Politics & Gender, 6 (2010), 573–600.

Sexual Politics and Ascriptive Autonomy

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I explore the notion of ascriptive autonomy as a conceptual and political tool that can be used to understand and enact potentially liberatory practices that enable marginalized people to have greater individual autonomy. "Ascriptive autonomy" refers to the sense in which autonomy is partly constituted by the conferral of the status of "autonomous individual." Autonomy is both a capacity to determine one's own ends and a status conferred by virtue of being recognized by others. I focus on the link between these two facets of autonomy insofar as recognition may enable the development of capacity. In certain situations, autonomy may be ascribed even if one lacks some requirements associated with the capacity for autonomy because of either institutional or psychic constraints that follow from oppression. In such instances of "selective, purposeful misrecognition," ascription may lead to the cultivatation of the capacity for autonomy while opening up a space for politics. To demonstrate this, I recast the feminist debate over sexuality using the terms of ascriptive autonomy. When viewed through the lens of misrecognition, we can better respond to critiques that charge proponents of the "pro-sex"position with focusing on sexual pleasure at the expense of sufficient attention paid to the constraints faced by women.

INTRODUCTION

In a volume that grew out of the explosive 1982 Barnard conference that showcased the ferocity of internal debates within feminism, editor Carol

I am grateful to the following people for their valuable feedback on this article: Elizabeth Wingrove, Mika LaVaque-Manty, Leonard Feldman, Ingrid Makus, members of panels and audiences at the 2009 Western Political Science Association meetings and the 2009 Canadian Political Science Association meetings, the editors of this journal, and three anonymous reviewers.

Published by Cambridge University Press 1743-923X/10 $30.00 for The Women and Politics Research Section of the American Political Science Association.
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doi:10.1017/S1743923X10000371

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1743923X10000371 Published online by Cambridge University Press

S. Vance captures the tensions between so-called pro-sex feminists and radical (or anti-pornography) feminists' approaches to women's sexuality. She writes that "[t]o focus only on pleasure and gratification ignores the patriarchal structure in which women act, yet to speak only of sexual violence and oppression ignores women's experience with sexual agency and choice" (Vance 1992, 1). This apparent dilemma — the imperative to explore the nature of and possibilities for women's sexual autonomy, on the one hand, and the necessity of acknowledging and resisting the continued existence of the patriarchal social structure within which women's autonomy is both exercised and constrained, on the other — remains unresolved several decades later. Feminist political theorists continue to contend with questions of the following nature: What social and political practices enable women's autonomous sexual agency, given the continued existence of patriarchy? How can we theorize the conception of autonomy that emerges out of such practices? What tools does feminist political thought offer for conceptualizing these practices, and under what conditions are such practices viable?

In this article, I draw on a broad range of theoretical traditions to engage with these questions. I offer a possible means for conceptualizing both sexual autonomy and the practices by which it may be enabled. I build upon feminist work that conceives of autonomy as relational — as always emerging out of social relations.[1] I focus here on particular configurations of those social relations: relations of recognition that ascribe the *status* of autonomy to those who are recognized as such. Feminists, I argue, may exploit this ascriptive quality of autonomy — which is not always tied to actual *capacities* for autonomy — in order to foster autonomous sexual agency. By conceiving of autonomy as *ascriptive*, we can imagine resistant acts of ascription that enable sexual autonomy through practices of what I refer to as "aspirational recognition."[2] Because there is, paradoxically, an element of *misrecognition* in such practices, they are effective only when engaged in consciously — purposefully and selectively — with attention to the need for concurrent resistance to larger structures of sexism, racism, and capitalism.

1. Among the many pieces that take up relational autonomy (some without using the term) are Benhabib 1992, Ben-Ishai 2009, Benson 1991, J. Christman 2005, J. P. Christman 1989, Fraser and Gordon 2002, Friedman 2003, Mackenzie and Stoljar 2000, Minow 1990, Nedelsky 1989, 1990, and Westlund 2009.

2. I take the term *ascriptive autonomy* from Mika LaVaque-Manty. The term is used somewhat differently by Richard Fallon. See Fallon 1994; LaVaque-Manty 2006.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1743923X10000371 Published online by Cambridge University Press

To think through both the enabling work that ascriptive autonomy may do in a given context and the critiques that may arise in response to such an approach, I consider feminist debates over sexuality, drawing on Elisa Glick's (2000) analysis of problems with the pro-sex perspective in these debates. Pro-sex feminists seek to shift the frame through which we view women's sexuality to consider not only the dangers of sexual violence that preoccupy radical or anti-pornography feminists but also the damaging effects of failing to recognize women as "sexual subjects." As Vance writes, "The horrific effects of gender inequality may include not only brute violence, but the internalized control of women's impulses, poisoning desire at its very root with selfdoubt and anxiety" (1992, 4). In responding to the need to address desire as well as danger, some pro-sex feminists suggest that participation in "transgressive sexual practices" may itself be a means of achieving liberation. However, Glick worries that pro-sex theory *stops* at the revaluation of marginalized sexualities. In turn, "the political and economic conditions that are responsible for [their] devaluation remain unchallenged" (2000, 26).

I reframe the pro-sex position as well as Glick's critique in the language of ascription and aspirational recognition, taking this as a case wherein ascribing autonomy to women is a form of resistance to patriarchal power, yet also one where the risk of depoliticization and individualization may apply, as Glick's critique suggests. I argue that reframing pro-sex feminist arguments in the terms I propose may help to draw out the subtle yet important differences between ascribing autonomy as a strategy of resistance and ascribing autonomy as an act of obfuscation that leaves existing power relations intact. I emphasize practices of *purposeful* aspirational recognition, which keep the need for assessing context and challenging structures of injustice in mind.

The theory of autonomy I propose intervenes in debates between advocates of conceptions of the self — and of sexuality more specifically — that lean either toward a more deterministic or voluntaristic perspective. The starkness of this debate, as perhaps it appears in the text of Vance's *Pleasure and Danger*, has given way to more nuanced contestation, to be sure.[3] Conceiving of ways to traverse the ground between the two extreme positions on this topic continues to be a warranted preoccupation for feminist theorists. In the broader debate over conceptions of autonomous agency, theorists including and influenced

3. For an overview of some of the perspectives of feminists engaged specifically in the debate regarding "agency" and "constraint," see Ferguson 1997.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1743923X10000371 Published online by Cambridge University Press

by Judith Butler generally reject autonomy as a liberal holdout, yet allow for the existence of "human agency." Such agency, however, emerges out of the context of power relations that frequently co-opt or produce that agency in the name of upholding the status quo. As Lisa Disch writes in a review of Butler's books, "there is an asymmetry to [Butler's] text because she looks almost exclusively at instances where dominant institutions have turned potentially insurrectionary initiatives to the advantage of the status quo" (Disch 1999, 555–56). Although on this account agency emerges from productive relations of power, the "agentic" behavior that emerges is often in the service of perpetuating relations of domination and oppression.

