution of gender identity can do justice to the complexities of the onto-genetic origins of gender in the human person’ or, indeed, ‘lead us to rethink a new configuration of subjectivity’. The basic problem is, so Benhabib affirms, that Butler’s conception of the onto-genesis of the subject is too thin: ‘what mechanisms and dynamics are involved in the developmental process through which the human infant, a vulnerable and dependent body, becomes a distinct self with the ability to speak its language and the ability to participate in the complex social process which define its world?’ That Butler notes that the subject is formed discursively leads Benhabib to question ‘how can one by constituted by discourse without being determined by it?’, especially given that Butler seems to reject any form of essentialism or pre-discursive features that may be said to escape and so resist the dominant discourse. Without such an account of the subject, it is unclear ‘what enables the self to “vary” the gender codes such as to resist hegemonic discourses? What psychic, intellectual, or other sources of creativity and resistance must
we attribute to human subjects for such variation to be possible?" For Benhabib, Butler simply does not have the conceptual tools to explain how the subject, formed through power relations and discourses, can effect political action to resist and reconfigure those relations.

This issue forms part of Martha Nussbaum’s infamous critique of Butler’s thinking, which starts with complaints about the ‘ponderous’ nature of Butler’s writing. Butler’s treatment of the other which Nussbaum feels is not sufficiently nuanced, and the obscurity and lack of logical force to Butler’s arguments. However, Nussbaum’s two major critiques are orientated against Butler’s perceived lack of a normative stance to guide political action and her performative theory of the self. Regarding the former, Nussbaum questions ‘Butler’s naïvely empty politics’ in which subversion for subversion’s sake is celebrated. This strictly negative approach to politics is held to be simply incapable of producing a nuanced analysis that distinguishes between forms of subversion that improve an individual’s material conditions and those that do not. Because she does not offer a normative stance and, indeed, rejects all normative stances because they are held to reduce heterogeneity to a singular discourse or sign, Nussbaum claims that Butler can, at most, only guide political action negatively – it must subvert already existing power structures and relations – but cannot produce positive political norms to create an alternative. By celebrating all action that subverts dominant norms, Butler, and on Nussbaum’s telling poststructuralists generally, cannot legitimately criticise anything. As a consequence, Butler ends up affirming political subversion for its own sake. The danger in taking this position, however, is that it can end up ‘collaborat[ing] with evil’ just because it is subversive.

Furthermore, Nussbaum maintains that Butler’s constructionist-performative analysis empties the subject of all the attributes that would allow it to contribute to fighting repression. There are two aspects to this. First, Nussbaum (mis)reads Butler’s performative theory of the subject as entailing an aesthetic performance and then questions the political effectiveness of her performative theory:

Parodic performance is not so bad when you are a powerful tenured academic in a liberal university. But here is where Butler’s focus on the symbolic, her proud neglect of the material side of life, becomes a fatal blindness. For women who are hungry, beaten, raped, it is not sexy or liberating to reenact, however paradoxically, the conditions of hunger, illiteracy, disenfranchise-ment, beating, and rape. Such women prefer food, school, votes, and the integrity of the body.

While critical of the proposals that she understands Butler to put forward, Nussbaum also questions whether the Butlerian subject is actually capable
of effecting performative gestures. After all, her subject is so empty that it is not clear where the agency emanates from. Thus, while admitting that ‘Butler does in the end want to say that we have a kind of agency, an ability to undertake change and resistance’, Nussbaum asks: ‘but where does this ability come from, if there is no structure in the personality that is not thoroughly power’s creation?’

Without an in-built structure divorced, to whatever degree, from power structures and social norms, Butler cannot show how the subject can fight repression or injustice. As such, her thought leads to ‘hip quietism’ in which ‘we [simply] ought to wait to see what the political struggle itself throws up, rather than prescribe in advance to its participants’.

