

University of East London Institutional Repository: <http://roar.uel.ac.uk>

This paper is made available online in accordance with publisher policies. Please scroll down to view the document itself. Please refer to the repository record for this item and our policy information available from the repository home page for further information.

To see the final version of this paper please visit the publisher's website. Access to the published version may require a subscription.

Author(s): Tamboukou, Maria.

Article Title: Rethinking the political subject: narratives of parrhesiastic acts

Year of publication: 2005

Citation: Tamboukou, M. (2005) 'Rethinking the political subject: narratives of parrhesiastic acts.' International Journal of Critical Psychology 14 pp138-157.

Link to published version:

<http://www.lwbooks.co.uk/journals.html>

DOI: (not stated)

Publisher statement:

<http://www.lwbooks.co.uk/permissions.html>

Rethinking the political subject: narratives of parrhesiastic acts

Maria Tamboukou, Centre for Narrative Research, University of East London, UK.

Abstract: In this paper I am exploring discourses and practices that constitute women as political subjects and as subjects of politics, particularly focusing on auto/biographical narratives of women educators at the dawn of the twentieth century in the UK. In following genealogical lines in the constitution of the political subject, I am making connections between the Arendtian conceptualization of political action and the notion of *parrhesia* as the act of telling the truth in risky situations that Foucault has used to theorize the political technologies of the individual. What I argue is that women teachers' narratives emerge in the intersection of historically constructed dichotomies and separations between the private and the public, the political and the social; these narratives create non-canonical conditions for the political subject to emerge as both relational and narratable. Within the contemporary climate of a profound crisis of politics, rethinking the constitution of the political subject is becoming I suggest, increasingly timely and urgent.

Rethinking the political subject: narratives of parrhesiastic acts

There is no becoming a subject without the generation sooner or later, of a contesting politics of that subject. (Riley, 1988, p.99)

In this paper I am exploring discourses and practices that constitute women as political subjects and as subjects of politics, particularly focusing on auto/biographical texts of women educators at the dawn of the twentieth century in the UK. In following narrative lines in the constitution of the female self, I am using the methodological lenses of the Foucauldian genealogy, an analysis that enables the study of complex variations, contradictions, paradoxes and tensions in the modes by which women educators moulded their political persona through the telling and writing of their stories. (Foucault, 1986) Genealogy I argue, accounts not only for the variety of subject positions and discursive appropriations inscribed in political narratives, at the dawn of the twentieth century, but also for the different ways in which the notion of individual rights and citizenship were conceived, used, negotiated, but also interrupted and bended. As Joan Scott has argued, 'the subject of feminism was not constant; the terms of her representation shifted, and in those shifts we find not only women's history, but also histories of philosophy, psychology and politics' (1996, p.14). It is mapping my analysis on the genealogical realm of subjugated knowledges and marginalised voices that I have therefore been interested in the stories of women who were neither 'P'oliticians nor 'into Politics', prior to their involvement in the movement for the suffrage. All of them were of course extremely active in 'the politics of the social', particularly through their involvement—albeit in different ways and from different perspectives—in the advancement of girls' and women's education across classes and educational sections. What, in the genealogical framework of analysis is particularly interesting however, is the very process of their self-transformation, their becoming political activists—some of them most fervently so—as an effect of their involvement in the political arena. It is in following this process of political transformation through written narratives that I have used the Arendtian conceptualization of speech and action as the modes par excellence 'in which human beings appear to each other', revealing as it were the uniqueness of the human condition:

With word and deed we insert ourselves into the human world and this insertion is like a second birth ...[It] is not forced upon us ... It may be stimulated by the presence of others ... but it is never conditioned by them ... To act in its most general sense, means to take an initiative, to begin ... to set something into motion (Arendt, 1998, p.177)

Action in the presence of others is a sine-qua-non condition for the emergence of the political subject. However, Arendt (1998) has pointed out that action is lost as the fleeting moment in the passage of time, if it is not transformed into a story. Following Foucault and Arendt, I am thus interested in stories not only as discursive effects of actions but also as recorded processes wherein the female self as the agent of her story transgresses power boundaries and limitations following 'lines of flight' in its constitution as a political subject¹. It is on this very process of storied actions, revealing the 'birth' of the political [female] subject that this paper will particularly focus.

