

## **Book Review: Habermas, Kristeva, and Citizenship by Noelle McAfee**

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**Book Review: *Habermas, Kristeva, and Citizenship* by Noëlle McAfee**  
***Constellations*, 12/3, September 2005**

by Melissa Yates

The aim of Noelle McAfee's *Habermas, Kristeva, and Citizenship* is to replace the modern conception of the subject that underpins Jürgen Habermas's theory of deliberative democracy with a poststructuralist, specifically Kristevan, conception of subjects-in-process. If she is successful, she refutes the objection that poststructuralism is ill-equipped to provide an account of political agency and gives theorists of deliberative democracy a reason to rethink their commitment to claims about subjectivity that limit their views on politics. There are three central elements to her thesis: first, that Habermas, in relying on a problematic conception of subjectivity, fails to uphold the aims of deliberative democracy; second, that despite this objection, deliberative democracy itself provides a worthwhile characterization of effective political agency; third, that a theory of subjects-in-process derived from Kristeva can be incorporated into the Habermasian account of citizenship that she has adopted. While I share with McAfee a worry that Habermas's conception of rationality is too narrow, especially in the context of deep pluralism, I am unconvinced that subjects-in-process can be Habermasian political agents in the way she suggests. In the end, McAfee has paved the way for a conception of what it means for coercive law to be legitimate distinct from processes of autonomous will-formation.

1.

In her first chapter, McAfee argues that Habermas problematically conceives of subjects as unified, autonomous, self-transparent, and capable of making universal claims. However, she is careful not to overstate her objection, as Habermas clearly defends an intersubjective account of autonomy and rejects a substance ontological approach to subjectivity. On the surface his conception of autonomy as emerging from a sociolinguistic process does not seem to rely on any antecedent account of subjectivity, or "core self", and might even be compatible with a dynamic, Kristevan conception (34-6).

However, McAfee has deeper worries about Habermas's commitment to autonomy as a regulating ideal. First, she wonders how a subject can intersubjectively "develop a capacity to free oneself from one's own embeddedness, to break loose from the traditions that give rise to the self in order to be able to reflexively critique those very traditions" (40). The problem from a poststructuralist stance is not that subjectivity emerges from sociolinguistic process, but that a fully autonomous, rational, and self-transparent subject emerges from such a process. But this charge does not give due credit to the subtler Habermasian claim that it is the will to autonomy that motivates subjects to perform as if they were autonomous, a point McAfee mentions but does not develop.

Her second concern, developed later in the book, is that Habermas's conception of subjectivity cannot provide a motivation for subjects to enter into processes of democratic deliberation, since on his account subjects do not see themselves as reliant on or indebted to other subjects for their own identity formation. As she puts it later, "it is a challenge to conceive of why people would choose to come together to build public relationships" (134).

McAfee's concern about motivation reveals, however, a crucial underlying assumption: that we are motivated to create public relationships because we are split subjects, with partial knowledge, and opaque to ourselves. She argues that if subjects were (or saw themselves as) fully autonomous and self-transparent they would fail to understand what could be gained by such relationships. I worry that her characterization of Habermas's conception is misleading on this point. Habermas does not defend a model of autonomy as *self*-legislation, such that political agents could conceivably act independent of these public relationships. Instead, he defends a model of colegislation that seems very much in keeping with McAfee's conception of relational subjectivity.

## 2.

Despite her rejection of Habermas's ties to a modern view of the subject, McAfee adopts a Habermasian characterization of political agency, defending the tenets of deliberative democracy from a poststructuralist perspective. McAfee asserts that deliberative democracy "allows us to address our moral and political differences by talk rather than by force" (37). Moreover, she finds in deliberative democracy "a practical, democratic model to replace the interest-based model of politics that has been so

influential during the twentieth century” (97). McAfee endorses Habermas’s call for “rekindling the promise of democracy—that the will of the people should guide public policy” (89). What this means for both McAfee and Habermas is that the public should serve as a check on political institutions and social norms, discover problems of social integration, deliberate about what should be done, and enact change through legislative bodies. This kind of work takes place in what Habermas calls the public political sphere, which citizens create when they come together to discuss matters of public interest.