Nussbaum’s polemic is rather unsubtle and totalising, but it does represent a certain, almost dominant, perception about poststructuralist thinking from within mainstream (liberal) theory that tends to reject it tout court. A more nuanced critical analysis has been provided by feminist writers more sympathetic to the poststructuralist position. Lois McNay, for example, offers a general critique of poststructuralist thinking on the subject that is developed from and accompanied by a number of specific critiques of various poststructuralist thinkers. For example, she laments the focus that, she argues, poststructuralist thinkers have placed on processes of subjection and subjugation, claiming that this implies a ‘negative moment’ with regard to the issue of identity construction. Her fundamental problem with such an approach is that it offers a ‘passive conception of the subject’ that is accompanied by ‘an etiolated conception of agency which cannot explain how individuals may respond in an unanticipated or creative fashion to complex social relations’.

Second, the poststructuralist critique is understood to depend upon a dispersed notion of identity, whether from power relations, symbolic discourse or ontological forces and processes, which results in ‘subjectivity becom[ing] a free-floating and atemporal entity which lacks historical depth or durée’. Thus, in relation to psychoanalytic approaches to poststructuralism, such as that provided by Lacan, McNay complains that ‘although the destabilising form of the category of the unconscious can be resisted, a more substantive account of agency beyond the individualist terms of a libidinal politics is foreclosed’. Similarly, in relation to Butler’s work, McNay charges that ‘agency remains an abstract structural potentiality which is sufficiently undifferentiated that it becomes difficult, for example, to distinguish whether an act is politically effective or not given that all identity is performatively constructed’. The implicit point being that a more socio-historically differentiated account of subjective agency is required.
The Argument

These are by no means all the lines of critique that have been proposed against poststructuralist thinking on the subject and agency, but I have spent some time outlining them to show both their historical longevity and, indeed, their diverse nature. After all, it might be thought that, if such a diverse group of commentators, coming from different theoretical positions and ‘schools’ of thought, agree on this point, there must be something to it. For the purposes of this book, I understand that the common charge implicitly linking these disparate individuals is that, while poststructuralists desire to alter our understanding of the world, their critiques of anthropocentric essentialism, at both symbolic and material levels, empty the subject of all possibilities for autonomous, intentional agency.

To further clarify what this means, it is helpful to follow Nathan Widder in holding that, minimally speaking, ‘[t]he subject may loosely be defined in terms of a being whose relation-to-self is sufficient for it to recognise and represent – or, perhaps better, to “re-cognise” and “re-present” – itself as a unified point of reference in relation to its agency’, 60 with ‘agency’ being a mode of subjectivity wherein the subject is capable of intentionally effecting its own movements and thoughts. The question then becomes whether poststructuralist thought is capable of offering a conception of subjectivity that permits agency. If, as the critics discussed charge, poststructuralist thought makes the subject a determined effect of pre-personal structures and processes, does this not undermine the possibility that the subject can act on or against the pre-personal structures that ground it? After all, any individual action would simply be an effect of those pre-personal processes. To Karl Marx’s famous dictum that ‘the philosophers have only interpreted the world in various ways, the point is to change it’,61 its critics charge that the poststructuralist position cannot effect change; the philosophers, or anyone else for that matter, must simply wait for the pre-personal ontological or discursive relations and structures constituting reality to change. Poststructuralists affirm radical change, all the while undermining any form of individually determined action that could bring it about.

