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Critical Theory and Psychoanalysis
Interview with Amy Allen

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Abstract
Amy Allen, a prominent figure in feminist philosophy and the fourth generation of critical theory, has made significant contributions to the intersection of critical theory, feminism, and psychoanalysis. This article-interview delves into her extensive body of work spanning over two decades, emphasizing her recent efforts to integrate psychoanalytic methodology into critical theory. As a professor at Pennsylvania State University, Allen's scholarship navigates the complexities of feminist thought and social critique, aiming to reconcile disparate perspectives within these fields. Through this interview, Allen revisits key themes from her previous works while elucidating the implications of her recent research, shedding light on the symbiotic relationship between psychoanalysis and critical theory in understanding power dynamics, autonomy, and gender in contemporary society.
Keywords: Critical Theory, Psychoanalysis, Feminism Theory

With more than two decades of intense research and philosophical production, Amy Allen is a significant feminist philosopher associated with the fourth generation of critical theory. She currently holds a professorship in philosophy, gender studies, women, and sexuality at Pennsylvania State University. Her works provide a critical approach to

feminist thought and social critique, attempting to integrate the conflicting contributions of both critical theory and feminist *praxis*. Recently, Allen has endeavored to illustrate how psychoanalysis can provide a productive model for the methodology of critical theory, rearticulating the analogy between the psychoanalytic method and the critical method from a less rationalist and cognitivist perspective on psychoanalysis. Among her most significant contributions, we can emphasize the following works: *The Power of Feminist Theory: Domination, Resistance and Solidarity (1999); The Politics of Ourselves: Power, Autonomy and Gender in Contemporary Critical Theory* (2008); *The End of Progress: Decolonizing the Normative Foundations of Critical Theor*y (2016); *Critique on the couch: why critical theory needs psychoanalysis* (2020)*.* In this interview, Allen was invited to revisit significant aspects of her prior work in the context of her most recent research on psychoanalysis and critical theory.

1.

A major feature of your work since The Power of Feminist Theory *and* The Politics of Our Selves *is the commitment to build a critical analysis of subjectivity situated midway between two theoretical perspectives that we can broadly characterize as transcendentalist and immanentist. This dialogue is carried on in your most recent book,* Critique on the Couch, *which seeks to offer a conception of emancipated subjectivity that goes beyond the alternative between a rationalist and coercive notion of the ego and the irrationalist horizon of a dissolution of the self. Drawing on the works of Melanie Klein, you consistently articulate a notion of non-coercive psychic integration marked by the never complete incorporation of unconscious contents and the ability to sustain ambivalence. At the same time, you indicate how crisis situations and even broader processes in capitalist society tend to undermine the constitution of such a non-coercive integration. How can*

one conceive the connections between these two arguments in a way that avoids falling into an opposition between ideal and reality, transcendence and immanence? How to think of the actual *potential for emancipated subjectivities in a context that in several respects* objectively *blocks them?*

In many ways, this is THE central question facing critical theory today: how to preserve the transformative and emancipatory power of critique while taking seriously what we might call the impurity of practical reason, its embeddedness in historical, social, and cultural conditions that are themselves saturated with relations of power, coercion, domination, and oppression. I don't pretend to have resolved this difficult issue – in fact, I suspect that it can't be fully resolved, but rather that it is an ambivalent tension that we must continually grapple with in our critical work. But I can at least begin to address your question by saying a few words about how I understand the project of critical theory.

One difficulty with defining the "critical theory" is that the term is itself unstable and contested. In the narrowest sense, it refers to the theoretical project of the Frankfurt School, but it can also be used more broadly to refer to any progressive body of theory (including, but not limited to, feminist theory, queer theory, critical race theory, postcolonial theory, decolonial theory, and disability theory) and/or to refer to the theoretical work that has been most influential in literary and cultural studies, which typically means French theory (deconstruction, poststructuralism, Lacanian psychoanalysis). Keeping this conceptual landscape in mind, I work with an understanding of critical theory that defines that project in terms of its tradition, its method, and its aim.

I situate my work within the *tradition* of Critical Theory understood as the shared intellectual and political project of the Frankfurt School.

However, as I see it, the way to do justice to the Frankfurt School tradition is precisely to inherit it, to take it up while simultaneously transforming it in and through dialogue with a broader array of progressive or emancipatory critical theories. Throughout my work I have tried to contribute to such a dialogue, particularly through engagement with the work of Michel Foucault (and to a lesser extent with that of Derrida and Lacan) and with that of feminist, queer, post- and de-colonial theorists, and, more recently, critical philosophers of race.

