The story of the relationship between feminism and the Frankfurt School through its first three generations is a complicated one. As has been noted recently by Stuart Jeffries, women were noticeably absent from the early Frankfurt School, an absence that Jeffries maintains is “odd, even disgraceful, for a putatively radical group of thinkers in the 20th century” (Jeffries 2016). Moreover, although one can find interesting insights into the relationship between femininity, masculinity, and domination in works such as Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno’s *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (2002) and *Minima Moralia* (1974), the early Frankfurt School’s nostalgia for the bourgeois nuclear family and paternal authority is strikingly at odds with the feminist critique of patriarchy. Moreover, none of the members of the early Frankfurt School engaged substantially with the feminist theory of their day, despite the fact that Simone de Beauvoir, for example, was their contemporary. Nor, with the exception of Herbert Marcuse – who described the “Women’s Liberation Movement” in 1974 as “the most important and potentially the most radical political movement that we have” (Marcuse 2006, 147) – were they particularly sympathetic to the demands of the feminist movement that was emerging in the late 1960s as part of the broader student movement (for the disagreement between Adorno and Marcuse over the student movement, see Adorno 1999; for a perceptive analysis of the bodily gendered aspects of the infamous “bared breasts” student protest against Adorno, see Yun Lee 2006).

By contrast, Jürgen Habermas, the leading figure of the second generation of the Frankfurt School, has favorably discussed feminist theory and practice – most notably in the context of the development of his discourse theory of law and democracy (Habermas 1996, 418–427) – and he has engaged with and taken on board feminist critiques of his work – most notably in his incorporation of Nancy Fraser’s conception of “subaltern counterpublics” in his analysis of the public sphere (see Fraser 1992; Habermas 1996, 312). However, his system–lifeworld distinction has been criticized by feminists for being blind to the nature and significance of gender oppression in such a way as to render his theory insufficiently critical (Fraser 1989). Moreover, his staunch rationalism is arguably at odds with the mainstream of contemporary academic feminist theorizing, which has tended to draw inspiration from the French poststructuralism of which Habermas was highly critical (Habermas 1987). Indeed, as Johanna Meehan has noted, “Habermasian theory stands squarely in a tradition of Enlightenment-inspired political theory and deontological ethics which many feminists have thoroughly rejected,” such that one might wonder “why feminists should read Habermas at all” (Meehan 1995, 1).
Axel Honneth, Habermas’s successor in Frankfurt and a leading figure of the third generation of the Frankfurt School, has arguably gone much further than his predecessors in his engagement with feminist theory and his theorization of feminist movements. He is not only engaged in substantial, public, book length debates with prominent feminist theorists (see Fraser and Honneth 2003; Stahl et al., forthcoming), but also draws on the (admittedly partial and increasingly fragile) achievements of feminist movements in his theorization of struggles for recognition and social freedom (see Honneth 2014, 154–176). To be sure, as Christopher Zurn acknowledges, “Honneth is...no radical calling for the overthrow of the sex-gender system” (Zurn 2015, 21), but his encounter with certain strands of feminism – particularly feminist ethics of care and debates about equality and difference – has been deep and sustained, and has impacted the formation of his theoretical position (see especially Honneth 2007).

Although the picture is somewhat mixed, then, it would not be unreasonable to conclude from these opening reflections that critical theory as the Frankfurt School tradition has conceived and practiced it is not necessarily feminist. And yet, some of the most prominent and important feminist theorists of the last three decades have either drawn inspiration from or developed their views in sustained dialogue with Frankfurt School critical theory. This list includes, at a minimum, such important feminist thinkers as Seyla Benhabib, Wendy Brown, Judith Butler, Angela Davis, and Nancy Fraser. Indeed, one might argue, as is implied by the title of one of Fraser’s classic essays (see Fraser 1989), that pushing Frankfurt School critical theory in a feminist direction is a way of making it more genuinely critical, thus enabling this tradition to live up to its own best methodological insights and its radical political promise. This suggests that Frankfurt School critical theory’s commitment to what Fraser calls, echoing Marx, “the self-clarification of the struggles and wishes of the age” (Fraser 1989, 113) actually entails a commitment to feminism as a mode of both theory and practice – whether its practitioners realize this commitment or not.