Women's political narratives in the context of 'the rise of the social'

As it has been rigorously shown, the history of women's education in England should be understood as the interplay of patterns of inclusions and exclusions imposed and dictated by issues around class, gender and race discriminations (Purvis, 1991). Moreover, this history was deployed within the discursive restrictions and limitations of 'the rise of the social'. In problematizing the social, Denise Riley has shown how the nineteenth century discourses revolving around women's education were constructed as responsive to a dire social need: 'a new object, society could be proposed as the beneficiary of female education' (1988, p.45). 'Women' and the 'social' in Riley's analysis were intertwined in the late nineteenth and early twentieth-century conceptualisation of women as subjects-in-becoming (p.47). Indeed, Riley argues, the 'social' became the site wherein discourses and practices of women's objectification and subjectification were being staged.

The 'social' does not merely admit women to it; something more constructive than a matter of entry or access is going on; it is as if 'women' become established as a new kind of sociological subjectivity. 'Women' both come under and direct the public gaze in the later nineteenth century as sociological subjects in a double sense [...] 'women' became both agents and objects of reform in unprecedented ways with the ascent of the 'social'. (1988, p.50-51)

It was in the context of 'the rise of the social' that a historically significant schism also emerges, namely the separation of the social from the political: 'one striking effect of the conceptualization of this 'social' is its dislocation of the political' (Riley, 1988, p.51). Thus, within a realm of dominant exclusionary discourses and practices, an important bipole of binarisms has been sustained, deployed and strategically used: on the one pole, the private / public dichotomy and on the other pole, the political /social schism. As Michele Riot- Sarcey has pointed out, the notion of the political has historically rested on a constructed distinction between the political domain referring to the representation of the nation and the social domain referring to individual and collective relations (1998, pp.11-16). If we can therefore accept that the political has been historically constructed as dependent first on the dichotomy between the private and the public and second on the separation of the social and the political domain, then it is in the interstices of these dichotomies that we can trace fissures of the female self as a political subject emerging.

Women's questions at the turn of the nineteenth century in the UK were constrained within the discursive framework of the social; it was all about better education, the right to work, self-control, self-esteem, morality, philanthropy, responsibility. When citizenship appeared in the agenda it irrevocably disrupted the 'social contract' as it were, to which active women had bound and indeed restricted themselves within. Their appearance in the public sphere created earthquakes in the status quo of the fin-de-siècle British society, but it also interrogated the very double distinction of the private/public and political/social, crisscrossing its already fragile discursive boundaries. As Riley has lucidly commented:

How 'women' might become candidates for translation from the social to the political sphere depended not only on how 'women' were conceived, but on how the understandings of those spheres themselves were altered. Their mutual dislocation produced a distinctive modern feminism. (Riley, 1988, p.55)

It seems that women political activists disregarded Hannah Arendt's concern with the danger inherent in the politicization of social issues, but at the same time they engaged passionately with the urge to appear in the public sphere and perform agonistic politics. As Honing has argued in responding to feminist critiques of the Arendtian position, this notion of the agonal and performative politics need not be linked to masculinism and aggressivity; it should rather be valorised in terms of the vast areas it opens for feminist politics to act. As she has succinctly put it:

I turn to Arendt because of what she *does* include in her vision of politics, and also because (*not* in spite) of what she excludes from it: the terms of that exclusion are instructive for a feminist politics that confronts and seeks to contest entrenched and often paralyzing distinctions between a public and a private realm. (1996, p.215) [emphasis in the text]

As Arendt would have it, women educators' political engagement through action and speech, were narrated in the stories others told and/or wrote. However, as Adrianna Cavarero has added these stories of political action which have the possibility to reveal the uniqueness of the subjects who act and speak need not exclusively be biographical. Indeed in the thought of Cavarero, narration is a discursive milieu within which the crucial question of who one is, gets registered and deployed in unforeseen directions. In keeping storying our lives and listening to the stories of others the self emerges as narratable: it is constitutive of the very desire of listening to its story being narrated by herself as well as by others. This narrative constitution however does not end up in pinning down the self within prescribed spaces, places, roles and identities. It does not produce an essence neither does it require one. Narratability, Cavarero argues is not about intelligibility, but about familiarity with the 'spontaneous narrating structure of memory'. Lives and stories meet in a matrix of power and desire producing realities and saturating bodies. In thus following Cavarero's proposition that narrative relations open up political spaces wherein storied selves are being exposed, transformed, ultimately deterritorialized, I follow narrative lines in the constitution of the female political subject.