Perhaps the most important legacy of the Frankfurt School tradition is its powerful critical *method*. As I understand it, the core methodological insight of this tradition, what distinguishes it from both ideal theory and hard-nosed political realism, is that it understands itself to be rooted in and constituted by an existing social, cultural, historical, and political reality that is permeated with power relations – relations that it nonetheless aims rationally and reflexively to critique. This means that critical theory grapples from the start with the essential tension between power and reason and, moreover, that any attempt to resolve this tension in one direction or the other amounts to a loss of critical perspective. It follows from this that critique must always be immanent – that is, to paraphrase Foucault, that we must give up the hope of accessing a point of view outside of power from which our critique of power can be launched – but, importantly, this does *not* mean that it can only ever be conventional. Immanent critique, as I understand and practice it, is *not* confined to measuring social reality against the prevailing normative standards of the day nor is does it amount to a conservative affirmation of the status quo. Critical theory challenges us to identify immanent sources of normative insight that can open up possibilities for transformative critique and *praxis* in the present. In my recent work, I draw on the Foucaultian image of critique as tracing lines of fragility and fracture in the present;

according to this image, critique is both thoroughly immanent and at the same time capable of initiating a profoundly transformative world-disclosure.

However, critical theory is more than an intellectual tradition that articulates a distinctive method; as your question indicates, it also has the practical and political *aim* of emancipation. For the early Frankfurt School, emancipation meant first and foremost overcoming the structures of oppression and alienation characteristic of late capitalism. Contemporary critical theory strives to broaden its purview to the theory and practice of emancipation from other forms of domination as well – including, but not limited to, sexism, heterosexism, racism, imperialism, and colonialism – but without giving up the critique of capitalism. (How exactly to accomplish this remains a pressing challenge). To be sure, there's a potential tension between my account of critical theory's method – according to which the tension between power and reason cannot be resolved in either direction – and traditional understandings of emancipation – which is typically understood as a liberation or freedom from power. This is why I understand emancipation in negativistic terms – as the minimization and transformation of relations of domination into mobile, fluid and reversible relations of power. I have called this "emancipation without utopia".

2.

In the Politics of Ourselves, *you engaged in the project of welcoming Foucault's and Butler's poststructuralism in Critical Theory, exploring its tensions with Habermas' and Benhabib's respective understanding of power, agency and intersubjectivity. In your recent book,* Critique on the Couch*, those issues seem to be still at stake, but this time you highlight Melanie Klein's contribution to complicate them with a more "realistic conception of person". In both books, the debates encompass*

disputes on different understandings of the self*. However, in your later work, psychoanalysis plays a greater role in your thoughts on subjectivity and politics than it had before. Would you say that drawing on psychoanalysis might have troubled your previous understanding of the* self*? More precisely: would you say there might be some tensions between the conceptual status of the* self *in your later Kleinian approach to it and your understanding of the self in* The Politics of ourselves*? If so, would it have any implication in your earlier critique of Benhabib's "assumption of a nongendered core self" in the narrative model she proposes?*

It's true that, at the time that I wrote *The Politics of Our Selves*, I had not yet engaged in a serious study of psychoanalysis. In fact, it was working on that book that made me realize that I really needed to read more deeply in psychoanalytic theory. I felt this most acutely in working on the Butler chapter, which focuses on their magnificent 1997 book, *The Psychic Life of Power*, and intervenes in their debate with the psychoanalytic feminist theorist Jessica Benjamin. But psychoanalysis is also at stake in my reading of Habermas in the *Politics of Our Selves*, since his account of ego and moral development retains some interesting traces of Freud's influence even after he adopts the framework of cognitive developmental psychology. So, shortly after the *Politics of Our Selves* was published, I spent a sabbatical year as a visiting scholar at the Boston Psychoanalytic Society and Institute, which was a truly amazing and transformative experience.

Even though my earlier work was not informed by a deep engagement with psychoanalysis, I see many lines of continuity between the account of the self that I develop in *Critique on the Couch* and the model that is articulated in *The Politics of Our Selves*. Both models are grappling with the notion of ambivalence, albeit in different