In a similar sense, writing about the "will to empowerment," Barbara Cruikshank describes processes of empowerment as acting on citizens' agency, indeed producing it, in ways that are "neither clearly liberatory nor clearly repressive" (1999, 72). For her, "empowerment is a power relationship, a relationship of government; it can be used well or badly" (p. 86). Yet like Butler, Cruikshank focuses primarily on the destructive possibilities of empowerment. We need a way to theorize the relational nature of autonomous agency that directs our attention to such "productive" social embeddedness, which, surrounded by relations of power, can produce a sense of self-directness to a *liberatory* effect — here in the realm of sexuality. A theory of ascriptive autonomy may provide such an avenue.

The act of ascribing autonomy may well reproduce the status quo, as Butler, Cruikshank, and others suggest, insofar as typical ascriptions of autonomy are directed to those who already hold positions of power — those who are recognized as autonomous by virtue of their dominant position, regardless of whether or not they possess the *capacities* we associate with autonomy. In this article, I argue that ascription, when oriented toward women living under conditions of patriarchy (whose autonomy may be compromised as a result of these conditions), may be put to subversive use insofar as it may have the effect of *generating* both the capacity for and status of autonomy, and the ensuing freedom that comes with them. What I refer to as the practice of "aspirational recognition" — a process of recognizing individuals as autonomous even if they lack all the capacities or opportunities necessary to act autonomously — contributes to the development of these capacities. This practice may, first, confer the respect and sense of self necessary for developing those personal capacities associated with autonomy and/or, second, contribute to consciousness raising that facilitates women and

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1743923X10000371 Published online by Cambridge University Press

their allies' abilities to challenge the institutions and social structures that constrain the exercise of autonomy.

This formulation of ascription describes what many of us already do—what we must do, indeed, to avoid "paralysis" and to make sense of our agentic acts while remaining cognizant of our social and political conditions. It also describes what, when made explicit, may be seen as a political strategy for fostering autonomous agency in marginalized subjects. In constructing this analysis, I draw on political theories of recognition, making use of them in an atypical manner.[4]

In his classic essay on the politics of recognition, Charles Taylor argues that "our identity is partly shaped by recognition or its absence, often by misrecognition of others, and so a person or group of people can suffer real damage, real distortion, if the people or society around them mirror back to them a confining or demeaning or contemptible picture of themselves" (Taylor and Gutmann 1992, 25). Where Taylor and other recognition theorists go on to stress the harms of misrecognition — its capacity to impair autonomy — and in turn the importance of recognition, my account appropriates this language for a somewhat different use.

Aspirational recognition is not quite "recognition" in the sense that recognition theorists articulate it, nor is it quite "misrecognition." Rather, I understand aspirational recognition as a practice of "overly generous recognition." In the sense that this is a practice that may ascribe autonomy where it may not be fully present, given social and psychical constraints, aspirational recognition seemingly "misrecognizes" an individual as autonomous. However, in the sense that it is a practice that ascribes autonomy where it exists as a *potentiality*, particularly when the individual is viewed in light of the social relations (social, political, institutional, etc.) that may be constraining, aspirational recognition does indeed "recognize" an individual, rather than misrecognize. Yet, as suggested by Glick's critique of pro-sex feminists, there is a danger that arises from the strategy of aspirational recognition. In focusing on an aspirational state, we may fail to recognize the conditions under which the limitations on autonomy exist in the first place. Such an oversight might lead us to assume that the work of attempting to enact genuine structural change is unnecessary. Though on this account ascription is intended to help create conditions to overcome patriarchy, it may also give the impression of the deed done. This risk suggests that we must be

4. See, for example, Fraser and Honneth 2003, Honneth 1995, and Taylor and Gutmann 1992.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1743923X10000371 Published online by Cambridge University Press

particularly sensitive to the contextual details that frame practices of ascription if it is to be a tool for achieving larger structural change.

FEMINIST CONCEPTIONS OF AUTONOMY: FROM RELATIONAL TO ASCRIPTIVE AUTONOMY

Feminist theorists of autonomy criticize the individualistic and masculinist conceptions of autonomy that have been dominant in the fields of political theory and philosophy. At the same time, many emphasize the importance of women's autonomy as a centerpiece of the struggle for their equality and freedom. In resolving the tensions between these two equally important perspectives, which have, on the one hand, often led to women being excluded from the category of autonomous individual and, on the other hand, led feminists to repudiate the concept of autonomy in its entirety, feminist theorists have articulated a notion of "relational autonomy."[5] Theories of relational autonomy start from the general presupposition that social relations of interdependence are fundamental to our experiences and actions as human beings. Thus, theories of relational autonomy, as Jennifer Nedelsky writes, require that we navigate the path between acknowledging the "constitutiveness of social relations" and the "value of self-determination" (1989, 9).

Autonomy can be understood, then, "as an acquired set of capacities to lead one's own life" that is acquired in the context of our various relationships (Anderson and Honneth 2005, 129). Furthermore, the capacities associated with autonomy "do not merely emerge naturally, but must be developed through various processes involving educational, social and personal resources" (J. Christman 2005, 87). Just as the development of autonomy competency is a product of particular sets of social relations, so too is the hindrance of these capacities. Joel Anderson and Axel Honneth emphasize that "one's autonomy is vulnerable to disruptions in one's relationship to others" (2005, 130). Particularly where relations of domination and oppression exist, autonomy may be deeply constrained.

Relational autonomy theorists generally conceive of autonomy as the capacity to live one's life according to one's own plans — that is, to have the capacity for "self-government" in the context of social relations. But the notion of relationality and the concerns that emerge regarding the effects of constraining relations on autonomy point to an aspect of

5. See note 2 above.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1743923X10000371 Published online by Cambridge University Press

autonomy that is related but distinct from its conception as a capacity or set of capacities. In his article "Kant's Children," Mika LaVaque-Manty suggests that "[a]utonomy is … at least partly ascriptive: I am autonomous if someone ascribes self-authorization to me" (2006, 369). The experience of being recognized as an autonomous individual, he argues, is itself an element of autonomy. Indeed, on both a material and social-relational level, such ascription may be key to granting access to some of the most basic requirements of an autonomous life. Moreover, ascriptive autonomy is also intimately linked to the development of the capacities necessary for autonomy. LaVaque-Manty writes: "There is a complex interaction between acquiring the capacity for responsible agency and coming to be recognized (in one's closer and wider social environment) as capable of being responsible" (p. 369). In his analysis, he emphasizes the potential for those in power — those who have the "power of interpretation," as he puts it — to deny ascription of autonomy to those whom they see (consciously or not) as necessarily remaining, in Kantian terms, in a state of immaturity (p. 386). Such "abuses" of ascriptive autonomy can apply considerable constraints to the individuals who have been denied that status.

