

Hospitality of the Matrix allows us to reflect about different future possibilities rather than actual realities: this is one of the virtues and merits of this book. Society's desires evolve by means of scientific discoveries and, vice versa, scientific progress is promoted and encouraged by ever-changing human needs and sociocultural shifts. So, redefining the concept of fatherhood and motherhood means reconfiguring the notion of hospitality both in the biomedical field – with reference to maternal/foetal relationships – and in the ethical area – with reference to self/other relations in the social context.

Sumi Madhok, *Rethinking Agency: Developmentalism, Gender and Rights*, Routledge: New Delhi, 2013; 256 pp.: 9780415811927

Sumi Madhok, Anne Phillips and Kalpana Wilson (eds), *Gender, Agency and Coercion*, Palgrave Macmillan: London and New York, 2013; 296 pp.: 9780230300323

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These two engaging books deal with the feminist reinterpretation of autonomy and agency. Both are inscribed in a wider current of thought about autonomy that has developed since the late 1980s. We could say that both books are ingrained in the relational reinterpretation of the notion of autonomy, according to which it is not possible to understand autonomy without thinking of agents as embedded in historic and social contexts, with differentiated bodies that are emotional as well as rational. The recognition of these features forces us to reconsider key notions related to autonomy, such as integration, identification, critical reflection or self-realization. It is only through analyses of the process of socialization and social relationships that it is possible to understand agents' self-perceptions and the relationship of autonomy to self-respect, self-worth and self-confidence. This type of analysis is also able to show how socialization in contexts of oppression can interfere with agency and impair the process of building the necessary capacities for autonomy (MacKenzie and Stoljar, 2000).

The title of the first book, *Rethinking Agency: Developmentalism, Agency and Rights*, encapsulates the scope of the book. Sumi Madhok's objective is to rethink the notion of agency. She does so starting with the question of how it is understood in oppressive contexts, specifically rural areas in Rajasthan, India, where she has done extensive fieldwork. Madhok worked with the *sathins* (the women charged with introducing ideas of development to villages). The recognition given to these women has been uneven. In some cases, they are viewed as agents capable of working in cooperation with both feminist groups and the state, to aid the development of women living in poverty. In other cases, they are seen as subversive agents capable of questioning the role of the state. This is probably why the state of Rajasthan finally decided that they were incapable of performing their duties and no longer employs them (p. 3).

For Madhok it is not clear that one could or should talk of these women as heroic feminist subjects, capable of reversing centuries of feminine oppression in their villages, but neither it is clear that they should be written off as failures. The criticism at the heart of this book is born from the questioning of analyses of *sathins* as agentic subjects that abstract them from their contexts, without considering the constraints imposed by their

social and personal circumstances. Madhok's thesis is that if the circumstances of coercion, oppression, lack of freedom, were all taken into account, we could make an alternative, holistic interpretation of the notion of agency, and thus judge the work of the *sathins* in a new light (p. 129).

According to Madhok, we need to revise the conceptual framework from which evaluative judgements are issued, whether from feminist groups or from the state. We therefore need to know which notion of agency is being used to judge the *sathin* (p. 4) in the first place. The prevailing idea of agency focuses on a person's expectations of achieving, as far as possible, a correspondence between their preferences and their actions. Agency or autonomy are terms often used interchangeably and identified with the freedom to act. Madhok's proposal sustains an idea of agency or autonomy that does not rest exclusively on the capacity to act with absolute freedom as proof of having a critical conscience and that does not insist on open resistance to the oppressor as a characteristic. It advocates instead the analysis of cognitive processes, motivations, desires and ethical activity that takes into account the social and cultural circumstances in which life plans are made and executed, while avoiding extreme positions (pp. 37–38).

A magnificent example of the application of Madhok's theory can be seen in the case of the reflexive deliberation articulated by *sathin* Mohini when she considers whether she should run for local government elections. Mohini thinks she has a chance of winning and making an important contribution. When subjected to pressure not to stand, however, she reconsiders her decision, since she chooses not to see her life turned into what she considers would be a living hell if she were to be elected (p. 39). Different conclusions can be reached from this account, depending on our notion of agency. In the version of agency developed in this book, Mohini's way of acting would be a sign of agency if we accept that agency is not only related to the freedom to act, but also to discourses that show reflexivity and self-awareness (p. 63).