The overall aim of this book is to defend poststructuralism against this charge. One way of achieving this would be to dissolve the problem by claiming that it is premised on a particular conception of the political rejected by the poststructuralists approach; namely, one whereby political change is simply premised on the actions of a foundational autonomous agent. That poststructuralists claim that the subject is an effect of pre-personal differential ontological processes means that the notion of politics accompanying it also has to change; it can no longer be premised
on autonomous, intentional, agential action. This disarms the critique by rejecting its basic premise that political action is and should be based on the intentional agency of a founding subject. Instead, it calls for a new conception of politics, one that ties political change to ontological alterations and, in so doing, means that if political change occurs, it does so irrespective of individual intentional input. The problem with such an approach, however, is that it 1) is unlikely to convince those not already convinced by the poststructuralist critique, and 2) reduces politics to ontology. For these reasons, this book takes a different, arguably more challenging, approach that aims to meet the critique on its own terms by showing that poststructuralist thinkers do engage with the question of agency and, indeed, offer numerous conceptions of human intentional agency to meet the charge laid against it; namely, that their critique of the foundational subject prevents them from offering a logically coherent account of agency that allows subjects to purposefully engage in (political) action to bring about the transformation(s) that poststructuralist thinkers affirm.

Strangely, this issue has been relatively ignored in the literature, with commentators either content to ignore or simply bypass it to descriptively, rather than critically, outline what each poststructuralist thinker engaged with affirms politically. Etienne Balibar and Caroline Williams are among the few to take it up, with both pointing out that the so-called death of the subject so often attributed to poststructuralist thinkers has been misunderstood and/or greatly exaggerated. Balibar’s contribution is, however, limited to a single article, thereby preventing him from engaging with specific poststructuralist thinkers to show how this manifests itself in their thinking, while Williams’s book-length study aims to show the persistence of the subject in twentieth-century French philosophy. For all its merits, it is not, then, orientated by and to the same problematic that motivates this study – which is to show that, contrary to its critics, poststructuralist thought offers a coherent theory of intentional agency – and in holding that the subject persists, comes dangerously close to claiming that the subject is somehow desperately hanging on for dear life against attempts to remove it from thought.

Rather than hanging on for its life, I argue that ‘the subject’ is integral to poststructuralist thought, which, following Balibar’s suggestion, is conditioned by a ‘simultaneous operation of deconstruction and reconstruction of the subject, or deconstruction of the subject as arche (cause, principle, origin) and reconstruction of subjectivity as an effect, or in yet another formulation, a passage from constitutive to constituted subjectivity’. Poststructuralist thought does not, then, aim to annihilate the subject as is often taken to be the case, but deposes a specific conception of the subject, where ‘it’ is
held to be the foundation or constituting entity for all else, to rethink or reconstitute the subject in terms of a constituted effect of pre-personal/subject sources. As a consequence, while poststructuralist thought may reject the notion of an unencumbered agent who exists outside of socio-historical context to freely choose how to act in and on the world, this does not mean that agency per se is abolished. Rather, we have to rethink the nature of and scope for agential action from a subject that is constituted rather than constituting.

My fundamental argument, therefore, is that rather than simply discard the subject as an effect of pre-personal relations or processes, poststructuralist thinkers, albeit in different ways, aim to depose one dominant form of subjectivity so as to propose another, with this alternative thought as a constituted effect of the ontological premises of poststructuralism (differential, multiple, non-essentialist and non-substantial, continuously becoming, and so on). Having shown that poststructuralism rethinks the subject, I respond to the related question of whether there is a way for poststructuralist thought to defend itself against the charge that its reliance on pre-individual processes and structures undermines individual intentional (political) agency. In other words, does poststructuralist thought lead, as a number of its critics complain, to political quietism?

To reject this notion, I show that it is based on a particular conception of poststructuralism, gleaned from a narrow selection of authors and texts often outlined in caricature. Furthermore, critics base their analysis on two conceptual errors. First, they tend to confuse ‘effect’ with ‘determine’ so that when poststructuralist thinkers are understood to decentre the subject by making it an effect of a prior process (social, historical, discursive and so on), their critics understand that they are claiming that the subject is determined by those pre-subject processes. I will argue that this is a consequence of a reductive or particularly uncharitable reading or hermeneutical errors regarding the handling of key texts.