One example of the effects of denial of ascriptive autonomy can be found in the case of the now-prevailing model of paternalistic social welfare programs that exists in the United States. These programs are founded on the idea that those in need of public assistance lack the autonomy to pursue their desired ends (which, the proponents of these programs claim, are the same as all Americans: to have a job and a nuclear heterosexual family) (Mead 1997). In response to this perceived lack of autonomy, such programs make welfare conditional on fulfillment of various behavioral requirements, from demeaning designations of appropriate comportment and dress to preoccupation with punctuality, regardless of unplanned events such as child-care emergencies. Ironically, these requirements themselves further limit the recipients' autonomy. Here, autonomy is constrained not only by the institutionalized limitations on recipients' behavior but also because of the psychic effects of being treated as less than a fully formed citizen with the rights and privileges that accompany this status. By abusing its "power of interpretation," the state not only denies the status of autonomy to welfare recipients but also restricts the development and exercise of their *capacities* to act autonomously.[6] This abuse of power

6. For more on the new paternalism, see Kershaw 2006, King 2005, and Mead 2005.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1743923X10000371 Published online by Cambridge University Press

may or may not be intentional; on LaVaque-Manty's account, manifestations of such harmful ascriptive practices are likely to be informed by a variety of intentions and interests, which may at times appear contradictory.

While ascription must be a question of human interpretation in practice, "even though autonomy is ascriptive, it is still a matter of *reasons*, not of power" (LaVaque-Manty, 2006, 386). That is, an individual's autonomy as such still exists only where those individuals or groups ascribing autonomy can offer reasons that account for their conferral of recognition in a given case. But, LaVaque-Manty notes, "power and authority blur in the real world," meaning that given the "right" power relations, one individual or group of individual's *stipulation* that another individual or group lacks autonomy may translate into the diminished capacity for autonomy (as in the case of the welfare programs) (p. 386). The reverse holds, too, and his discussion of Kant's treatment of children's education demonstrates this in a manner that is particularly compelling. Rejecting more paternalist measures of educating children, Kant suggests that giving children certain choices is critical to the development of their agentic capacities. Children may not be fully autonomous agents, but treating them as autonomous in some respects may be an important manner of facilitating the further development of autonomy. Indeed, even if some (controlled) harm comes to a child as a result of these choices, it may be a useful exercise in the development of autonomy. Still, here the reasons for the ascription of autonomy to these individuals (children) are premised upon a perception that they have the *capacity* to determine their own ends, even if it is only in some arenas.

Since those who "abuse" the power of ascription, or deny ascription of autonomy to others, may premise their actions on the basis of claims or beliefs that the objects of such denials are "immature" or nonautonomous, the example of the enabling effects of ascriptive autonomy in the treatment of children might seem to be a precarious one, given my focus on women in this article. But by no means wishing to follow philosophers who have conceived of women as immature and categorized them with children, I take up LaVaque-Manty's example of children only to illustrate what it means to ascribe autonomy to someone whose autonomy is constrained. Women's autonomy, however, is constrained not by a lack of maturity analogous to that found in children but by the institutional and psychic effects of living in a society marked by (hetero)sexist, racist, classist, or otherwise oppressive conditions. In turn, ascribing autonomy to women despite their situation at the

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1743923X10000371 Published online by Cambridge University Press

intersection of such societal constraints can be a way in which we (citizens, community members, the state, scholars, etc.) may foster the development and exercise of this heretofore limited autonomy.

The link between ascription of status and development or exercise of capacity may be further elucidated by drawing on Nancy Hirschmann's compelling account of social construction in her feminist theory of freedom (2003).[7] Hirschmann divides social construction into "three levels." On the second level of her theory, the effect of social construction is not only to produce a misrepresentation of reality (the first level) but also to produce reality itself. That is, Hirschmann argues that this level, which she terms "materialization," entails the production of material effects by virtue of the social construction of norms. Here, social construction "becomes constitutive not only of what women are allowed to do, but of what they are allowed to be" (p. 79).

For example, the view that women are physically inferior to men at the highest levels of sport leads coaches to prescribe different training regimens for male and female athletes. Because women's training regimens are less demanding than men's, they inevitably perform at a lower level, producing the phenomena that the original "misperception" (at the first level) assumed.[8] This example suggests the *disabling* effects of materialization. But the *enabling* practice of ascribing autonomy in the transformational sense I have been suggesting is also consistent with Hirschmann's account of materialization. Materialization offers another way of thinking about the link between ascribing the status of autonomy and developing or exercising the capacity for autonomy.[9] If the coach prescribed the same workouts for her female athletes as her male athletes, perhaps the gap between performances would shrink.[10] In turn, if I recognize you as an autonomous individual, even if, like the female athlete who has been

7. I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer for suggesting Hirschmann's account of freedom as a useful tool for clarifying my argument in this article.

8. This example was inspired by a talk given by Greg Malszecki at the conference Bodyworks: A Symposium, York University, Toronto, Ontario, November 2009.

9. The theory of ascriptive autonomy suggests that the status of autonomy is also "socially constructed." But in keeping with Hirschmann's rejection of the claim that there is some identity that we can attain *sans* social construction — that is authentic — this does not negate the practical and existential importance of experiencing recognition as an autonomous individual and exercising the capacities with which it is associated. Both provide unmistakable opportunities for living, in Hirschmann's lexicon, more freely.

10. The female athletes might also sustain injuries if the transition from the gendered training regime to the "gender-neutral" regime occurs too rapidly for their bodies to adjust. This, I think, speaks to the logistics of ascriptive autonomy: We must recognize the very real material barriers (but not "natural" barriers) to achieving full autonomy and attend to these while engaging in practices of aspirational recognition.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1743923X10000371 Published online by Cambridge University Press

impeded by a lifetime of lower expectations, you have not fully developed your capacities and/or been allowed to exercise them, the "gap" between your status as constrained and your aspirational status as autonomous may lessen, too.

To return to the role of ascription in the realm of sexual autonomy, consider another example. Assume that some sex workers may be working in their industry in part as a result of the economic, social, and political constraints of living under oppressive conditions, including those constructed by patriarchy.[11] This is not to say that this is the primary reason or the reason at all for all sex work, but that this is the case for at least some women engaging in sex work. We might also assume that within the context of North American society — marked not only by patriarchy but also by the criminalization of most sex work — there are aspects of this job that constrain women's autonomy (e.g., the threat of violence or the economic urgencies that may lead one to forgo certain desirable protections). So, we can say that for some sex workers at least some of the time, both the reasons for selecting this type of work and the experience of engaging in this form of work may lead them to experience constraints on their autonomy. As opposed to our seeking to "save" sex workers from a profession that outsiders may perceive as oppressive, we (fellow citizens, labor groups, feminist activists, state institutions, etc.) might treat sex workers as autonomous — ascribe autonomy to them — despite the conditions of constraint that we know exist. As an expression of this ascription, we may offer resources that can enhance the quality of sex workers' lives — access to sexual health services, meeting spaces, mechanisms for reporting abuses on the job, and so on.[12]

If we understand such acts as ascribing autonomy, the theory I have been outlining suggests that these practices are also engaged in fostering autonomy, in the sense that treating people as autonomous may both enhance the relations-to-self that foster autonomy (self-esteem, self-respect, etc.) *and* provide the space within which to organize so that the institutionalized elements of the job that constrain autonomy may be challenged.[13] If autonomy is ascribed to a marginalized individual who,

11. For a more detailed analysis of the issues surrounding sex work, see Overall 1992.

12. This would be consistent with the position of the "Second World Whores' Congress," as cited in Overall 1992: "Prostitutes reject support that requires them to leave prostitution; they object to being treated as symbols of oppression and demand recognition as workers" (p. 706).