In the book there is a description of the process that leads these women to self-awareness and to the capacity to articulate discourses. The discourse on rights plays a fundamental role in this process (pp. 128–159). *Sathins* are firmly committed to the language of rights. This may perhaps be, as Madhok points out, because they can relate it with terms not wholly unfamiliar within their traditions, such as the idea of the *haq* (the term is in the Koran with, among others, the meaning of *justice and that which is true*; in Urdu and Hindustani its meaning is associated with *justice, truth, equity, right, due*; see pp. 130–134). This starting point helps them to adopt an idea of rights that they can employ in creative and reflexive ways, but, above all, that are useful in the building of new self-images. At first, this reflection on rights is linked to the idea of the state and to the protection they expect from it. Later, the state proves to be a disappointment, and the language of rights helps to give feelings of empowerment despite the women's disappointment with the state. Rights are not legitimated by the state, but rather by a superior morality that they can fit into their traditions (p. 150). For *sathins*, the manifestation of these rights is the capacity to express themselves in their own voice. It is a step they highly value, for it allows them to articulate discourses and to confront the de facto powers of their communities or even the state itself.

Sathins' capacities to act are defined by reflection and elaboration in relation to political rights and ideas of development. The *sathins* engage in a process of reconstruction of

their self-image through the acquisition of citizenship that includes respect as a form of recognition. They feel that they are subjects with rights because they are also political subjects who are related to other community subjects and have undergone a process that makes them see themselves as literate persons. Despite this, however, they do not stand for elections. In many cases, they do not feel capable of bearing the costs that this step would impose on their lives. They elaborate their reasons extremely clearly. Can we affirm that they are persons capable of agency?

Madhok's readable and interesting book aims to prove that they are, and it is hard to fault her reasons. These women are faced with an array of options and they reflect on them. While outsiders might judge that they should ideally make different choices, they have to choose actions that are feasible and best suit their circumstances. They are women who have encountered many obstacles, but pursue the journey towards a new view of themselves and their world and they do so as human beings who cannot be expected to become saints or heroes because, first and foremost, they are women in a hugely unequal world.

In the second book reviewed here, *Gender, Agency and Coercion*, edited by Sumi Madhok, Anne Phillips and Kalpana Wilson, we find an attempt to explore in greater depth the main issues discussed in the previous book. In particular, the contributors attempt to shed light on the binary opposition between agency and coercion that inevitably turns human beings into agents or victims. To do so, it is necessary to clarify the complexity of relationships, not always antithetical, between agency and coercion (p. 3). It is also desirable to escape the stereotyped notion of a western subject who is always autonomous in the face of a non-western subject devoid of autonomy (p. 4). In summary, this is a book that aims to articulate an idea of autonomy as nourished in relationships with others, capable of taking into account the social structures that make agency possible and the social activities through which it is exercised (p. 7). Agency is not only a question of self-awareness and individual actions; it is also a matter of collective transformation (p. 8).

The work published in this book is animated by a shared concern with the way agency and coercion are negotiated in circumstances of inequality and oppression (p. 7). In order to answer the question of whether *agency or autonomy* should be the focus (p. 5), we need to consider the different theoretical positions, political conclusions and disciplinary traditions described in the book. In some cases the terms are used interchangeably, while in others, only the term *agency* is used. Authors who draw on political theory or philosophy are more likely to prefer the term *autonomy*, while social and cultural studies theorists use *agency*. Preference for the term *agency* originates, in some cases, in critiques of the excessive normative load in the term *autonomy*, which is accused of being conceptually ethnocentric and biased. These distinctions, however, are not always accepted because they are not always entirely clear (p. 6).

In the reflections on autonomy we find, on the one hand, a conception of autonomy as a basic capacity for agency that reflects a certain level of control of our life and, on the other, we find a notion of autonomy as a regulative ideal that goes beyond basic autonomy and its elements and is linked to a certain level of rights or responsibilities. It is the construction of this autonomy as a regulative ideal that presents some of the problems critiqued in some of the chapters. These criticisms accord with Diane Meyers' challenge

to the traditional liberal acceptance of autonomy as limited to a reflexive self-definition and rational integration. She proposes a 'five-dimensional account of the self', that is to say, an idea of the self as unitary, social, relational, divided and embodied. In each of these dimensions Meyers suggests skills that are related to agency and are crucial for autonomy (Meyers, 2005: 27–55).