Second, critics tend to conflate ‘unencumbered agency’ with ‘agency’ so that when poststructuralists reject the former, based as it is on a notion of a constituting subject who exists outside socio-historic-symbolic structures, their critics argue that this disqualifies all forms of agency. However, to claim that unencumbered agency is the only kind possible is to depend upon a particularly reductionist understanding of the concept. After all, as Mark Bevir explains, ‘to deny that subjects can escape from all social influence is not to deny that they can act creatively for reasons that make sense to them’.64 That subjects emanate from others does not necessarily mean that they are determined by that source. As Amy Allen points out, ‘children are shaped from birth by the practice, beliefs, and superior power of their
parents. However, no one who actually has children will think for a second that this statement implies that children have no agency or will but are instead completely determined and controlled by their parents. Building on this, I argue that, while poststructuralist thinkers reject the notion of an unencumbered, constituting subject, they replace it with a notion of an embedded constituted subject – which is understood to be an effect of pre-personal socio-historical-symbolic processes – that is able to intentionally act, to varying degrees, within its conditioning environment.

However, while I show that each of the thinkers engaged with continues to (often implicitly) insist that the subject is capable of action, the responses provided as to how this is possible are often problematic. There are a variety of reasons for this that will be outlined as I proceed, but the disagreements point to a cleavage within poststructuralist thinking based on its relationship to psychoanalysis and the unconscious. While recognising that Deleuze, Derrida and Foucault undertake extensive engagements with psychoanalytic theory, my argument is guided by the contention that they do not sufficiently or coherently discuss or incorporate the notion of the psyche and, in particular, the conscious–unconscious split into their rethinking of the subject, with the consequence that they struggle to satisfactorily account for how their decentred subject is capable of intentional agency to effect its pre-personal ‘foundations’.

In contrast, those poststructuralists, such as Butler, Castoriadis, Kristeva and Lacan, who do explicitly split the subject from the psyche and distinguish between the conscious and unconscious are better able to engage with the question of how the decentred subject is capable of such agency. By explicitly incorporating the unconscious into their explanations, they decentre the (conscious) subject and start to develop the conceptual distinctions to explain how such a subject can be conditioned by pre-personal structures and processes, but still choose how to act in relation to them. However, I argue that in the case of Butler, Kristeva and Lacan, this splitting does not go far enough and so fails to resolve the issue of how the subject who is unconsciously conditioned by pre-personal structures and processes is also able to (consciously) choose how to react to them.

In contrast, I argue that Castoriadis surmounts this objection because he does not just split the subject from the psyche and distinguish between the conscious and unconscious; he also splits the unconscious so that it is defined by a part that internalises the social norms that allow it to function and survive in society and an asocial fluctuating monadic ‘core’ that contests that socialisation and, in being distinct from the socialised part, allows the subject to choose how to act in relation to its social norms. While this appears to establish and depend upon a problematic ontological
opposition between the psychic monadic core and social norms, Castoriadis’s acceptance of a limited form of psychic asociality is understood in terms of processes and so remains consistent with the poststructuralist critique of foundationalism, essentialism and substantive identity, while he shows that the pseudo-totality that is the human being works to overcome the psyche/society opposition. I argue, therefore, that his conception offers the most developed poststructuralist account of agency because it produces a sophisticated, multidimensional account of the constituted subject and complements it with a detailed, subtle and heterogeneous analysis of the conditions that permit the embodied subject to act autonomously despite being conditioned by pre-personal (socio-historic-symbolic) forces and processes.

**Chapter Structure**

To outline this, the book is divided into two parts distinguished by those poststructuralist thinkers who offer primarily ontologically and socially orientated analyses (Part I) and those who offer psychoanalytically orientated ones (Part II). However, to reiterate, my argument is not that the thinkers engaged with in Part I ignore or are not interested in psychoanalysis or questions of the psyche; it is that, at the very least, they do not incorporate its insights into their positive conceptions of the subject with the same emphasis that the thinkers engaged with in Part II do. Furthermore, to muddy the structural division further, those authors included in Part II also recognise, focus on and incorporate the socio-historic-symbolic insights found in the non-psychoanalytical accounts of Part I. I divide the authors in this way for organisational and hermeneutical reasons to most clearly develop and outline my claim that because the thinkers in Part II most fully and explicitly take into consideration the psyche as part of their reconstruction of the subject, they provide the more sophisticated and subtle analyses of the decentred subject’s capacity for intentional agency.