ways. Indeed, *Critique on the Couch* foregrounds the work of Melanie Klein precisely because, for me, she is the pre-eminent theorist of psychic ambivalence – even more so than Freud, who is undoubtedly deeply attuned to the ambivalences of psychic life. The difference between Klein and Freud on this point is that Klein's metapsychology begins where Freud's ends: with the ineliminable duality of the life and death drives, of love and hate, aggression, and destructiveness. Klein's theory of the psyche thus turns on the management of the deeply rooted ambivalence that structures psychic life as it seeks to negotiate the vicissitudes of these drives. For Klein, the hallmark of psychological maturity – which she understands not as a developmental stage that we achieve but as a position that we can take up or inhabit in those moments when we are being our best selves – is the ability to accept, withstand, and negotiate the ambivalence that follows from the duality of the drives, an ambivalence that indelibly marks all our relationships, including our relationship with our selves. To be sure, the temptation to foreclose or deny this ambivalence by engaging in the Manichean logic of splitting, according to which others are either wholly evil or purely good, is ever present. Resisting the lure of this temptation demands stubbornly persisting in relating to others (and ourselves) as whole people, with good and bad parts. The ability to withstand ambivalence is a hallmark of what Klein calls the depressive position, which is also the source of meaning-making, creativity, and reparation. As such, we could say that her work centers on the question of how ambivalence can be rendered productive.

I see this same orientation toward ambivalence and rejection of the logics of splitting and purification at work in my earlier account of the tension between subjection and autonomy in *The Politics of Our Selves*. The core aim of that book was to draw on the work of Habermas, Benhabib, Foucault, and Butler to understand the self as *both* constituted in and through subjection to power relations *and* at the

same time capable of autonomous self-constitution. This, in turn, involves reconceptualizing autonomy as a capacity that does not stand outside of relations of power and dependency but rather emerges from them. Autonomy is made possible by subjection – heteronomy and dependency are its conditions of possibility – and yet it nonetheless makes possible, in turn, a critical, reflexive, self-transformative *praxis*. The thread that connects these two models of the self is what we might call a "both/and" orientation that sees the following as urgent tasks for critical theory: thinking through interplay of constraint and enablement in the constitution of subjectivity, agency, and autonomy; grappling with the entanglement of power and domination with rationality and validity; and working through the implications of the ambivalence of aggressive and erotic drives for our understanding of sociality.

There's also a more substantive connection between the two accounts: the role of dependency in the constitution of the self. The fact that we all start off our lives in a prolonged period of radical dependence on our caregivers, whom we helplessly rely on to keep us alive, meet our basic needs, and provide us with the love and emotional support that we need to grow and thrive is a distinctive feature of the human condition with profound psychic and social implications. In general, critical theorists have been more attentive to this aspect of the human condition than many other philosophical traditions have been, through their focus on the role of intersubjectivity and intersubjective recognition in the formation of the self. The work of Habermas and Honneth is exemplary in this regard, and it has important resonances with relational conceptions of autonomy and the self that have been developed by feminist philosophers. However, as valuable as these insights into the relational and intersubjective nature of selfhood undoubtedly are (and we should not underestimate how important these models have been for the critique of the atomistic individualism of liberal political theory), post-Habermasian critical

theory tends to downplay some of the ambivalent implications of the intersubjectivity of the self. One such implication, which I explore in *The Politics of Our Selves*, is that our radical dependency on our caregivers renders us systematically vulnerable to subordination, precisely because it makes us willing to accept recognition on whatever terms it is offered. Here I draw on the profound insights of Butler's analysis of subjection, while departing from their suggestion that subjection is per se subordinating. *Critique on the Couch* explores a different aspect of dependency, namely, its entanglement with the deeply ambivalent dynamics of love and hatred, aggressiveness, and destructiveness. It should go without saying, but I will say it anyway, that the point of these analyses is decidedly *not* to reject feminist and critical-theoretical insights into intersubjectivity, relationality, and dependency, much less is it re-assert a liberal model of the self as an "inner citadel". The point, rather, is to complicate and deepen these feminist and critical-theoretical insights by exploring the promise and peril of the intersubjectivity of the self.

So, to return to your question, although I certainly see different emphases and points of focus between these two models of the self, I don't see them as being at odds with one another.

3.

In The End of Progress *you convincingly argue that a more robust engagement of critical theory with decolonial struggles would require abandoning the category of progress in normative reflection and social analysis. Could psychoanalysis also be thought of as a form of resistance to the type of normative foundation based on the notion of progress? To what extent can* Critique on the Couch *offer us alternative or complementary theoretical resources to those defended by you in 2017?*

Yes, indeed! As I see it, the two books are deeply complementary. In fact, both books have their origins in a paper that I was invited to present at the American Philosophical Association in 2008 for a panel on the topic of "The Future of Critical Theory". Tasked with reflecting on critical theory's future, I thought about its past and, more specifically, how contemporary critical theorists relate to that past. Whereas some view critical theory's history as a story of the triumphant progress of Habermasian rationalism, others understand it as a narrative of a decline and fall away from the towering achievements of the first generation of the Frankfurt School. This is a deep divide within the field of critical theory. Thinking through these different narratives lead me to a serious and sustained engagement with Adorno and Horkheimer's *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. It was through my encounter with this text and the ways it has been (mis)interpreted by subsequent generations of critical theorists that I became convinced that the best way forward for critical theory was by going back – that is, by recovering some of the insights that were central to the work of the early Frankfurt School but that had subsequently been forgotten or deliberately abandoned. Chief among these insights was an appreciation of the deeply ambivalent relationship between power and reason at the core of modernity.