The essays included in the Madhok, Phillips and Wilson book are not organized in sub-sections because, the authors tell us, their subject matter overlaps, and they all deal with both theoretical issues and their application in practice. The chapters, however, are identified as falling into four groups. Thus, Chapter 2: 'Choosers or losers? Feminist ethics and political agency in a plural and unequal world' by Kimberley Hutchings, Chapter 3: 'The feminist subject of agency: Recognition and affect in encounters with "the other"' by Clare Hemmings and Amal Treacher Kabesh, Chapter 4: 'The meaning of agency' by Mary Evans and Chapter 5: 'The unbearable lightness of theory: Political ontology and social weightlessness in Mouffe's radical theory' by Lois McNay, explore the meanings of agency. This first group of essays addresses the configuration of feminist political action in a plural world. On the one hand, the binary model of choosers or losers is questioned, as well as the coercion implicit in certain feminist political projects. On the other hand, importance is given to certain alternative projects that could pose huge risks for women. Yet it is true that the idea of agency in the western world is valued in contradictory ways in our traditions, as Mary Evans reminds us. In keeping with this, Lois McNay points out that the drawing on ideas from radical democracy does not necessarily help to clarify the idea of agency.

A second set of articles addresses agency related to aspects of development and includes Chapter 6: 'Agency as "Smart economics": Neoliberalism, gender and development' by Kalpana Wilson, Chapter 7: 'Action, agency, coercion: Reformatting agency for oppressive contexts' by Sumi Madhok and Chapter 8: 'Sexual exploitation and abuse in UN peacekeeping missions: Problematising current responses' by Marsha Henry. Sumi Madhok's chapter includes the main ideas presented in the first book, reviewed above. Kalpana Wilson's criticism of the microcredit loan system points out the over-responsibilization of poor women in family survival and the diminishing of state responsibilities, which result in a strongly neoliberal shift. Marsha Henry advocates a vision of women that contextualizes their circumstances without taking colonial perspectives and eschewing the automatic treatment of women who work as prostitutes as victims.

The Marsha Henry article could also be included in the third grouping about the body and its capacity for agency. This consists of Chapter 9: 'Does the body make a difference?' by Anne Phillips, Chapter 10: 'Rejecting the choice paradigm: Rethinking the ethical framework in prostitution and egg sale debates' by Heather Widdows, Chapter 11: 'Compensating egg donors' by Emily Jackson and Chapter 12: 'Reproblematising relations of agency and coercion: Surrogacy' by Samantha Asheden. These chapters demonstrate that a major site of conflict over women's capacity for agency revolves around their bodies. It is in this territory, as Anne Phillips tells us, that the red lines that often define coercion are drawn. The answer to the question of where the boundaries between pressure and coercion lie when money is involved, as in the case of prostitution and surrogate motherhood, or the point at which family arrangements turn into pressure as in the organization of marriages, is more complex than appears at first sight. The chapter by

Heather Widdows rejects the notion of choice and consent in agency while pointing out the need to take into account the content if choices are to be considered valid. Emily Jackson and Samantha Asheden also reject binary thinking by identifying both positive and negative aspects of surrogate motherhood and its commodification. Each and every essay emphasizes the need to consider the social consequences of individual actions.

Finally, the fourth grouping consists of Chapter 13: 'Representing agency and coercion: Feminist readings and postfeminist media fictions' by Sadie Wearing and Chapter 14: 'As if postfeminism had come true: The turn to agency in cultural studies of "Sexualization"' by Rosalind Gill and Ngaire Donaghue. These deal with the view of agency in popular culture and discuss aspects of this culture that pose new challenges and invite reflection.

This stimulating book includes an extensive catalogue of variations on the idea of agency or autonomy. The interdisciplinary framework presented has undeniable advantages, since it opens to debate a diverse range of issues and, in consequence, points to a diversity of answers. The disadvantage of interdisciplinarity, on occasion, is the lack of a common conceptual framework. The feminist theory that informs the book, however, comes from an interdisciplinary tradition with shared references. This adds to the appeal of the essays in this book.

One of the many achievements of the two books reviewed above is the clear demonstration of the need to reflect on the idea of autonomy from a feminist perspective. We should not forget that the question 'why not me?' is at the heart of feminism. That is to say the question of women's agency and their capacity to control their lives and bodies. Women have frequently challenged their religion, their culture and their traditions, sometimes at a high cost to themselves. For women, being a revolutionary subject often has nothing to do with a display of 'great heroic attitudes', but rather with the construction of a more equal reality through small, incremental steps and with reflexive awareness of self-positioning, as demonstrated by the *sathins* presented by Sumi Madhok.

References

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