In what follows, I survey the landscape of feminist critical theory, tracing its notable peaks and also attempting to discern promising paths for the future. I begin not at the beginning but rather in the middle, with a discussion of those feminist critical theorists whose work emerged in conversation with Habermas, in the wake of his communicative turn. Two of these thinkers in particular, Seyla Benhabib and Nancy Fraser, are widely recognized as important third-generation Frankfurt School theorists in their own right. I thus start by reconstructing the key points of their influential debate (Benhabib et al., 1995). Next, I trace the impact of the Benhabib–Fraser debate with a discussion of the problem of the subject in post-Habermasian feminist critical theory. Finally, I consider some recent work in feminist critical theory that rejects the Habermasian approach and returns to the insights of the first generation of the Frankfurt School. I conclude by outlining some of the challenges that lie ahead for the project of feminist critical theory.

**Feminist Contentions**

In 1990, the Greater Philadelphia Philosophy Consortium sponsored a symposium on the topic of feminism and postmodernism, with Seyla Benhabib and Judith Butler as speakers and Nancy Fraser as respondent. Their exchange was published in the journal *Praxis International* (11: 2 July 1991) and subsequently expanded into the book, *Feminist Contentions: A Philosophical Exchange* (1995). In many ways, this text could be seen as the high-water mark for Habermasian feminist critical theory. It not only crystallized many of the core issues at stake in the debate between Habermasian critical theory and French post-structuralism – a debate that was also arguably at its height in the 1990s – it also articulated the significance
and stakes of this debate for feminist theory and practice. In so doing, it set the agenda for a good deal of subsequent work in feminist critical theory.

The opening salvo in the debate is Benhabib’s strong critique of postmodernism and its limited potential for feminism. Borrowing from the work of Jane Flax (1990), Benhabib defines postmodernism in terms of three theses: the death of man, the death of history, and the death of metaphysics (Benhabib et al., 18). The death of man refers to the rejection of traditional conceptions of subjectivity as constitutive of knowledge, which postmodernism replaces with the idea of subjects as socially constructed in webs of power, knowledge, and discourse. The death of history entails the rejection of totalizing Enlightenment narratives of historical progress understood as necessary, universal, and directed toward the Absolute. The death of metaphysics expresses the rejection of a unitary conception of Being or reality – the Absolute – and of the strong foundationalist claims about truth enabled by such metaphysical notions. Benhabib argues that each of these theses can be articulated in a strong and a weak version, and that whereas the weak versions are relatively uncontroversial, the strong versions undermine the emancipatory ideals of the feminist movement and therefore should be rejected. Thus, whereas the weak version of the death of man thesis suggests a subject situated in history, social practice, language, and so forth, the strong version dissolves the subject into nothing more than an effect of power and discourse. Whereas the weak version of the death of history thesis rejects grand metanarratives of historical progress, the strong version rejects any and all large-scale historical narratives such as those that are necessary to explain gender subordination. Whereas the weak version of the death of metaphysics thesis rejects grandiose claims to comprehension of the real as the ground of truth (which virtually no modern philosophers accept anyway), the strong version undermines the very possibility of philosophy, and, for Benhabib, social criticism without philosophy is impossible.

As Benhabib sees it, postmodernist feminists endorse strong versions of each of these three theses; in so doing, they undermine

the feminist commitment to women’s agency and sense of selfhood, to the reappropriation of women’s own history in the name of an emancipated future, and to the exercise of radical social criticism which uncovers gender “in all its endless variety and monotonous similarity.”

(Benhabib et al., 29)

Such a stance is unacceptable from the point of view of feminist critical theory insofar as this project takes the commitment to emancipation – an expression of what Benhabib calls elsewhere the anticipatory-utopian aspect of critique (Benhabib 1986, 226) – as central to its enterprise.

Benhabib aims her critique not only at Butler, whom she accuses of dissolving the subject in relations of power and discourse (Benhabib et al., 21–22), but also at Fraser, who advocates a relatively strong version of the death of metaphysics thesis under the heading of “social criticism without philosophy” (Fraser and Nicholson 1990). Although Butler’s contribution to the debate, framed as a reply to Benhabib’s challenge that defends certain “postmodern” ideas while simultaneously questioning the very validity of this label, is interesting and important in its own right, I will pass over it in order to keep the focus on the disagreement between Benhabib and Fraser. Fraser characterizes the debate between Benhabib and Butler as one between critical theory, with its focus on concepts like autonomy, critique, and utopia, and post-structuralism, with its deconstructive conceptions of subjectivity, identity, and agency and she disagrees with the assumption that feminists can’t have both. Thus, whereas Benhabib positions herself as a critic of postmodernism and a defender of Enlightenment conceptions of autonomy, critique, and normativity, Fraser characterizes this as a
false antithesis. In doing so, she stakes out a more capacious vision of feminist critical theory that aims to incorporate the key insights of poststructuralist thinkers such as Butler and Foucault.