13. Indeed, we must combine the recognition aspects of this strategy with concurrent strategies of collective action and organizing. See the section of this article entitled "Ascription without context" for further details on this.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1743923X10000371 Published online by Cambridge University Press

as a result of this marginalization, experiences either institutional or psychic barriers to autonomy in some arenas, the experience of being nonetheless treated as autonomous may help to endow the individual with the ability both to contest these institutional barriers and to recover the relations-to-self that are so critical to the realization of autonomous agency.[14]

By outlining this example, I want to direct our attention to the use of ascriptive autonomy I am most interested in here. I am concerned with the ascription of autonomy that is applied to those who for reasons of social, political, or economic oppression may not have a full(er) range of capacities for autonomy, but who are nonetheless strategically afforded the status of "autonomous agent," either on the basis of capacities they do not have or on the basis of their embodiment of *some* capacities, but not others. Just as the realities of differential power relations suggest that some powerful individual or institution can stipulate that someone who is indeed autonomous is *not* autonomous, and in part make it so, so too can those with varying degrees of power recognize others as autonomous. Indeed, this may be the case even if the reasons they offer for this ascription are authoritative because of, or partly because of, the "blurring" of power and authority described earlier – for example, a police officer who has a particular interest in sex workers' well-being and seeks to lend his or her support to sex workers in the form of police protection of some form may effectively foster autonomy by treating women as agents who, like other workers, are deserving of such support. Although the officer's power to do so is contingent on the often problematic power structure in which policing is embedded, he or she may still effectively foster autonomy by engaging in such ascriptive practices.[15]

The notion of ascriptive autonomy as empowering offers a way of intervening in debates about the exercise of autonomy under constraining conditions. Ann Ferguson (1997, 118) frames the problem

14. This way in which ascription may help to overcome institutional barriers by allowing for the space within which individuals and groups may organize or resist is what I think follows from LaVaque-Manty's claim that ascriptive autonomy opens up a "space for politics" or a "conceptual agon" (2006, 369). See end of the section of this article titled "Recasting the debate in terms of ascriptive autonomy."

15. Recognition does not necessarily have to come from an individual or entity associated with potentially oppressive power; it can be a product of collective action wherein a group of marginalized individuals combine forces to form a unified front, which in turn ascribes autonomy to individual members. See Danish sex worker example in the section of this article entitled "Ascription without context."

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1743923X10000371 Published online by Cambridge University Press

underlying this debate as stemming from the following question: "If who I am — that is, my values, commitments and projects — is largely a function of my social and physical environment, then how is it possible for me to change?" Ferguson points to the concern that acknowledging our socially constituted traits may lead to a determinist theory of agency. For marginalized people, how is it possible to act autonomously in order to pursue one's own ends if those very ends may be constructed by the conditions of marginalization?[16] The practice of ascribing autonomy may be a way to contend with this problem. Ascriptive autonomy may help to open up the space between a notion of complete constraint by social conditions and one of unrealistic, individualistic, self-determination. If the conferral of status has an accompanying effect of affecting capacity, even in situations of significant constraint, it may be possible to develop autonomy.

This is particularly evident when we think of ascriptive autonomy as emerging out of practices of aspirational recognition that I describe in the section on "Recasting the debate in terms of ascriptive autonomy." First, I explore an example of the debates around sexual autonomy, wherein ascriptive autonomy can serve as a useful conceptual tool.

FEMINIST DEBATES ON SEXUALITY

Although the debate between "sex-positive" feminists and anti-pornography feminists has been underway for some time, the theoretical disagreements at its core have not found definitive resolution. Elisa Glick's (2000) article, "Sex Positive: Feminism, Queer Theory, and the Politics of Transgression," sheds new light on the implications of the theoretical claims and related practices emerging from this debate. Glick's critique of some pro-sex feminist arguments offers an opportunity both to conceive of the potentially enabling implications of ascriptive autonomy and to highlight its potential risks. In this section, I sketch Glick's argument, fleshing out related claims made by some pro-sex feminists; in the following section, I recast the debate in the terms of ascriptive autonomy.

Glick takes aim at "those contemporary pro-sex and queer theories that encourage us, as feminists and sexual minorities, to fuck our way to freedom," as she provocatively puts it, referring to Pat Califia's rhetorical rejection of the strategy of overcoming gender oppression via sexual practice (2000, 19). Glick responds to pro-sex feminists, who, she

16. This can be understood as a version of the Marxist notion of "false consciousness."

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1743923X10000371 Published online by Cambridge University Press

believes, effectively argued in the 1980s "that radical feminism's representation of women as disempowered actors fails to see women as sexual subjects in their own right" (p. 20).[17] In turn, pro-sex feminists have worked to ascribe sexual agency to women, particularly those engaged in the practices of conventionally marginalized sexualities.

Glick agrees with the critique of radical feminism at the core of pro-sex feminist theories. However, she points out that pro-sex theorists and activists in fact share a similar logic with radical feminists. That is, both "have a liberatory view of sexuality that is grounded in an ahistorical and individualistic concept of freedom as 'freedom from repressive norms'" (p. 21).[18] Whereas radical feminism argues that a "good" feminist sexuality ought to be rooted in the rejection of male sexual violence and aggression, pro-sex feminists argue that a good feminist sexuality is one that transgresses gender or engages in "genderfuck." Both are troubling, she argues, insofar as they focus on personal emancipation (here with regard to sexuality) as the means to political change — an ideological move that on her reading replicates capitalist notions of market freedom. Such a focus on personal emancipation leads advocates to underplay the context of gender oppression in which such transgressive sexual practices are enacted. This tension underlines the concern at the heart of debates over the possibilities for agency under conditions of oppression.

Following from this concern, pro-sex and radical feminists seem to disagree on not just the value of sexuality as the conduit to liberation but also the possibility of sexual agency as such in a context of sexism and gender oppression. Glick explains that as they advocate the use of state repression to contain sexual violence against women, radical feminists "tend to deny the possibility of individual or collective resistance through sexuality, even as they prescribed the parameters for a properly 'feminist' sexuality" (p. 22). On the other hand, in making their argument for the "centrality of sexual freedom in women's struggles against oppression," pro-sex feminists "claim that dominant configurations of power do not prevent women from exercising agency" (p. 22).

According to Glick, Butler embodies this latter perspective.[19] Butler suggests that we cannot conceive of a normative sexuality that exists prior

17. In this account of the debate, the label "radical feminists" designates those anti-pornography feminists who call for greater state regulation of some elements of sexuality, while "pro-sex feminists" designates those who argue in favor of a greater focus on pleasure and sexual liberation via the practice of transgressive sexual practices.