Initially, I planned to write a single and more ambitious book, one that would recover and reconstruct the interrelated Freudian and Nietzschean-inspired critiques of the rational ego and of historical progress found in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* with an eye toward theorizing the relationship between power and reason as an essential, irresolvable tension. After several years of work, I gave up on that grand plan, and decided to split the project into two books. The first of these, *The End of Progress*, critiqued the role that conceptions of historical development, social evolution, and learning processes play in establishing the normative foundations of Habermasian and post-

Habermasian critical theory. Reconstructing the history of European modernity as a learning process, I argued, not only commits critical theory to a problematic foreclosure of the tension between power and reason – whereby history becomes the medium through which reason progressively works its way free of power, ultimately culminating in a power-free utopia – it also entangles critical theory in Eurocentric modes of thinking that we urgently need to leave behind if we are to live up to our own critical aims. The interest in holding open the tension between power and reason also informs my constructive turn, in the final chapters of *The End of Progress*, toward problematizing genealogy as the most promising methodology for critical theory and metanormative contextualism as its most suitable conception of normative justification. Problematizing genealogy and metanormative contextualism are both rational practices that remain thoroughly impure – which is to say, situated in turn historical, social, and cultural contexts that are themselves saturated with relations of power. Rather than foreclosing the tension between reason and power in either direction, these methodological and conceptual tools help to render that tension productive for critique.

The tension between power and reason remains at stake, if mostly implicitly, in *Critique on the Couch* as well. Echoes of this animating tension can be found in each of the book's overarching aims, which include drawing on psychoanalysis to develop a realistic conception of the person, to counteract the normative developmentalism and progressivism of critical theory, and to rethink the methodology of critique. A realistic conception of the person is one that takes seriously the ineliminable role of irrationality, unreason, and aggression in human social life. Although aggression and destructiveness are obviously not the same as power or domination, surely they are not unrelated. The psychoanalytic critique of normative developmentalism offers perhaps the most obvious link to my earlier critique of progress;

to say that the cure is that there is no cure is to offer a psychoanalytic analogue to the claim that power and reason exist in an ineliminable tension. Finally, my account of psychoanalytic method coheres with the model of problematizing genealogy articulated in my earlier work, and it grapples with the (somewhat circumscribed, but not non-existent) role of rational insight in motivating processes of self- and social transformation.

4.

The critical remarks you make about Freud's psychoanalysis are compelling, especially regarding the centrality of the Oedipus complex and the developmentalism contained in the Freudian understanding of the subject formation. Would it be correct to understand your turning to Melanie Klein's psychoanalysis as an attempt to avoid a theory focused exclusively (or at least primarily) on the male development and in a notion of progress that underlies it?

Yes, absolutely, this is one of the features of Klein's work that I find especially productive. Of course, one must be careful here not to overstate her departure from the Freudian Oedipal model of sexuality. It's undeniable that she herself accepted this developmental model of sexuality and deployed it – often in a quite authoritarian way – in her own theoretical and clinical work. References to Freud's theory of psychosexual development – together with her own ideas about internalized phantasies of breasts, penises, and babies – are all over Klein's case studies. The point that I would emphasize, however, is that Klein's mature metapsychology, which consists of her understanding of the movement in and through the two psychic positions that she calls paranoid-schizoid and depressive, does not itself depend on that theory of psychosexual development. Indeed, because her metapsychology centers on the pre-Oedipal period, and, more specifically, on psychic

dynamics that she takes to be operative in the first year of life, it concerns a constellation of anxieties and defenses that could be described as more primordial than those that related to sexual repression, focusing as they do on the stability, fragility, and preservation of the ego and its objects.