In response to Benhabib, then, Fraser argues that one can defend medium-strength versions of the three theses – versions that capture more of the radicality of poststructuralist critique while remaining perfectly compatible with the emancipatory aims of feminist critical theory. With respect to the death of man thesis, Fraser sides with Butler in arguing that the subject can be both constituted by power relations and capable of critique – as she says, memorably: “nothing in principle precludes that subjects are both culturally constructed and capable of critique” (Benhabib et al., 67) – though she chides Butler for trading the language of normativity and critique for that of resignification. This move makes it difficult for Butler to distinguish between better and worse subjectivating practices, or between, as we might put it, subjection and subordination (see Allen 2008, 72–95). On this point, Fraser concludes, “feminists need to develop an alternative conceptualization of the subject, one that integrates Butler's poststructuralist emphasis on construction with Benhabib's critical-theoretical stress on critique” (Benhabib et al., 69). Regarding the death of history, Fraser argues that it is possible to give up on grand metanarratives, traditional philosophies of history, and strong conceptions of historical progress and yet to continue to read history in a way that is guided by an interest in women's emancipation. Finally, with respect to the death of metaphysics, Fraser defends her claim that situated social criticism – what she calls social criticism without philosophy, that is, without appeal to grand metanarratives or strong foundationalist assumptions – is perfectly adequate to ground feminist critiques of male dominance. Fraser argues that feminism doesn’t need an “ahistorical, transcendental discourse, claiming to articulate the criteria of validity for all other discourses” (Benhabib et al., 65) to ground its critical and normative claims; historically, socially, and culturally situated claims will do just fine, and they are the best we can hope for in any case.

Even with the hindsight of more than twenty years, it is difficult to discern precisely what is at stake in the debate between Benhabib and Fraser over the death of metaphysics and death of history theses. To be sure, Fraser seems less worried than is Benhabib about the specter of radical contextualism that arguably threatens all notions of immanent or situated critique. Still, Benhabib is quite clear even in her critique of postmodernism that she is no defender of ahistorical, transcendental metadiscourse (see Benhabib 1986). In contrast, Benhabib sought to develop a more Hegelian version of communicative ethics, one that stressed the crucial role of the contextual, the particular, and the concrete in moral-political deliberation. Benhabib characterized her position as an interactive universalism: a more historically self-conscious form of universalism according to which the moral point of view is understood as “the contingent achievement of an interactive form of rationality rather than as the timeless standpoint of a legislative reason” (Benhabib 1992, 6).

When we compare Benhabib’s interactive universalism with Fraser and Nicholson’s social criticism without philosophy, the differences, at least as regards the question of metaphysics, seem slight and mostly terminological. Fraser and Nicholson present their model as an alternative to legitimating metanarratives of any sort, whether they come in the form of a Hegelian philosophy of history (about which more in a moment) or in the form of an ahistorical, foundationalist epistemology or moral theory. A legitimating metanarrative, on this view, is any philosophical theory that aims to secure the legitimacy of first-order discursive practices (Fraser and Nicholson 1990, 22). Following Jean-François Lyotard, Fraser and Nicholson argue that
the problem with such metanarratives is not so much their narrative or historical structure but rather their very claim to meta status, a status which, at least in our “postmodern” era, simply cannot be made good. As they put it: “a so-called metadiscourse is in fact simply one more discourse among others” (Fraser and Nicholson 1990, 22). Thus, while it is true that their model of social criticism without philosophy is avowedly nonuniversalist, pragmatic, and fallibilist (Fraser and Nicholson 1990, 34–35), “nonuniversalist” here seems to signal not much more than a rejection of the type of decontextualized foundationalism that Benhabib also criticizes.