Furthermore, within each part, the thinkers are not placed chronologically, but in terms of conceptual coherence. This is particularly the case in Part II, where, for example, the chapter on Butler is placed before that on Lacan because, even though he precedes her historically, conceptually her thinking combines Foucault’s socio-historical analysis with Freudian psychoanalysis to pave the way for the privileging of psychoanalytical categories and approaches found in the later chapters on Lacan, Kristeva and Castoriadis. Similarly, Castoriadis comes after Kristeva even though he historically preceded her because I argue that he offers a more conceptually satisfactory response to the question of poststructuralist agency.
Part I, entitled ‘Decentring the Subject’, is composed of four chapters. Chapter 1 engages with Gilles Deleuze’s critique of the foundational Cartesian subject as thought from and through his privileging of difference. The affirmation of difference (over identity) is often understood to be the defining motif of poststructuralist thought, with Deleuze’s thinking being particularly important to this endeavour. Starting with Deleuze’s thinking on this matter, including its implications for any questioning of subjectivity and agency, not only demonstrates the radicality of his critique – it aims at nothing other than a complete overhaul of the categories of Western philosophy – but also sets the scene for subsequent thinkers who also affirm the fundamental importance of difference. I first show that Deleuze aims to undermine the notion of the foundational, essentialist subject to rethink the subject from difference, before, second, engaging with whether this permits a coherent account of intentional agency. While noting that this question has garnered significant contemporary debate, I conclude that Deleuze’s positive comments on the topic are simply too ambiguous and indeterminate to be taken as offering a definitive account of agency, while, in any case, he appears to purposely reject the anthropocentrism that underpins the question of whether the subject thought from difference is capable of autonomous, intentional agency. Instead, he asks for a radical reformulation of the question in terms of the pre-personal ontological ‘singularities’ structuring reality, rather than of the subject that is their effect. As such, Deleuze is unable to offer an adequate response to the question motivating this volume, not necessarily due to a failing in his thinking, but because he purposely rejects any formulation of the question in terms of subjectivities and, by extension, intentionality.

However, whereas Deleuze privileges difference over the identity that he maintains has traditionally been used to think subjectivity, Jacques Derrida (Chapter 2) criticises this inversion, claiming that it does not go far enough in deconstructing the logic of the identity model. Rather than privilege ‘identity’ or ‘difference’, Derrida insists that there is a ‘prior’ moment that makes possible the opposition between these terms. Terming this différence and using ‘it’ to rethink the subject – a discussion that also brings to the fore the relationship between sexuality and subjectivity as mediated through Heidegger’s thinking – Derrida reaffirms the deconstruction of one historically dominant form of subjectivity to stimulate a rethinking (rather than abandonment) of subjectivity. I argue, however, that he simply says too little on what the resultant subject entails and little, if anything, on the question of agency, tending to simply take it for granted that the subject can ‘choose’ how to act.
I complement these two chapters with two on Foucault, showing how he moves the decentring of the subject away from the ontological concerns prevalent in Deleuze and Derrida to social-historical concerns based in a specific conception of power relations. To this end, Chapter 3 turns to Foucault’s earlier ‘archaeological’ and ‘genealogical’ works to outline their significance for the question of the subject and show that it is wrong to claim, as many critics have, that Foucault simply makes the subject an effect of power relations. Through a detailed textual analysis, I identify that Foucault holds that, while the subject is an effect of power relations, this does not mean that the subject is determined by them. Rather, the individual is held to be a relay point through which power relations flow and, as such, is capable of redirecting those power relations. Foucault is, then, the first thinker engaged with who explicitly argues that the decentred subject is capable of agency.