I can see why this line of thought would bring up a question that you raised a moment ago about my earlier critique of Seyla Benhabib's narrative conception of the self. My critique of Benhabib charged her with assuming the existence of a nongendered rational core of the self, a self that takes up gender narratives and weaves them into its broader life story. However, it may well seem that my reading of Klein's account of the pre-Oedipal psyche presupposes something along these same lines – namely, an ungendered core of the self and its more primordial anxieties and defenses that exists prior to the processes of Oedipalization through which gender and sexual identity are installed.

Although I readily admit that some of the details of my critique of Benhabib may need to be reformulated, I would still like to defend what I take to be its core claim, namely, that thinking of gender as a narrative that the self takes up and weaves into its life story obscures the ways that gender is much more deeply anchored in the self. Much of this anchoring takes place through language, but the dynamics of psychic attachment to primary caregivers who are performing specific gender roles obviously play a crucial role as well. The point of this observation is not that gender is more primordial or central to the self than other markers of identity, such as race, sexuality, ethnicity, ability, and so forth. Here, I would admit that the language of what is and is not "core" to the self is not terribly helpful and that to claim, as I did in *The Politics of Our Selves*, that the self is "gendered all the way down" is perhaps insufficiently nuanced. Rather, the point is simply that, based on the available empirical evidence we have regarding gender development in late capitalist societies, the world of young children is

already carved up into binary gender categories well before they develop the ability to construct narratives. That is to say, the gender binary, which is produced through a great deal of painstaking yet largely invisible linguistic, cultural, and social work, is already in place before children develop the capacity to constitute and reconstitute their selves through narrative. To the extent that this is true, mastery of prevailing modes of gender presentation constitutes a pre-condition for constructing any narrative whatsoever. To be clear, I do not take this to be an *ontological* fact, but a *social* and *historical* one. As such it is changeable – indeed, this aspect of our social world is currently undergoing a dramatic transformation, as fluid and non-binary gender presentations become increasingly more common, and our language evolves accordingly.

5.

In Critical Theory Between Klein and Lacan *you and Mari Ruti unfold the text as a conversation in which you respond directly to questions, interpretations and objections to Klein's and Lacan's theories in order to explore their similarities and differences. In* Critique on the Couch*, on the other hand, you seem to defend the primacy of the Kleinian understanding to bring back a more fruitful use of psychoanalysis by critical theory. Could you explain why the Lacanian heritage seems to you less promising to this aim?*

I hope it's clear from my exchange with Mari that I find her interpretation of Lacan to be tremendously productive for critical theory – though it's true that this is because her interpretation is more reparative, less relentlessly negative, than other prominent versions of Lacanian theory. And Lacan does figure into the argument of *Critique on the Couch*, particularly in chapter four, where I try to articulate what sort of forward-looking notion of progress is compatible with the

postulate of the death drive. That discussion turns on the attempt to work out a version of Lacan's claim that the cure is that there is no cure.

That said, you are quite correct that *Critique on the Couch* places more emphasis on Klein than on Lacan (or Freud, or any other psychoanalytic theorist, for that matter). Part of the reason for that emphasis is simply that I think that Klein's work is an under-utilized resource for critical theory – a claim that could not be made about Lacan, whose work has been much more influential in the critical humanities.

But there's also a substantive reason, which is that I think that Klein's psychoanalytic theory is uniquely attuned to both the intrapsychic and the intersubjective dimensions of experience. To speak very schematically, I would say that Lacanian theory focuses so much on the intrapsychic dimensions of experience that it becomes difficult to see whether or how intersubjectivity is possible at all, whereas relational psychoanalysts focus so much on the intersubjective pole that they downplay the power of the intrapsychic—most notably, by rejecting the theory of the drives. Although she's often (mis)interpreted on this point, both by Lacanian critics who accuse her of not taking the intrapsychic dimension seriously enough and by relational critics who charge her with ignoring the social environment completely, Klein is situated at the productive midpoint between these two extremes. She understands the psyche in relational terms, as object-related form the start, while at the same time conceptualizing our object relations as inevitably mediated and filtered through the lens of unconscious, intrapsychic phantasy. This gives her understanding of relationality a unique depth, richness, and ambivalence.