In other words, both Benhabib and Fraser are resolutely post-metaphysical and anti-foundationalist thinkers. As such, their views with respect to the question of metaphysics are arguably much closer not only to each other but also to that of Judith Butler – particularly her notion of “contingent foundations” (see Benhabib et al., 35–57) – than they seem willing to acknowledge. Similarly, Benhabib and Fraser seem remarkably close on the point about the death of history. Both agree that the rejection of grand Enlightenment metanarratives of historical progress counseled by Lyotard need not entail a refusal of all large-scale, causal-explanatory historical narratives; indeed, such narratives are, they agree, necessary for understanding the maintenance and reproduction of structures of gender subordination and, as such, for fulfilling what Benhabib called critical theory’s “explanatory-diagnostic” aim (Benhabib 1986, 226).

To be sure, there are subtle differences between Benhabib’s and Fraser’s conceptions of history that don’t fully emerge in this early debate. Whereas Benhabib’s conception of history is rather straightforwardly left-Hegelian – though her Hegel is, in line with her postmetaphysical stance, a Hegel without the Absolute – Fraser’s social criticism without philosophy model makes room for a significant genealogical component (see Allen 2017). Still, both Benhabib and Fraser seem to hold on to some version of a detranscendentalized and postmetaphysical yet recognizably left-Hegelian understanding of history. Indeed, both have been criticized in recent years from the direction of postcolonial feminism for failing to interrogate fully enough their Hegelian, teleological, modernist commitments (see Hutchings 2008, 2014).

The Problem of the Subject

However, as Benhabib herself has argued, it was the “problem of the subject” – the implications of the death of man thesis for thinking about agency and critique – that was most central to this debate (Benhabib 1999, 337). And with respect to that problem, the differences between Benhabib’s and Fraser’s positions are more significant. Indeed, their positions could be seen as laying down two distinct paths for the development of post-Habermasian feminist theory. On the one path, there are those who follow Benhabib in developing the notion of a situated, narrative self as a compelling alternative to the poststructuralist position; on the other path are those who follow Fraser in attempting to integrate (at least some aspects of) the poststructuralist position into feminist critical theory.

Benhabib presents her narrative conception of the self as an alternative to Butler’s poststructuralist, performative conception. She claims that the narrative conception is better able to illuminate the vicissitudes of gender identity in a way that enables us to understand the “varieties of resistance and cultural struggles of the present” (Benhabib 1999, 338). According to this conception, “to be and to become a self is to insert oneself into webs of interlocution; it is to know how to answer when one is addressed and to know how to address others” (Benhabib 2002, 15). As Benhabib notes, we are all born into various webs of interlocution or narrative – including familial, gender, ethnic, racial, religious, national, cultural narratives, and more – and “we become who we are by learning to be a conversation partner in these narratives” (Benhabib 1999, 344). Moreover, although we are not in a position to choose the webs of interlocution in which we find ourselves, “our agency consists in our capacity to weave out of those narratives and fragments of narratives a life story that makes sense for us, as unique
individual selves” (Benhabib 1999, 344). We are, in other words, not just the protagonists but also authors of our own stories. Contra Charles Taylor, however, from whom she borrows the notion of “webs of interlocution,” Benhabib offers an anti-essentialist model of the self that emphasizes not our substantive first-order strong evaluations but rather the second-order capacity to take an evaluative stance with respect to one’s life. By construing the core of identity as an ability rather than a substance, Benhabib highlights the temporal dimension of identity; the process of achieving narrative coherence is, for her, “an interminable task, for narration is also a project of recollection and retrieval” (Benhabib 1999, 350). Particular events in our past take on new significance in the light of present events, new characters get written in and written out of our life stories, and so forth, all of which prompt us continually to reconstruct our narrative identity. Benhabib also highlights our inability to master our own narratives completely; not only are our own motivations and intentions often opaque to us, our narratives must also attain some degree of fit with the continually unfolding narratives of those others with whom our own life stories are inextricably intertwined.