18. Citing Sawicki 1991.

19. See, among others (Butler 1999, 2004).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1743923X10000371 Published online by Cambridge University Press

to power relations; in fact, the aspiration to such a prepolitical sexuality, her argument suggests, closes off the possibility that sexuality can be rethought as subversive. Her critique of identity politics — that it "tends to assume that an identity must first be in place in order for political action to be taken" — leads us to her understanding of sexuality (Butler 1999, 181). She writes, "My argument is that there need not be a 'doer behind the deed,' but that the 'doer' is variably constructed in and through the deed" (p. 181). In the sense that she rejects the doer as the imagined agent existing prior to the deed, Butler suggests that sexuality cannot exist prior to "acts" of sexuality. For her, this does not mean the impossibility of agency, but rather that it is through variation enacted within the "regulated process[es] of repetition" that we give meaning to sexuality (p. 185).

As Butler argues against the aspiration for a prepolitical sexuality, so Carol Vance (1992) points to the unproductive and paralyzing nature of avoiding sexuality as a platform for resistance because it exists within the realm of oppressive power relations. She asks,

> do we distrust our passion, thinking it perhaps not our own, but the construction of patriarchal culture? Can women be sexual actors? Can we act on our own behalf? Or are we purely victims whose efforts must be directed at resisting male depredations in a patriarchal culture (pp. 6–7)?

If, trapped within the context of patriarchal culture, we imagine that a "genuine" (feminist) sexuality *outside* this context exists, we avert the possibility of women's sexual agency until this illusory outside can be reached — that is, we permanently forestall women's sexual agency. In response to this paralysis, Glick describes Butler's work as arguing "for a model of localized resistance from within the terms of power." Butler wants to "resist . . . constructing sex as a prediscursive utopia beyond the law" (2000, p. 23).

Although the possibility of rethinking the terms of sexuality so as to upset and subvert oppressive constructions of gender is an appealing one, Glick argues that on its own, such an ambition mistakes revaluation and transgression for genuine political change. This is in part, she argues, because pro-sex feminists like Butler replicate an inconsistency within the work of Michel Foucault.[20] According to Glick, Foucault makes both the claim that sex is an instrument of domination and the claim

20. Glick also categorizes Gayle Rubin's work as following Foucault and therefore replicating the inconsistency described as follows. See Rubin 1993.

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that sexuality can be resisted through a reformulation that positions it as transgressive of disciplinary power (2000, 23–24). He "seeks to locate a de-repressive theory of sexuality alongside a transgressive aesthetics" (p. 24). In replicating this inconsistency, pro-sex feminists argue for a revaluation of marginalized sexual practices as a tool of resistance, yet they do not always address the tensions between this goal and the ways in which relations of power have, first, constituted this very marginalization and, second, structured the marginalized sexual practices themselves.

Glick argues that the economic and political conditions that have led to marginalization in the first place are obscured, in particular, by the shift in focus from the collective to the individual that has accompanied pro-sex feminist arguments for the liberation of pleasure and the radical nature of transgressive sexual practices. While "the personal is political" has long been a feminist slogan, in this case, says Glick, the political dimension of the renewed focus on the personal may be lost. Moreover, since certain sexual practices are seen as "vanguard" or as particularly privileged sites for resistance, not only is a notion of "correct" feminist sexuality replicated (in like manner to that which is criticized in the anti-pornography feminist movement), but these privileged positions are also underinterrogated. Because their performative nature is in part what makes them emblematic of sexual agency, that which is performed is absolved of political responsibility. This critique is particularly relevant to discussions of drag, sadomasochism, and "camp." Glick writes, "Before promoting such cultural practices as forms of political resistance, we must consider how these practices operate in a system of racist and capitalist social relations" (p. 28).

RECASTING THE DEBATE IN THE TERMS OF ASCRIPTIVE AUTONOMY

As I have alluded to, Glick's critique of the pro-sex position can usefully be rearticulated in the terms of ascriptive autonomy. As I do so, I flesh out the notion of recognition that applies to practices of ascribing autonomy. The pro-sex feminist critique of radical feminism's preoccupation with the regulation of sexuality as a means for resisting sexual violence and objectification of women can be understood as emerging from the concern that women's sexual autonomy is entirely obscured by such an approach. While pro-sex feminists do not want to suggest that sexual violence and other forms of repression are irrelevant, they believe that an approach focused purely on these constraints

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assumes a singular conception of autonomy as existing on an all-or-nothing basis. They instead seek some middle ground between a notion of women's sexual agency as wholly constrained by the threat and act of male violence and women's sexuality as being as free as it is pleasurable.

A theory of ascriptive autonomy has at its core a notion of autonomy as a capacity that exists in degrees. As LaVaque-Manty notes, some of the "practical usefulness of the idea of ascriptive autonomy" is found in the fact that "it makes autonomy context-dependent: you can count as autonomous in different ways in different contexts" (p. 384).

Marilyn Friedman (2003) explains this more fluid and complex notion of autonomy:

> Autonomy is a matter of degree, which means that selves who are relatively more autonomous come to harbor, within the range of capacities they can exercise separately from others (although they needn't exercise them separately), a greater assortment of the capacities for reflective agency, or harbor them to a more effective degree than do selves who are relatively less autonomous (pp. 17–18).

The notion of autonomy as existing in degrees and across a range of capacities is compatible with the aspiration of pro-sex feminists to some semblance of a middle ground between extreme determinism and naive notions of unconstrained agency despite patriarchy. In order to achieve such a balance, pro-sex feminists suggest that the capacity for sexual pleasure — via sexual agency — must be a component of our evaluation of, and aspiration toward, greater autonomy for women.

One way of establishing greater sexual autonomy for women is to ascribe this very autonomy — to recognize women as sexual agents. Yet such ascription may constitute an instance of misrecognition. The sexual self that is differentiated and separate from patriarchy does not exist. As Vance acknowledges, the threat of sexual violence that women face is compounded by the fact that acts deemed sexually agentic may be seen to invite such violence, thereby constraining women's sexual agency. Exercising sexual agency is particularly risky where it is ingrained that "women must think not only about the consequences of their sexual actions for themselves, but also about the consequences for men, whose sexual 'natures' are supposedly lustful, aggressive, and unpredictable" (Vance 1992, 4). Nonetheless, say pro-sex feminists, we must still recognize women as sexual agents in the face of such constraints. Vance concludes, "Feminism must insist that women are sexual subjects, sexual actors, sexual agents; that our histories are complex and instructive; that

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our experience is not a blank, nor a mere repetition of what has been said about us, and that the pleasure we have experienced is as much a guide to future actions as the brutality" (p. 24).

This language of insistence, this urgent call for a sexuality that is not *merely* the product of patriarchy, points to the impulse that underlies the subversive ascription of autonomy. In particular, it points to the paradoxical aspect of ascribing autonomy to those who may not fully be autonomous, which I identified previously as a practice of aspirational recognition. Again, the act of ascribing autonomy to someone who does not necessarily possess all the capacities associated with autonomy may nevertheless prove to be an enabling force, in part by virtue of this "overly generous" ascription of autonomy. In order to understand the potential and the risks of this practice, it is worth briefly exploring the notion of misrecognition in its more typical negative sense.