To be sure, Klein's claim that the psyche is object-related from the start isn't exactly the same as feminist and critical theories of the relational or intersubjective self. For Klein, unconscious phantasy

inevitably shapes and potentially distorts our perceptions of the flesh and blood human beings with whom we relate. Thus, when Klein talks of "objects", she's always referring simultaneously to the internalized, phantasied objects and the actual, external others on whom those phantasies are based. Still, although our relationships to external objects (including, perhaps especially, the primary object) are necessarily structured by and filtered through our intrapsychic phantasies and projections, they remain relationships (however mediated) to external objects. Even the phantasy of the good breast, which is so central to Klein's argument, is based on the embodied experience of being fed, nourished, and loved by a caregiver. So, the "object" for Klein, is both internal and external at the same time. What interests her, I think, is precisely the gap between phantasy and reality, between one's phantasmatic internal objects and the external others on whom those phantasms are based. Although she maintains that this gap can never be fully closed – for to do so would be to eliminate unconscious phantasy altogether – it can be narrowed. Indeed, the ability to narrow this gap, to tamp down one's own psychic projections and get closer to experiencing others as they are, in their whole selves, is a hallmark of psychic maturity, and, as Bob Hinshelwood puts it, "the task of a lifetime".

6.

In Kritik als soziale Praxis*, Robin Celikates defends the habermasian project found in* Knowledge and Human Interests *as capable of avoiding a sociological objectivism that ignores the agents' self-understanding, as well as the limits of a hermeneutic perspective concerned strictly with the endowment of meaning between socially inserted agents, without asking about their possible failures and social constraints. In* Critique on the Couch*, you criticize this type of psychoanalysis' treatment by critical theory due to its rationalist*

excesses. Still, I would like to know if you admit the need to overcome psychoanalytic objectivism and uncritical forms of hermeneutical discourse. And if so, to what extent is the "less rationalist" reading of psychoanalysis proposed by you capable of presenting an alternative response to these two polarities?

Yes, absolutely! In fact, I'm completely convinced by many of Celikates's arguments in *Critique as Social Practice* – and I'm a huge fan of Robin's work overall. Indeed, I would characterize my critique of him in chapter five of *Critique on the Couch* as proposing a friendly amendment to his project. As such, I don't think that my reading provides an alternative response to the polarities that he identifies, but rather (I hope!) adds a bit more depth and nuance to his (extremely fruitful) interpretation of psychoanalytic method.

7.

Would we be correct in saying that, despite your criticisms of Habermas and Celikates, you would still admit a role to be played in the methodological relationship between critical theory and psychoanalytic clinic? If so, I would like to ask you to talk a little about the importance that the concept of transference has in your book Critique on the Couch*, especially concerning the challenges of basing a critical method on an analogy between the individual transference and social analysis.*

Yes, I think that's correct. I am interested in reconstructing the intuition, which was prominent in Habermas's early work, and which has been recently revived by Honneth and Celikates, that psychoanalysis offers a fruitful model for the methodology of critical theory. Although I find this intuition compelling, I also worry, as you've noted, that the interpretations of psychoanalysis that these theorists offer to support it are overly rationalistic and cognitivist. None of their accounts take

seriously enough, it seems to me, the role of the transference in psychoanalytic method. As a result, they don't even broach – let alone answer – the question of what role something akin to transference phenomena might play in the project of critique. So, the goal of chapter five of *Critique on the Couch* is to re-articulate this analogy between psychoanalytic and critical method on the basis of a less rationalistic and less cognitivist understanding of the former.

To be sure, one might be inclined to say that emphasizing the centrality of transference to psychoanalytic method undermines the very possibility of modeling critique on psychoanalysis. After all, one might very well wonder what could possibly serve as the functional equivalent for transference in critical theory? As I argue in the book, the best way to begin to make sense of this is to understand transference in structural rather than relational terms. In structural terms, transference refers not so much to the process of transferring one's affective attachments or investments onto the person of the analyst but rather to the emergence, in the context of the analysis, of the analysand's way of experiencing the world as precisely that – an idiosyncratic way of experiencing the world that she herself has had a hand in creating. Through this emergence, this pattern of experience is opened up to practical transformation. When transference is understood this way, its resonance with a model of critique understood as a process of de-naturalization through what had been taken as given is revealed instead to be the contingent product of historical and social construction, a process that simultaneously opens the social world up to transformation, seems obvious (at least to me!).

Still, one might worry that using the model of transference in this context implicitly commits me to the problematic fiction of a total, integrated, societal subject, akin to the individual who engages in psychoanalytic treatment. And indeed, this worry points to an important disanalogy between psychoanalysis and critical theory:

individuals decide to enter analytic treatment, whereas societies as a whole – even deeply troubled ones, perhaps especially deeply troubled ones – do not seek out critical theory. Although it's true that I don't address this problem in my book, I think that one could at least begin to do so by being more attentive to the relationship between critique and social movements. Social movements or struggles give voice to the affective outrage, felt suffering, and desire for transformation of groups of individuals who are marginalized or oppressed; in that sense, they could be seen as analogous to the analysand seeking out treatment. If critical theory stands, as Nancy Fraser has argued, in a sympathetic though not uncritical relationship to emancipatory social movements, then the analogue of the psychoanalytic dialogue through which transference operates would then not be a dialogue between critical theorists and the society as a whole, but rather between critical theorists and the collective social agents who are already engaged in struggles for progressive social change – precisely as Robin Celikates argues in *Critique as Social Practice*. Although I was skeptical of appealing to social movements to address this concern in some of my early sketches of this project,[1] I now realize that my skepticism was in large part a function of the fact that I was implicitly presupposing a relational conception of transference. Until I encountered the structural conception of transference, through my reading Jonathan Lear's work, I could not see what could possibly serve as the analogue for transference in the case of critical theory.

8.

In Critique on the Couch *you also talk about the "domestication" of conflicts arising from the concepts of death drive and life drive. Do you believe that, in some way, Melanie Klein's concept of "unconscious*

1 See Allen 2016b: 252.

fantasy" can offer parameters so that this clearly intrapsychic conflict is not erased by social theory?

When I talk about domestication, I'm primarily concerned with the domestication of the explosive power of psychoanalytic drive theory by critical theorists working in a Habermasian vein. Whereas the early Frankfurt School sought to preserve the explosive content of drive theory in their engagement with psychoanalysis – hence their sharp critique of revisionist approaches – Habermas and his followers, when they haven't jettisoned psychoanalysis altogether, have rejected the language of drives out of fears of reductionist biologism. In his early engagements with Freud, Habermas offered a highly cognitivist and rationalist interpretation of psychoanalysis – much more an ego psychology than an id psychology, to borrow Erich Fromm's distinction. Subsequently, as is well known, even this linguistified version of psychoanalysis proved too speculative for Habermas, and possibly also too disruptive for his rationalist and progressivist theory of communicative action. At that point, he left Freud behind and turned instead to empirical work in cognitive and developmental psychology. For the most part, Habermasian critical theorists have followed Habermas's lead, and have ceased engaging with psychoanalysis at all. Those that have continued the dialogue with psychoanalysis, such as Axel Honneth, have favored intersubjectivist and relational approaches that reject drive theory. As a result, they have struggled to do justice to the depth and persistence of aggression in human psychic and social life.

With respect to this first type of domestication, Klein's work offers an important corrective. As I argue in chapter one of the book, Klein is deeply committed to the duality of life and death drives, and thus to the idea of primary aggression. Because aggression and destructiveness are rooted in the death drive, they are ineliminable

features of human psychic – and, by extension, social – life. This is in large part what I mean by saying that Klein offers a realistic conception of the person. However, by reconceptualizing the drives as fundamentally directed toward objects, Klein recasts them in relational terms, as modes of relating to others either lovingly or destructively. Thus, I suggest, Klein enables critical theorists to preserve the explosive content of drive theory while remaining within the methodological constraints of critical theory, by which I mean adhering to the commitment to understanding the self as socially, historically, and culturally constituted.

However, and this is crucial, rather than simply drawing conservative conclusions from the primacy and ineliminability of aggression – maintaining that society needs powerful repressive institutions and social structures to keep aggression in check – Klein shows us other possibilities. Unlike Freud, she thinks that aggression can and should be productively sublimated – indeed, she contends that all productive activities contain some elements of aggression. This includes everything from mundane activities like house-cleaning, which require a constant assault on dirt and disorder, through all manner of competitive games and sports, to exalted activities such as arguing cases before the Supreme Court. More generally, the sublimation of aggression is crucial for all forms of creativity; for Klein there is no creation without destruction. Klein's lesson for critical theory is that we should worry less about the alleged dangers of acknowledging the primacy of aggression and more about how to understand the links between aggression and destructiveness, on the one hand, and creativity and reparation, on the other.

There's also a second type of domestication at issue in the book. Whereas the first kind of domestication is meta-theoretical, having to do with the implications of endorsing or rejecting drive theory, the second kind concerns the unconscious itself. The idea here is that the

unconscious stubbornly resists normalization and full incorporation into the social order – in other words, the unconscious provides what Mari Ruti calls a "kernel of rebelliousness" that is productive for critical theories of resistance. Ruti draws on Lacan's theory of the real to articulate this insight, but I think that Klein's notion of unconscious phantasy moves in the same direction. After all, both are ways of talking about the irreducibility of the drives, and of the death drive in particular. The idea that the drives are an important source of utopian impulses precisely because they are so unruly, so incapable of being fully domesticated even by the most totalizing social order, was also an important point for the early Frankfurt School, and one that has subsequently been lost. This is admittedly a minor theme in my book, which focuses a bit more on the meta-theoretical issues, but it is an important topic in the ongoing dialogue between psychoanalysis and critical theory.