In her book, Moral Textures (1998), María Pía Lara also develops the concept of narrative for feminist critical theory, though her account focuses more on the aesthetic dimension of narratives – as a corrective to the narrow Habermasian focus on moral validity – and also on their collective deployment within the public sphere – that is, on the potential of narratives to generate social and political transformation by reconfiguring the limits of the possible. However, like Benhabib, Lara links narratives to reflexive agency (Lara 1998, 71); moreover, on her account, narrative agency is integral to both autonomy and authenticity (Lara 1998, chapter 4). For Lara, “emancipatory narratives can themselves create new forms of power, configuring new ways to fight back against past and present injustices, thus making institutional transformations possible. This is the power I call ‘illocutionary force’” (Lara 1998, 5). The illocutionary force generated by the feminist transformation of gender narratives has, on Lara’s account, expanded our existing moral vocabulary, including our conceptions of justice and autonomy (see Lara 1998, 80).

Lois McNay characterizes this turn to narrative as an attempt to do justice to the post-structuralist emphasis on difference while holding on to the universal normative foundations provided by Habermasian communicative ethics (see McNay 2003, 15). Although she is sympathetic with Benhabib’s critique of poststructuralism and also with the turn to narrative within feminist critical theory more generally, she is critical of Benhabib’s and Lara’s attempts to bring together a Habermasian theory of communication and an account of narrative agency. McNay raises two concerns. First, she worries that these accounts “deploy an exaggeratedly syncretic concept of narrative identity that underestimates the blocks, both psychic and social, to the formation of a coherent sense of self” and, as a result, they foreclose “an understanding of complexities and contradictions within the construction of gender identity” (McNay 2003, 7). Second, she argues that “the normative emphasis on narratives as inherently reflexive and as authentic expressions of experience arises because the analysis of narrative structures is detached from a thorough analysis of power relations” (McNay 2003, 12; for a related critique of Benhabib, see Allen 2008, 163–170; for a compelling reconstruction and defense of Benhabib, see Lucas 2016). For McNay, the problem ultimately lies in the attempt to integrate a conception of narrative agency into the Habermasian framework. As she puts it,

a universal basis for feminist critique can only be retained by relying on a delimited and problematic concept of narrative which underplays the complexities of gender identity and, in some ways, replicates rather than overcomes the rationalist tendencies in Habermas’s work. (McNay 2003, 16)
(For what it is worth, this seems to me to be a more compelling critique of Benhabib than of Lara, precisely because of Lara's focus on the disclosive power of the imagination and of aesthetic validity.) For these reasons, McNay argues for an alternative model of narrative agency on Ricoeur's more complex and psychoanalytically inflected conception of narrative (see McNay 2000, 2003) and connects this to a Bourdieusian analysis of power and social suffering (see McNay 2003, 2014).

While Benhabib, Lara, and McNay may disagree about how best to articulate a conception of narrative agency within the context of feminist critical theory, they could each be seen as offering this conception as a compelling alternative to a poststructuralist account of subjectivity. A different trajectory of the feminist contentions debate can be found in the work of those theorists who have attempted to integrate some version of a poststructuralist account of subjectivity and identity into a broader feminist critical theory. In my own work, for example, I have attempted to bring together the Foucaultian and Butlerian account of subjection – which is, I argue, crucial for the explanatory diagnostic task of analyzing gender subordination in all of its depth and complexity – with a Habermasian conception of autonomy understood as communicatively and intersubjectively generated (Allen 2008). This approach is inspired by Fraser's response to Benhabib, inasmuch as it entails understanding critical capacities as themselves “culturally constructed” – but no less critical for all of that (Benhabib et al., 67). In other words, it is an attempt to develop Fraser's called for alternative conceptualization of the subject that integrates Butler's emphasis on construction with Benhabib's emphasis on critique (see Benhabib et al., 69).

This integrative project has two principal aims. The first, interpretive, aim is to intervene in the Foucault/Habermas and Butler/Benhabib debates, challenging superficial misunderstandings on both sides and developing readings of both thinkers that show there to be more middle ground between them than is typically assumed. For example, I contest the standard reading of Foucault as an anti-subjective and anti- or crypto-normative thinker while simultaneously developing a more contextualist reading of Habermas's notion of autonomy that is compatible with a Foucaultian conception of power and subjection. The second, conceptual, aim is to use this interpretive recasting to rethink the relationship between subjection and autonomy, in a way that allows us to understand individuals as both constituted as subjects through relations of power – that is, through processes of subjection in the dual sense of that term – and yet still capable of a kind of situated critical reflection that deserves to be called autonomy – even if that reflection can never be done from a point of view outside of power.