Chapter 4 extends this by focusing on Foucault’s later work, where he builds on his early decentring of the subject to rethink the self as being capable of self-constitution. This affirms his earlier claim that the subject-as-self is not just conditioned by power relations, but can also choose how to act in relation to them. Ultimately, however, I argue that his account of what permits such agency is simply too thin to adequately account for its possibility. The chapters on Derrida and Foucault also engage with the question of sexuality to counter the charge that poststructuralist thought ignores sexuality and the sexual difference, while in so doing also preparing the way for the engagement with later feminist poststructuralist accounts in Chapters 5 (Butler) and 7 (Kristeva).

Having shown that Deleuze, Derrida and Foucault do not simply aim to annihilate the subject but rethink it in founded rather than founding terms and even start to account for how agency is possible within these terms, Part II, entitled ‘Turning to the Psyche’, transitions to psychoanalytically orientated accounts to argue that these provide the strongest engagement with the question of how a decentred subject is capable of agency. To ease the transition between the two parts and approaches, Chapter 5 deals with Judith Butler’s analysis because she takes off from Foucault’s account of power relations but combines it with insights from Freudian psychoanalysis. I first outline her critique of the essentialist, substantial subject to show that her theory of performativity maintains that the subject is conditioned by social norms, linguistic structures and the body. I then show that she also brings the question of the unconscious into the discussion – a concept that will take on increasing importance in subsequent chapters – before outlining what this means for her account of agency to argue that, for Butler, agency is defined by and from the disjunction between the social and psyche.
In making this claim, I counter two dominant, but contradictory, critiques of Butler’s work: 1) that she cannot offer an account of agency because she holds that socio-symbolic norms determine the subject; and 2) that she does offer an account of agency, but it is too thin, which has led to the further claim that she must rely on a form of transcendence that she otherwise rejects. I argue against 1), but take up a qualified version of 2) by agreeing that her account of agency is too thin. While she decentres the subject from a foundational position, and maintains that the constituted subject continues to be capable of agency, we need a far more precise and subtler conception of where intentional agency is located ‘within’ the subject to permit it to actually act once the site for agency has been opened by the constantly changing alterations in the socio-symbolic systems it is an effect of and inhabits.

While Butler develops her analysis from insights gained from Freud and is critical of Lacanian psychoanalysis, I argue that it is Lacan’s thinking that contributed most to ‘the’ poststructuralist rethinking of the subject and, by extension, agency. For this reason, Chapter 6 turns to Lacan to first outline his critique of the Cartesian subject, before moving to his famous real, symbolic and imaginary schema. I argue that the Lacanian subject is a consequence of the entwinement of the three registers, with their interrelationship constantly and momentarily configuring itself into bursts of agency that permit the subject to act in ways that are not predefined by its symbolic conditions. However, I conclude by showing that Lacan is simply not sufficiently clear on the mechanics of agency: while the lack of the real accounts for how agency is possible for a subject conditioned by and resulting from symbolic relations, it does not adequately explain how the disruption caused to the symbolic realm by the lack of the real subsequently permits the subject to decide – or whatever mechanism this takes place through – to act in a positive expressive form.

Chapter 7 moves from Lacan’s to Kristeva’s account of the subject, an analysis that is largely conducted against the former. Two differences stand out. First, Kristeva returns to Freud to claim, contra Lacan, that the unconscious is defined by drives rather than language. Second, she criticises Lacan’s account of the symbolic, claiming that it ignores the semiotic, by which she means non-conceptual signification. Putting the two critiques together allows Kristeva to argue that the subject is always in process due to the complex amalgamation of drives, semiotic and symbolic significations, and social norms. I link this to her political analysis and, in particular, her critique of the impact that contemporary capitalist society has on the psyche. Kristeva holds that, historically, the psyche’s development meant that it was marked by negativity, which provided the subject with some independence from the social norms it was embedded within. This
independence was crucial to permit the subject to ‘freely’ express itself. Kristeva warns, however, that contemporary capitalist society has undermined this negative space, with the consequence that psychic space and hence freedom has shrunk. Her solution is to search for new semiotic forms of revolt to reopen the division between the psyche and social to enact non-conceptual and non-instrumental forms of expression.