9.

What would be the main contribution of this joining between critical theory and psychoanalysis for the diagnosis and criticism of the current democratic crisis? And finally, could you talk a little about your current research agenda and how it continues the program presented in Critique on the Couch*?*

Well, sadly there seems to be no shortage of aggression, destructiveness, and irrationality in contemporary politics! So, psychoanalysis is more relevant for critical theory than ever, and indeed we have seen a resurgence of interest in psychoanalytic insights among critical theorists in recent years. I'm certainly not alone in advocating a renewed engagement between psychoanalysis and critical theory; my book is in conversation with work by Joel Whitebook, Jessica Benjamin, Noelle McAfee, Mari Ruti, Jamieson Webster, Robyn

Marasco, Claudia Leeb, David McIvor, Benjamin Fong, Fred Alford, Wendy Brown, Inara Marin, and others who have also done important work on this topic.

Klein's work in particular offers some very interesting insights into the current crisis of democracy, as I explore briefly in the book's conclusion. The idea there is to try to apply Klein's notion of the paranoid-schizoid position not so much in a diagnosis of authoritarian personalities, but rather to use this framework as a way of understanding our politics itself. To say that politics is increasingly done in a paranoid-schizoid mode is to say that it adheres to a logic of splitting, disintegration, and polarization which increases tendencies toward demonization of one's opponents and phantasmatic distortions of reality. Such a mode of politics is fueled by persecutory anxieties—anxieties that are heightened when, for example, right wing leaders tell their constituencies that they are being overrun or replaced by immigrants – and it provides fertile ground for conspiracy theories.

If Klein's notion of the paranoid-schizoid position provides a useful framework for diagnosing our current political situation, her account of the depressive position offers some fruitful ideas for thinking about possible paths forward. Politics in a depressive mode is marked by first and foremost by the ability to withstand ambivalence and to relate to our political opponents as whole people with whom we happen to disagree (perhaps strongly) rather than as the personification of evil. Noelle McAfee's work on rethinking deliberative democracy in light of the insights of psychoanalysis is really crucial on this point. Depressive politics is also characterized by open-ended, expansive forms of integration that allow for internally contested, fractured, and fractious political communities, as David McIvor's rethinking of truth and reconciliation commissions in light of Klein's work shows.

To be sure, maintaining what we might call a depressive political stance is not easy – the paranoid schizoid position, with its comforting

simplicity of ideological purity, remains a constant temptation – nor does it by itself solve all of our problems – at best, it creates a political context in which collective solutions to pressing political problems might be found. But this is far from nothing. The political analogue of Klein's realistic conception of the person is thus a form of democratic realism that understands democracy as a mechanism for negotiating ambivalence, coping with loss, and productively channeling aggression. More hopefully, Kleinian democratic realism also envisions the ongoing, painstaking, open-ended process of building political communities in the face of deep and abiding disagreements and differences. Avoiding the twin temptations of triumphalism and defeatism, Klein offers a sober and realistic but nonetheless meaningful defense of democracy's productive and creative potential.

As for my current research, I'm started working on a new project on Marx and 20th century Marxism. I'm interested in the relationship between the theory of history – what's usually called historical materialism, though Marx himself did not use that term – and the critique of capitalism in Marx's work and in later Marxist traditions. Part of the project is interpretive, dealing with Marx's own texts, and addressing questions such as what is Marx's theory of history? What are its core commitments and how do these change over time? How many of these commitments remain in place in Marx's mature critique of capitalism, as articulated in *Capital* and his later writings? The rest of the project is more reconstructive, turning to later Marxist thinkers, to see how they have attempted to disarticulate the critique of capitalism from the theory of history. There are lots of interesting examples of this type of work in the European Marxist tradition—including Althusser and French Marxism, the cultural Marxism of early Frankfurt School theorists like Adorno, Benjamin, and Bloch, and the British School of Raymond Williams, Stuart Hall, and others – but in this project I'm particularly interested in those thinkers who have used

Marx's work to critique imperialism, colonialism, and slavery. I'm also interested in engaging with non-European Marxists, such as Frantz Fanon, WEB DuBois, and Enrique Dussel. Although this new project doesn't deal extensively with psychoanalysis, certain themes from *Critique on the Couch* are still very much at stake, particularly questions about progress, development, history, and, of course, how to understand the immanent potentials for critique and emancipation in our present.

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