Recognition theorist Charles Taylor suggests that misrecognition, which he describes as the "mirroring" back of a demeaning image, is particularly destructive insofar as it fails to reflect the individual's "authentic self." By the late eighteenth century, Taylor writes, the moral significance of being human in a way that "is my way" emerged (Taylor and Gutmann 1992, 30). Given the calling to live our lives in accordance with our own "ways," if we are not "true" to ourselves, we "miss the point of [our lives]" (p. 30). Misrecognition, then, is defined by dominant groups' failure to recognize the authentic selves of marginalized individuals. In turn, the misrecognized individual's sense of self is deeply distorted. But what does it mean to speak of "the authentic self"? Taylor resists the notion of an authentic self as "monologically" constituted. Describing what he calls "the crucial feature of human life" — to wit, its "fundamentally dialogical character" — Taylor refers to a broad notion of language or expression, explaining that "[p]eople do not acquire the languages needed for self-definition on their own" (p. 32). Rather, according to Taylor (and in line with feminist theories of relational autonomy), we gain these "assets" or capacities from our interactions with others, through dialogical means. Despite this emphasis on the socially constituted nature of the authentic self, Taylor's use of the notion of "authenticity" suggests that he does embrace a conception of a "true self" that is discoverable, and therefore recognizable.

Patchen Markell finds in Taylor two senses of the notion of recognition. One of these is "the constructive sense" of recognition, wherein recognition is something like the act of ascription: It is defined "not as a knowing but a doing, which like a chairperson's recognition of the

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speaker, actively constitutes the identities of those to whom it is addressed" (Markell 2003, 41). But Markell notes that Taylor also seems to endorse a "cognitive sense" of recognition: "[P]roper relations of recognition must be founded on accurate mutual knowledge among the people and groups involved" (p. 40). Throughout his analysis of theories of recognition, Markell is critical of this latter sense, which, he argues, aspires to an impossible and destructive sovereign agency. He charges recognition theorists like Taylor with harboring "the aspiration to be able to act independently, without experiencing life among others as a sources of vulnerability, or as a site of possible alienation or self-loss" (p. 12). He suggests that such aspirations to sovereign agency may, in fact, represent the underpinnings of the injustices of so-called misrecognition that these theorists set out to combat: On Markell's account, injustice is the desire to have a certain type of sovereign agency and withhold this agency from others. This agency cannot, *in fact*, exist for either the oppressed or oppressor, but in seeking it out, the oppressor creates the conditions that subjugate and exclude the oppressed.

My discussion of ascriptive autonomy is sympathetic to Markell's critique, while offering a further account of potential alternatives to the pursuit of the authentic self. It is worth considering ascriptive autonomy in light of Markell's critique because it may be possible to misinterpret ascription as a differently framed instance of the aspiration to "sovereign agency" of which he is critical. On the one hand, in ascribing autonomy to an individual lacking in some of the capacities associated with autonomy, one has a sense that there is a way in which an individual *can* one day achieve that full autonomy and then be recognized, rather than misrecognized, as an autonomous individual. Yet I think that ascriptive autonomy avoids the critique of the pursuit of sovereign agency because the "truth" of the autonomous individual that is the aspiration of such a practice is never specified, and the possibility of a hard and fast specification is undermined by the very fact that autonomy is in part ascriptive.

In contrast to the image of the pursuit of sovereign agency criticized in Markell's critique, LaVaque-Manty's account of the abuse of ascription by those in power underlines the fact that the pursuit and claim to autonomy must always be somewhat ambiguous and fluid. LaVaque-Manty (2006, 387) writes:

> The point isn't that there is some unequivocal fact of the matter about whether someone really is or can be autonomous. Things are always to some extent ambiguous; power and authority unavoidably blur around the

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> edges, and it's an open question whether autonomy in one dimension is reasonable grounds for ascribing autonomy in another.

It is importantly the contextuality of autonomy — of which ascriptive practices are a part — that suggests an "autonomous self" as something more complex and messy than any notion of the unitary authentic self. This complexity can be understood as "constituted by the myriad of social relationships and practices in which the individual is engaged" (Sawicki 1991, 41). In turn, Jana Sawicki argues, "the identity that emerges is fragmented and dynamic" (p. 41). This fragmentation is not an obstacle; rather, it is the grounds upon which we find "the capacity to choose the forms of experience through which we constitute ourselves" (p. 42). Such an aspiration cannot be simply cast aside as the pursuit of sovereign agency. It is instead a more nuanced view of the self. If ascriptive autonomy can be liberatory, it can be so only by taking up such a notion of identity and autonomy.

Ascriptive practices reflect a sense of the ambiguity and potentiality of the autonomous self, rather than an actually delineated form of an "authentic" autonomy. Who will the more autonomous self — that is the developed (and developing) product of conditions under which autonomy is ascribed — be? We don't necessarily know. To put it in the terms of sexual autonomy, if we recognize women as sexual agents, insofar as our engagement in transgressive sexual practices may be seen as radical and subversive, even under conditions where this sexual agency is limited by patriarchal relations of power, we create the space for a fuller sexual agency to emerge. What the "true sexual agent" will emerge as is not necessarily clear, but her emergence in conjunction with the erosion of those limiting factors may be enabled by aspirational recognition. Either through the establishment of improved relations-to-self or by enabling resistance to institutional obstacles that hinder autonomy, the act of ascribing autonomy despite constraints offers the groundwork for the unstable but more autonomous subject that emerges.

The notion of subjectivity underlying ascriptive autonomy renders it responsive to the concern of Glick and Sawicki that both sides of the sexuality debate tend to subscribe to a "repressive hypothesis": There is a genuine, feminist sexuality that has been repressed in some way, and the appropriate liberatory practices will unveil this "pure" form of sexuality. Like Markell, the critics of this repressive hypothesis resist the attempt to uncover this (false) authenticity, which fails to take account of the social and historical context out of which identities must emerge. In contrast, the aspiration undergirding ascriptive autonomy is socially constituted

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(ascription is necessarily relational) and, in a sense, indeterminate. Though there is an aspiration to some autonomous self, it is a self that is autonomous by virtue of its social constitution.

This approach might seem to be mired in a host of contradictions. When we "aspirationally" recognize someone as an autonomous agent, do we necessarily create a template of a particular notion of autonomy that the so-recognized individual must strive for? If so, does this create an effect contradictory to the aspiration to autonomy — that is, the institution of a disciplinary norm? Yet is it possible to have any aspirations to an emancipatory experience of autonomous selfhood without projecting norms upon that outcome? The notion of ascriptive autonomy may be capable of responding to these troublesome questions, albeit perhaps in an uneasy way. But this unease is fruitful.