It is here that the question of agency enters Kristeva’s analysis. While her clinical work depends upon the subject being capable of acting to change itself, she never provides a detailed discussion of agency or of how and where it fits into her schema. This has given rise to a debate in the literature between those who defend Kristeva by claiming that she does offer a theory of agency that shows how the subject can effect social change and those who claim that she does not. I side with the latter by arguing that the former do not actually identify what agency entails for Kristeva, but simply conflate it with her theory of the subject-in-process. As a consequence, and despite her conceptual innovations, Kristeva depends on a theory of agency that her analysis of the subject-in-process is too thin to support.

Chapters 1–7 chart the main trajectories through which poststructuralist thinkers have both decentred the subject from its long-held foundational role and attempted to reconstruct the subject from what results. While these show that the poststructuralist paradigm is far more sophisticated than is typically appreciated with regard to the subject – the subject is not simply decentred, but is rethought as an embodied socio-symbolic being – they also link the discussion to the issue of autonomous, intentional agency. I have, however, claimed that the various ‘solutions’ proposed have been, in some way, structurally problematic because the notion of agency offered is underdeveloped, inconsistent with other aspects of the proponent’s thought, or relies upon a conception of the subject that is too thin to permit such agency.

In contrast, Chapter 8 turns to the work of Cornelius Castoriadis, who, I argue, develops an embodied and socially-symbolically embedded notion of the subject that is also sufficiently conceptually thick to offer a sophisticated, subtle and coherent analysis of how such a subject is capable of intentional agency. To outline this, I show that Castoriadis splits the subject between an initial psychic monad – the ontological core of the psyche that he also calls the ‘little screaming monster’ – and the individual, with the latter resulting from the socialisation of the former that is necessary to ensure the subject’s survival. Part of the process of successfully socialising the psyche monad is to find avenues within the social-historical formation whereby the autonomy of the psychic monad can express itself. In this way, Castoriadis not only insists that the socialised individual must continue to act, but that such agency is integral to the well-being of the subject.
This does, however, lead back to the question of whether it is logically possible for Castoriadis to claim that the socialised individual is capable of such agency. In response, I suggest that Castoriadis introduces a conceptual innovation. Whereas psychoanalytically orientated poststructuralists, such as Butler, Kristeva and Lacan, focus on the psyche, split it between the conscious and unconscious, and focus on the latter, Castoriadis goes one step further by also splitting the unconscious between what might be called the ‘socialised unconscious’, ‘housing’ the social norms and values learned and incorporated from the socialisation process, and the ‘primal unconscious which is the monadic core of the psyche’ that always remains distinct from the former. With this split, Castoriadis is able to show that, while the subject is embodied and socially founded and embedded, there is a part of the subject’s psyche – itself always in flux – that remains distinct from its social norms to permit and explain how the socialised individual is capable of autonomously and intentionally choosing its actions.

The concluding chapter provides a brief overview of the argument to show that, contrary to their critics, the issue of the subject and the question of agency are central, if at times problematic, topics for poststructuralist thinkers and that Castoriadis provides the most sophisticated response to them. I subsequently go on to clarify the normativity inherent in poststructuralist thinking to start to respond to the question of the type of politics permitted, depended upon and indeed affirmed from this.

Notes


8. For the purposes of narration and because the meaning of these terms depends upon a whole conceptual apparatus that differs from thinker to thinker, I will, at this point, resist offering a guiding definition of this term, all the while using the terms ‘subjectivity’ and ‘subject’ interchangeably. This will change when I engage with how these concepts are conceptualised by the various poststructuralists.