In her book, Identities and Freedom (2013), Allison Weir pursues a similar integrative project, with a focus on the concept of identity. Her goal is to rethink the notion of identity in the wake of its persistent and ongoing critique. One of Weir's key moves is to take on board the poststructuralist critique of identities as being constituted by subordination, power, and exclusion while insisting that identity is not reducible to these negative forces. Identities, for Weir, are also sources of values, of connections to ourselves and to each other, and to ideals; as such, they are not only sources of subordination, but they are also enabling conditions for individual and collective freedom.

Weir develops this more complex and internally differentiated conception of identities in relation to power by bringing together the work of Charles Taylor and Michel Foucault. Weir takes Taylor and Foucault to be representative of two familiar yet distinct ways of understanding identity: respectively, identity as an enabling source of meaning and identity as a subordinating trap. Taylor's positive conception of identity is grounded in a first person, existential account of what matters to or has meaning for me and why and an understanding of the social as an enabling condition for individual freedom and agency; Foucault's, by contrast, is grounded in a third person, genealogical account of how the ascription of identity is a function of power and a conception of power relations as coextensive with the social
body. While Taylor offers a compelling account of existential meaning and authenticity, he tends to understand the social in benign terms that blind him to the complexities of power; while Foucault offers a bracing account of how notions of identity can serve to anchor power relations deep in the self, he also tends to underplay the role of resistant and alternative identifications in enabling resistance to subjection. Moving beyond both thinkers, Weir argues that freedom requires “a practice of relation to self and others that involves both analysis of relations of power and identification with resistant identities” (Weir 2013, 23). This also means moving beyond the opposition between the first- and third-person perspectives by means of a shift to the second person, that is, to questions about “my identification and connection with and to particular people, communities, and ideals” (Weir 2013, 29). But the trick is to do this without losing sight of the fact that we don’t fully understand ourselves – as individuals or collectives – unless and until we understand the relations of power through which we are constituted. In this way, Weir cleverly positions the perspective of Habermasian communicative action as the sublation of Taylor’s communitarianism and Foucault’s poststructuralism – a new twist for post-Habermasian feminism.

Back to the First Generation?

For much of the last thirty years, the influential strand of feminist critical theory discussed above has developed in critical dialogue with the work of Habermas. As Wendy Brown noted in 2006,

to the extent that feminist theory does engage [the Frankfurt School] tradition today, it is primarily through Jürgen Habermas; and within Habermas’s extensive oeuvre, it is his theorization of the public sphere and communicative rationality – his later, markedly Kantian and more liberal thinking – that feminist theory has taken up.

(Brown 2006, 2)

On Brown’s view, however, the excessive focus on Habermas has come at a cost for feminism. As she puts it, “whatever the value of Habermas’s work on communicative ethics, it cannot be said to bear the philosophical reach or political radicalism represented by the early Frankfurt School”; as a result, with this focus on Habermas, “something in feminist thinking has been tamed” (Brown 2006, 2). Robyn Marasco makes a similar assertion: “That feminist critics find nourishment from Habermasian discourse ethics suggests the extent to which contemporary critical theory has curbed its political aspirations and narrowed its theoretical field” (Marasco 2006, 88).

Although the post-Habermasian strand of feminist critical theory has been highly influential, it has never exhausted all of the possibilities for a feminist critical theory. Indeed, there have always been influential feminist critical theorists – including Brown herself – who have rejected the Habermasian turn and instead have drawn inspiration from the early Frankfurt School, in particular Adorno (Cornell 1992), Walter Benjamin (Brown 2005), and Marcuse (Willett 2001; Davis 2004). Marasco (2006) offers a masterful analysis of the productive tensions between first-generation Frankfurt School critical theory and feminist theory. Canvassing the analyses of femininity and male domination in the work of Horkheimer, Adorno, and Marcuse, Marasco offers an immanent critique of early critical theory, revealing the extent to which, for each of these thinkers, “the feminine embodies the hidden kernel of ‘truth’ contained in the past – whether distant (nature) or recent (family) – and protects it from the totalizing sweep of bureaucratic capital” (Marasco 2006, 106). However, as Marasco further argues, this linking of the feminine with a negative utopian horizon – by
associating it either with a mythic sexuality that precedes and exceeds bureaucratic instrumental rationality or with a nostalgic conception of maternal love in the bourgeois family—“proves a particularly shaky foundation upon which to rest a redemptive critique, precisely insofar as woman's desires, experiences, and forms of life are themselves the effects of bourgeois rationality” (Marasco 2006, 106). As Adorno puts it,

the feminine character, and the ideal of femininity on which it is modelled, are products of masculine society. The image of undistorted nature arises only in distortion, as its opposite. ...The feminine character is a negative imprint of domination. But therefore equally bad.