The desire for consistency, Valerie Renegar and Stacey Sowards argue, is overthrown in more recent feminist work, replaced instead by an embrace of contradictions as "powerful tools for creating new choices" (2009, 10). They point to the ways in which "the evaluative and projective functions of agency" can be invoked as liberatory strategies to move toward a "better world" (p. 14). Projective agency, here taking the form of ascriptive autonomy, employs "counterimaginations" as a means of achieving change. Renegar and Sowards write, "[Third-wave feminists' use of] contradictions function[s] to enhance agency by creating space for self-determination, transcending expected behavior and adherence to ideas, and exploring alternatives through counter-imaginations and creativity" (p. 14). These counter-imaginations emerge from contradiction, yet help us to conceive of ways to seek emancipation without entirely setting in place the terms upon which the emancipated, autonomous self will be constructed. The contradictions of aspirational recognition contribute to the ways in which ascriptive autonomy "opens up a space for politics," creating "a conceptual agon where controversial claims to authority and authorization are made and countered" (LaVaque-Manty 2006, 369). Out of the tensions within such strategies, the political grounds upon which to struggle for autonomy can emerge.

ASCRIPTION WITHOUT CONTEXT

What are the boundaries of aspirational recognition? One potential risk of engaging in such practices is that the context out of which the limitations

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on an individual's capacities for autonomy have emerged may be obscured. By ascribing autonomy, we may actually be applying a "Band-Aid" solution to the underlying problems that constrain autonomy in the first place, absolving institutions and individuals from the responsibility to provide the resources necessary to overcome these constraints. If sexual agency is constrained by patriarchy and capitalism, the risk of ascribing sexual agency to women *despite this* constraint as a tool for the development of autonomy is that it will be seen as the only necessary tool for enabling the existence of such autonomy. Ascription may be taken as sufficient evidence of the elimination of constraining factors. When ascriptive practices are understood as encompassing *all* of what is necessary for social change, we run the risk of accepting, rather than contesting, the dominant terms of the discourses out of which this autonomy may emerge.

Glick articulates this risk in her discussion of the debate over sexuality, as outlined in the section on "Feminist Debates on Sexuality." She argues that practices we ascribe autonomy to and as such understand as political resistance, here transgressive sexual practices, must be seen as socially constituted. Yet on her reading, pro-sex feminists often fail to do this. Nancy Hirschmann's "third level" of social construction captures the implications of this point nicely. Termed "the discursive construction of social meaning," this level points to the ways in which our powers of interpretation, and therefore our abilities to express ourselves and even to act, are defined by the structure of our language (Hirschmann 2003, 81). We choose to interpret certain acts as autonomous through practices of aspirational recognition; those *choices*, too, are socially constructed. She writes that "because our conceptual and material world have been formulated and developed by masculinist perspectives, women are not only unable to act on their desires but even unable to formulate desires, preferences, and wills in their own terms, rather than in the terms defined and limited by values of patriarchy" (p. 81). Thus, there is no "outside" of social construction: We are invariably constructed by social relations, even though we are not always, or even often, conscious of it. In celebrating certain forms of transgressive sexuality as signifying sexual freedom, pro-sex feminists may ignore the "paradox of social construction": "[W]e are who we are because of our contexts, even if it is a patriarchal one, and hence those contexts make freedom possible" (p. 99). In our society, even transgressive sexualities emerge out of a patriarchal context.

Glick's critique of the strategy of ascribing autonomy (as I have rearticulated her argument here), despite the existence of serious

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constraints, extends to the particular form that the ensuing political struggle takes. Although individuals or groups may ascribe sexual autonomy to women in the face of the constraints of our patriarchal culture with the hope of creating the space to challenge this culture, Glick worries that the challenge *stops* with the ascription of autonomy. The political space that is opened becomes only a personal one. The misrecognition aspects of aspirational recognition that are meant to be a conduit to a fuller sense of recognition in the long term become an ongoing misrecognition, depoliticizing the necessary struggle for women's freedom and autonomy.

As discussed earlier, ascriptive autonomy — as a politics of "aspirational recognition" — is in a sense founded on contradiction, framed around inconsistency. But this, following Renegar and Sowards's depiction of third-wave feminism, may be its virtue. Ultimately, while Glick's argument about the problems emerging from the pro-sex feminist approach is very important and well founded, I think there is value in ascribing sexual autonomy to women in the face of conditions of patriarchy and other constraints. On my reading, Glick does not want to do away with this strategy, as she aligns herself in important ways *with* the sex-positive movement she critiques. My argument here is that framing the project(s) of pro-sex feminism in terms of ascriptive autonomy is a helpful way of both highlighting the emancipatory effects of the emphasis on women's sexuality as a site for pleasurable transgression, as it were, and (in response to Glick's critique) emphasizing the need for a combined effort to resist the structural conditions that have made this struggle necessary in the first place. The contradiction that Glick identifies as following from Foucault — the trouble with acknowledging the nonexistence of an "outside" of power, yet using sexuality, which is necessarily embedded in power relations, to resist this power — is engaged in a productive way by the notion of ascriptive autonomy as aspirational recognition.

The use of aspirational recognition as a form of *performative* resistance to unjust power relations requires that we *knowingly* ascribe autonomy to those who are not fully autonomous by virtue of the constraining context out of which they emerge. We know that this autonomy is incomplete, partial, and constrained; the performance of this ascription, I argue, creates the space within which to spur on resistance on a personal/political level to the constraints of that context. Practices of ascriptive autonomy are in a sense always performative. Whether or not we engage in practices of aspirational or nonaspirational forms of recognition, we

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repeatedly and regularly engage in the ascription of autonomy to some individuals. Most of the time, these ascriptions replicate the existing structure of power relations. Our understandings of who can be and who is autonomous are inevitably socially constituted, to the point that even though I may see myself as an antiracist feminist, I may be likely to ascribe autonomy to a white, heterosexual, man in any given context, almost without consideration. Those who are dominant in society have the privilege of being recognized as autonomous individuals, and therefore accessing all the benefits, both social and psychic, that come with that status. But, to borrow Judith Butler's terminology, aspirational recognition may be conceived of as a *subversive* repetition — a performance of ascriptive practices that works to subvert the dominant paradigm, rather than reinforce it.

Thus, even within the context of social relations that typically result in performances of ascription that replicate the status quo, it is possible to act in such a subversive manner. Hirschmann suggests that despite the encompassing nature of discursive reality, "the reality that is shaped and limited by patriarchy can never be totally subsumed by it, so that women always interact with and in it to create a reality that is somewhat at odds with the ideology" (2003, 100). That is, even within a given discursive context, practices that might typically serve the purpose of holding in place the terms of that discourse may yield unexpected and unwieldy results. Although she writes from a somewhat different theoretical tradition, Butler makes a similar claim: She writes that "the injunction *to be* a given gender produces necessary failures, a variety of incoherent configurations that in their multiplicity exceed and defy the injunction by which they are generated" (1999, 185). Within the spaces created by the unexpected results Hirschmann refers to, or the failures of gender performance Butler describes, is the possibility of subversive ascriptive practices through aspirational recognition.

If the types of acts to which we ascribe sexual autonomy are "self-strategies or selfprojects [which are] consciously willed plans for reconstituting body habits, skills and the social meaning of interactions with others," as Ferguson puts it, these are only effective when engaged in the context of collective action (1997, 128). She writes that "selfreconstitutive strategies for social change are likely to fail if they do not take shape in the context of a social movement of others who are adopting like self-strategies" (p. 129).