11. For example, Michel Foucault famously proclaimed ‘[l]et me announce once and for all that I am not a structuralist, and I confess, with the appropriate chagrin, that I am not an analytic philosopher. Nobody is perfect’ (‘Sexuality and Solitude’, in Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth, Essential Works of Foucault, Volume 1, 1954–1984, ed. Paul Rabinow, trans. Robert Hurley et al. [London: Penguin, 1997], pp. 175–84 [p. 176]). As noted, Jacques Derrida was also uneasy about the term ‘poststructuralism’, noting that it was not heard in France until the theories of those associated with ‘it’ had been introduced to American academia and subsequently returned to France. For Derrida, then, ‘poststructuralism’ exists, but in a particular culturally specific sense as an American invention (‘Letter to a Japanese Friend’, p. 3). Julia Kristeva also notes the ambivalent status of the term ‘poststructuralism’ by, on the one hand, denying that the thinkers usually associated with the term were sufficiently theoretically homogeneous to permit their grouping, but, on the other hand, recognising that, despite this, the impact that they had on French intellectual life ‘lends these writings their apparent cohesiveness and perhaps justifies the notion of a “poststructuralist group”’ (‘Julia Kristeva Speaks Out’, in Julia Kristeva: Interviews, ed. Ross Mitchell Guberman [New York: Columbia University Press, 1996], pp. 257–70 [p. 259]).

13. For one of the very few accounts that have tried to reconstruct Irigaray’s thinking to point to a conception of agency therein, see Miri Rozmarin, ‘Living Politically: An Irigarayan Notion of Agency as a Way of Life’, *Hypatia*, 28.3, 2013, pp. 469–82.


18. Warren Breckman, *Adventures of the Symbolic: Post-Marxism and Radical Democracy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013), p. 98. It is important to note that Breckman does not distinguish between ‘structuralism’ and ‘poststructuralism’, but runs them together. Nevertheless, I suggest that Breckman’s comments on Castoriadis’s relation to ‘structuralist’ thought more accurately describe Castoriadis’s bond to the way of thinking, with its emphasis on dynamic structures, fluidity, symbolic meaning, the decentred subject and so on, that are shared, albeit heterogeneously, by the style of thinking and, indeed, group of thinkers usually called ‘poststructuralist’.


26. Ibid., p. 274.

27. Ibid., p. 268.


32. Ibid., p. 59.

33. Ibid., p. 59.


35. It goes without saying that this critique of poststructuralist thought is not representative of all strands of feminist thinking. As we will see, Judith Butler and Julia Kristeva develop feminist theory (albeit in different ways) from poststructuralist positions, as do Hélène Cixous and Luce Irigaray. Indeed, Cixous, Irigaray and Kristeva are often grouped together under the label ‘French feminists’. For an overview of French feminism, see Christine Delphy, ‘The Invention of French Feminism: An Essential Move’, *Yale French Studies*, 97, 1987, pp. 190–221; and on the relationship between feminist theory and poststructuralism, see Claire Colebrook, ‘Feminist Criticism and Poststructuralism’, in Gill Plain and Susan Sellers (eds), *A History of Feminist Literary Criticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), pp. 214–34.


38. Ibid., p. 101.

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40. Ibid., p. 167.
41. Ibid., p. 167.
42. Ibid., p. 170.
45. Ibid., p. 109.
46. Ibid., p. 110.
47. Ibid., p. 110.
49. Ibid., p. 43.
50. Ibid., p. 45.
51. Ibid., p. 43.
52. Ibid., p. 41.
53. Ibid., pp. 45, 42.
56. Ibid., p. 161.
57. Ibid., p. 17.
58. Ibid., p. 8.
59. Ibid., p. 46.
65. Amy Allen, 'The Anti-Subjective Hypothesis: Michel Foucault and the Death of the Subject', *Philosophical Forum*, 31.2, 2000, pp. 113–30 (p. 120).