(Adorno 1974, 95)

Although these two ways of reading femininity may seem starkly at odds, Marasco argues that they are two sides of the same dialectical coin. In the early Frankfurt School,

woman appears to be nothing more and nothing less than the way she has been seen through the lenses of male dominance. Negatively, she is reduced to a by-product of history, a consequence of male power whose desire is both produced and exhausted by domination. Positively, she enjoys the status of the relic, a trace of “prehistory,” to remind us that things might be otherwise.

(Marasco 2006, 108)

Ultimately, however, what might seem like a disabling theoretical impasse contains, according to Marasco, the kernel of an important methodological insight that feminists can learn from reading the early Frankfurt School. As she puts it,

the production of gender through rationalities of male dominance poses a conundrum for a feminist critique of dominance: any words, concepts, forms of life, desires, experiences, and practices deployed for feminist aims are those historically available through the complex of social power. We can neither step outside the history of male dominance nor take solace in the assurance of its progressive softening or radical overcoming.

(Marasco 2006, 110)

But this diagnosis should not lead us to conclude that feminist critique has run out of steam or is necessarily chasing its own tail; rather, for Marasco, “critical theorists show us that, while it is impossible to think or represent ‘woman’ apart from how ‘she’ has been thought and represented by male dominance, this is precisely the melancholy conundrum that animates critique” (Marasco 2006, 111).

In recent years, Adorno’s work in particular has sparked sustained critical interest from feminists (see Heberle 2006). As Renee Heberle argues, many of Adorno’s central philosophical concerns resonate deeply with those of feminist theorists, and “much of Adorno’s thinking predicts some of [the] basic conundrums of feminist theorizing” (Heberle 2006, 2). Like much work in feminist theory, Adorno’s philosophy challenges and deconstructs dualisms such as nature and history, desire and reason, object and subject (see Heberle 2006, 5); it makes concrete lived experience fundamental to philosophical thinking (see Heberle 2006, 6); and it elaborates a theory of the nonidentical that problematizes essentialist conceptions of identity (see Heberle 2006, 6).

In her recent book *Power and Feminist Agency in Capitalism* (2017), Claudia Leeb draws out the importance of the Adornian account of the nonidentical for contemporary feminist
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Drawing extensively on Adorno, read alongside Marx and Lacan, Leeb reframes the debates about identity and subjectivity discussed in the previous section. The core animating idea of Leeb's book is what she calls the political subject-in-outline, which she develops out of her reading of Adorno's notion of the nonidentical and Lacan's conception of the real. Leeb describes the political subject-in-outline as moving “within the tension of a certain coherence (the subject) necessary to effect change, and permanent openness (the outline) necessary to counter its exclusionary character” (Leeb 2017, 5–6). At the individual level, the subject-in-outline is constituted as a subject by power relations but is never wholly constituted, and thus always remains open for transformation; at the political level, the subject-in-outline has a certain coherence (such as is afforded by the category “women”) while remaining permanently open to further expansion and inclusion. On Leeb's reading of Adorno, his unique combination of interests in psychoanalysis and cultural Marxism enables him to provide a theoretical bridge between Lacan and Marx. Thus, in addition to using Adorno to reframe the kinds of feminist debates about subjection, autonomy, and identity that were prominent in Habermasian feminist critical theory, Leeb's book joins forces with recent work by Nancy Fraser (2013) and Wendy Brown (2015) in shifting the focus of feminist critical theory back to the critique of capitalism.

Conclusion

In recent years, the most interesting and exciting work in feminist theory and gender studies has been in the areas of intersectionality theory, queer and trans* feminism, and transnational and postcolonial feminisms. By way of conclusion, I would like to raise some questions about whether and how Frankfurt School critical theory can participate in and contribute to these debates.