Ferguson's point is critical: Ascriptive practices that take up the strategies of aspirational recognition need to be tied to collective consciousness

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raising and action regarding the material effects of the constraints that limit autonomy in the first place. Aspirational recognition must take place alongside direct organizing against visible forms of power.

Hirschmann suggests that in addition to engaging with the discursive forms of power that shape human agency, we must not lose sight of the fact that though power "circulates" everywhere around us, there are many distinguishable instances of "very deliberate and coercive power used by many men against women" (2003, 87). Given the propensity of some postmodern theories to overlook these "real" instances of power exerted by assignable agents, Hirschmann argues that we must not lose sight of the "link [between] discursive understandings [and the] physical, visceral reality of oppression" (p. 89).

The case of sex workers' actions in Copenhagen, Denmark, during the 2009 United Nations Climate Summit provides an example that highlights how this connection can be maintained. During the summit, the mayor of Copenhagen distributed a postcard to the hotels where delegates, including many heads of state, officials, and other political actors, were staying. The postcard reads "Be sustainable: DON'T BUY SEX" (Van Deven 2009; capitalization in original). Concerned about the potential boost in sex workers' business during the summit, the city tried to curb potential interest in the sexual services provided by local workers. In Denmark, sex work itself is not illegal, but procurement of sex workers' services remains illegal.

In response to the distribution of the aforementioned postcard, a representative of the Danish Sexworkers Organisation (SIO) issued a statement to the media: In exchange for the postcard, local sex workers would provide free services to delegates. We might interpret the actions of the SIO as ascribing autonomy to Danish sex workers. Providing free services in exchange for the postcard suggests that sex workers are free to set their own guidelines regarding when and for what compensation they will provide services. Observers might interpret the act as suggesting that sex workers in Copenhagen are indeed autonomous, unconstrained, or at least not controlled by the forces of patriarchy or capitalism. The workers might have been emboldened by a sense of freedom — they had the power to subvert the local government's attempt to thwart their business. This in turn might have boosted some sex workers' sense of self-efficacy and self-esteem — factors that contribute to the capacity to act autonomously. The practice of ascribing autonomy could be deemed successful.

Critics, however, might point to the fact that Danish sex workers are subject to deep social stigma, denied social welfare benefits, threatened

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with criminalization, and degraded by police. Migrant sex workers face additional burdens. Such critics might argue that by ascribing autonomy to these sex workers and encouraging delegates to engage their services, the organization is giving the impression that, aside from the intervention of local officials, sex workers in Denmark are autonomous, in no way disabled by social forces and material constraints. But the SIO did not just make a public statement regarding the postcards; the organization also created a Web page that included a message directed to delegates, as well as information about sex workers' conditions in Denmark and an explicit rejection of claims that their profession is degrading or coerced. The initial offer of services in exchange for the postcard surely drew much attention to this Website. The Website, I argue, is a critical complement to the act of "aspirational recognition" that the SIO undertook. Combined with collective action and consciousness raising, ascriptive practices play an important role both in enabling the relations to self that are critical to the development and exercise of autonomy and in fostering the social and political awareness needed to overcome factors that constrain sex worker autonomy in the first place (Danish Sexworker Organisation 2009).

The Danish sex worker case highlights the ways in which ascriptive practices can foster political resistance when appropriately contextualized and embedded within strategies of collective action. Irene Gedalof (2000) suggests that the gap between Glick and Butler rests on the fact that the two have fundamentally different views of politics. Glick's vision of political resistance is rooted in "a conventional model of emancipatory politics," wherein "resisting subjects with agency can only function from a subject position that allows them to stand outside the parameters, framework or logic of an undesirable power relation" (Gedalof 2000, 51). In contrast, Butler's postmodern vision of politics suggests that there is no "authentic" form of resistance that exists from the position of transcendence. Rather, Butler "contests both the possibility and the desirability of a position of transcendence from prevailing power relations, arguing that one can only resist from within the space of those power relations" (p. 52).

I want to suggest that perhaps a notion of ascriptive autonomy enabled by aspirational recognition can occupy some middle ground between these two perspectives. First, retaining a notion of autonomy at its core, even with the development of an unspecified autonomous subject as the ultimate aim of ascribing such autonomy, holds in place what I think ought to remain a key principle for feminists: the pursuit of conditions

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and practices that enable women to live in accordance with their own life plans, or to pursue their own ends. With this in mind, ascriptive autonomy can open up a space for politics that acknowledges the embeddedness of ascriptive practices in power relations yet also retains a transformative and emancipatory aim in its relationship to/with those power relations. The performance of aspirational recognition suggests a possible manner of thinking about a politics that at once averts the futile attempt to seek out some transcendent positionality from which to engage in resistance and helps us to navigate the uneasy tensions that emerge from the practice of resistance from *within* power relations.

CONCLUSIONS

Theorists of recognition often debate the nature of misrecognition; is it, for example, a problem that manifests itself in psychical damage or institutional barriers to social status, or both?[21] In this article, I suggest a different way of viewing both recognition and misrecognition: I make the somewhat paradoxical claim that a form of misrecognition — the term so often used to describe social relations that profoundly distort human experience on various levels — may be a useful tool, when used purposefully, for enabling the development of autonomous agency. Certainly, many of the concerns that motivate my interest in the notion of ascriptive autonomy in this article are similar to those held by recognition theorists attempting to construct a politics that averts, remedies, or reframes what they call misrecognition. Yet ascriptive autonomy offers a different way of thinking about what it means to be "recognized" as an autonomous individual. If recognition theory, as Markell suggests, aspires to a kind of certainty about the nature of the "authentic self" that cannot and perhaps should not be sought out, ascriptive autonomy suggests a way in which the emancipatory aspirations of recognition theory can be reconciled with the uncertainty that accompanies all of our fluid experiences of autonomy. Without pinning down the "truth" of the autonomous individual, but still retaining the underlying commitment to the pursuit of a life determined for ourselves as an essential component of struggles for liberation, the value of ascriptive practices may be found in their explicitly social and performative nature.

The case of women's sexual autonomy helps to demonstrate how this notion of ascription might be a tool with which to navigate the tensions

21. See, for example, Fraser and Honneth 2003.

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that occur in contemporary struggles for freedom. By reframing the pro-sex feminist versus radical feminist debate in the terms of ascriptive autonomy, I have tried to model its value as a liberatory notion, specifically through the use of aspiration recognition. At the same time that it sheds light on the enabling potential of ascriptive autonomy, this debate also highlights a potential misuse of the notion, wherein aspirational recognition is treated as an end state. Rather, we should see the use of aspirational recognition in practices of ascription as a conduit through which to achieve more fully transformative solutions to the problems of (in this case) patriarchy and gender oppression. Ascriptive autonomy, as LaVaque-Manty notes, may be particularly valuable insofar as it opens up a space for politics. The politics of aspirational recognition that I suggest here are only the beginnings of, and certainly not a wholly unproblematic starting point, for the use of this space. But as a way of rethinking debates over recognition, autonomy, and political change, ascriptive autonomy may offer new possibilities for both theoretical and practical interventions.

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https://doi.org/10.1017/S1743923X10000371 Published online by Cambridge University Press