However, in developing and adopting what she takes to be Habermas’s account of political agency McAfee may commit herself to some of the same modern ideals she criticizes. For instance, I worry that she cannot adopt this view of citizenship without also adopting Habermas’s account of legitimacy (that laws are legitimate only insofar as they are self-legislated) and his discourse procedures for adjudicating disagreements. For instance, effective citizenship requires, for Habermas, the creation of a political public sphere. While McAfee, as already noted, argues that subjects-in-process are more inclined to engage in public deliberation than are autonomous subjects, central to Habermas’s endorsement of a public sphere is his procedural account of legitimacy. His model of an ideal speech situation, largely rejected by poststructuralists for its appeal to universalism, consensus, and rationality, grounds his account of how deliberation can be productive of legitimate political outcomes.

### 3.

Throughout this book McAfee criticizes the narrowness of modern subjectivity and Habermas’s presumption that there are no viable democratic alternatives. In the end, she argues that there is a coherent alternative account of poststructural political agency amenable to the functions and characteristics of Habermasian citizenship. Such relational subjectivity, McAfee contends, avoids the motivation problems Habermas faces because it conceives of subjects-in-process as already deliberating. This claim depends in large part on McAfee’s reconstruction of the Kristevan notion that subjects are split: “even though we tell ourselves we are whole, we are in many respects strangers to ourselves. In effect, we are, as Freud noted, split subjects, split between our conscious and our unconscious selves” (60). As such, our subjectivity itself is constantly being constituted, and so is an “open system.” The intrasubjective tension inherent in subjects-in-process

paves the way for their intersubjective deliberation. She argues that coming to terms with the “other within” makes possible both the development of stable subjectivity and a “community in which people can come to be at ease with those who seem so different” (125). Political agency is democratic for McAfee when subjectivity itself is conceived as dependant on a web of interrelations with others. We are most democratic when we are citizens inclined toward one another, in Jean-Luc Nancy’s sense (187).

Arguing that Kristeva can contribute something useful to an account of political agency is, however, an uphill battle. Consequently, the book charts objections to the apolitical nature of poststructuralism. In particular, she cites two central worries that have been raised against such an approach to politics: 1) that it leaves the door open to heteronomy, manipulation, or coercion from others in rejecting autonomy, 2) that it is defeatist or relativist. I find her response to the first the most problematic. First, her objection to autonomy as self-legislation neglects Habermas’s claim that as political agents we are colegislators. In “Constitutional Democracy: A Paradoxical Union of Contradictory Principles?” Habermas argues, “The entitlement to political participation is bound up with an expectation of the public use of reason: as democratic colegislators, citizens may not ignore the informal demand to orient themselves toward the common good” (Habermas 779). It remains to be seen whether his appeal to colegislation and coauthorship could answer some of McAfee’s worries about Habermas’s commitment to autonomy.

Second, her account of what is *democratic* about citizenship seems one-sided. In adopting Habermas’s account of political agency she would also need to address his interest in accounting for legitimate political will formation. Moreover, this need not mean the adoption of a strictly self-legislative ideal, as mentioned above. This is not to suggest that McAfee is uncritical of universalism, the private/public distinction, the narrowness of rationality, etc. Instead, my concern is that these commitments are central enough to Habermas’s notion of effective citizenship as to make it difficult to conceive of a subject-in-process acting in the political public sphere. Here the problem is not motivation to engage in deliberation, but rather that subjects-in-process would lack the ability to adjudicate disagreements or the incentive to agree with one another. To the

extent that McAfee remains within a deliberative democratic project, her thesis calls for an account of legitimacy that does not arise from autonomy but remains democratic.

McAfee offers a rich development of Kristeva's work on subjectivity into a political arena that will be of use to poststructuralists and to scholars unacquainted with Kristeva's work. She also provides Habermasians reason to be more attentive to issues concerning subjectivity. This book will be of great interest to scholars of critical theory, poststructuralism or postmodernism, psychoanalysis, feminism, continental philosophy, and political theory.

Habermas, Jürgen. "Constitutional Democracy. A Union of Paradoxical Principles?"

*Political Theory*, 29/6 (December 2001): 766-781.

McAfee, Noëlle. *Habermas, Kristeva, and Citizenship*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2000.