Although the topic of intersectionality remains hotly debated among feminist theorists (for an overview, see Allen 2016b), it has also been called “the most important contribution that women's studies, in conjunction with other fields, has made so far” (McCall 2005, 1771). The concept of intersectionality has a long and complex genealogy (see Collins 2011), with roots that stretch back to nineteenth-century Black feminist analyses of the intersections of racism and sexism (see Gines 2014), but contemporary intersectionality theory takes its inspiration from the work of legal theorist Kimberlé Crenshaw (Crenshaw 1991a, 1991b). Although some feminist critics of intersectionality theory construe it as a theory of identity, the core claim of intersectionality can perhaps more productively be interpreted as a claim not about identity but rather about power. On this view, the goal of an intersectional approach is to develop a single framework for analyzing power that encompasses sexism, racism, class oppression, heterosexism, and other axes of subordination and that theorizes their complex interconnections.

To the extent that Frankfurt School critical theory retains the ambition of offering a critique of actually existing power relations in the societies that it aims to critique, and assuming that it would accept the claim that the contemporary societies that are the object of its critique are structured by relations of racial, gender, class, and sexual subordination, it stands to benefit from developing an intersectional analysis of power and domination. However, in order to do so, critical theorists will have to develop a more complex and differentiated conceptualization of power and domination than those currently on offer. Iris Marion Young's analysis of the five faces of oppression (Young 1992) and Nancy Fraser and Honneth (2003) could be useful starting points here, but both stand in need of further elaboration and development. Such elaboration would arguably also need to take place through a much more sustained critical engagement between Frankfurt School critical theorists and
woman of color (Black, Latina, and indigenous) feminists than has heretofore been the case. One promising point of departure here would be the work of Angela Davis, not only one of Adorno and Marcuse’s most prominent students, but also an important Black feminist, critical philosopher of race, and theorist of what she calls the “intersectionality of struggles” against carceral racism, colonialism, and patriarchy (Davis 2016, 144).

As far as queer and trans* feminism go, work in these fields often foregrounds issues of embodiment (see Ahmed 2006, Salamon 2010) and affect (Berlant 2011, Chen 2012) that are far afield of the largely discursive concerns of much work in Habermasian and post-Habermasian feminist critical theory. Adorno may have interesting resources to offer here, given his emphasis on bodily suffering, particularity, and affect (see Yun Lee 2006). However, in order to make use to those resources in the context of queer and trans* theory, one would have to read Adorno very much against the grain, in light of his own problematic views of homosexuality as an immature form of sexuality (see Cornell 2006, 33–34).

Finally, with respect to transnational and postcolonial feminisms, the stumbling block here is likely to be post-Habermasian critical theory’s commitment to and investment in a normatively loaded conception of modernity. To the extent that Frankfurt School critical theorists are committed to the idea that European modernity and Enlightenment represent the outcome of a progressive historical learning process, their work is strikingly at odds with a wide range of work in post- and decolonial theory, including that of prominent transnational and postcolonial feminists such as Chandra Mohanty (2003), Gayatri Spivak (1999), Saba Mahmood (2005), and Jasbir Puar (2007). These theorists (and many others) have exposed and rigorously problematized the ways in which the normative conceptions of European modernity held so dear by contemporary Frankfurt School theorists are entangled with ideologies of colonial and imperial domination. It remains to be seen whether and how a critical theory tradition that is, at least in its contemporary form, relatively unified around its commitment to modernity and which tends to view feminism itself as an outgrowth of the modern, Enlightenment conception of freedom as autonomy can respond to this challenge (see Weir 2013). Once again, the work of the early Frankfurt School, with its rigorous skepticism of the concept of progress, may provide important resources here (see Allen 2016a).

It seems to me an open – and important – question to what extent the Frankfurt School tradition of critical theory can fruitfully engage with, learn from, and contribute to these contemporary debates in feminist theory. A plausible case could be made for the claim that in order to do so, it will need not only to shift its focus to questions of power, embodiment, and affect that have not been high on its theoretical agenda in recent years but also to attenuate or at least critically interrogate its residual modernist commitments. Although reorienting critical theory in these ways may run the risk of putting feminist critical theory at odds with more mainstream, Habermasian and post-Habermasian Frankfurt School approaches, doing so may be necessary if feminist critical theory is to remain not only sufficiently critical but also sufficiently feminist.

References
CRITICAL THEORY AND FEMINISM


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Further Reading