In this light, who are these women and what do they reveal in acting and speaking publicly? As Olympe de Gouges, the pioneer of women's rights in the French Revolution had put it, [they are] 'women who only have paradoxes to offer'. In theorizing this paradox, Joan Scott has commented that by speaking as an identifiable group of women, French feminists in the nineteenth century were using sexual difference as a political platform, at the same time that they were seeking their rights in terms of their sameness to the abstract notion of the individual as a universal subject of rights: 'To the extent that it acted for 'women', feminism produced the 'sexual difference' it sought to eliminate. This paradox-the need both to accept and to refuse 'sexual difference'-was the constitutive condition of feminism as a political movement throughout its long history. (Scott, 1996, p.4)

If feminists have carried this paradox in their theoretical and political luggage till our own very days, they have certainly not followed uniformed ways and universal routes to do so. As Riley has noted: 'to speak about the individual temporality of being a woman is really to speak about movements between the many temporalities of a designation. And as this designation alters historically, so do these myriad possibilities assume different shapes (1988, p.98). It is therefore tracking the genealogy of this paradox, and some of the myriad shapes it has assumed that I will leave Scott's lucid analysis of French feminism and move my inquiries into the movement of the suffrage in the UK. The story of this movement has been well known, represented, theorised and discussed (See, Purvis and Holton, 1999). However it is the task of the genealogist to reread stories, both forgotten as well as very well known ones. It is this endless genealogical task of rereading that I am now following.

Action and speech produce meaningful stories²

At first I refused to speak at street corners and in the open; I could not overcome my Victorian prejudices; it seemed such a vulgar thing to do and I shrank from the rudeness and violence, the rotten eggs and the garbage [...] I made my debut outside some gas-works in South London, in 1906, and I remember the dizzy sickness of terror, with which I stood up in the cart and heard the shouts of derision as the men, leaving their work, crowded round us in their hundreds, I had been instructed to speak up and get ahead. Never stop and never mind talking nonsense as long as they can hear you.' I obeyed and got ahead, though I have not a notion what I said, but I reflected with satisfaction in my agony, that with this terrible din the worst nonsense would not be audible [...] Then a sharp terror seized me—they were listening—some phrases had caught their attention, and in the hushed silence I heard a voice, surely not my own, talking strange nonsense at a long distance. I nearly broke down with stage fright when a rough but friendly voice whispered encouragement: 'Go it, old gal, you're doing fine, give it 'em.' I kept my crowd, which was the test of success, and from that day I preferred outdoor speaking in spite of the roughness and physical strain [...] At one of our first W.F.L. meetings at Sutton, in 1907, wild pandemonium reigned; rats were loose amongst the audience—I have a horror of rats but being in the chair I had to endure and 'sit tight' [...] Perhaps, those of us who went out with the caravan to preach our gospel in remote villages, had the worst experiences. Sometimes, the hostility of the people was so great that the police were alarmed. Occasionally, we were taken to the police station and kept there for safety till far into the night. Sometimes the caravan was attacked, windows broken, attempts made to smash it up by letting it run violently down hill [...] Mrs Despard once had a rotten egg landed full in her face, but quietly continued her speech. The filth and garbage thrown at us, was most destructive to the limited wardrobe we took on tour- Fortunately, we kept the sight of our eyes, largely by the big hats then in fashion [...] We were all warned against the danger of speaking from chairs. Several of our members had been injured through such platforms being seized from under the feet. A soap box, generally willingly lent by the nearest grocer, was far the safer.

(Wynne-Nevinson, 1926, pp.212-216)

These extracts come from 'Life's fitful fever' the published autobiography of Margaret Wynne Nevins (1858-1932) a suffragette teacher from Leicester, who left teaching to follow first WSPU (Women's Social and Political Union) and then WFL (Women's Freedom League). What I found particularly interesting in these extracts is the way they illustrate the power of auto/biographical narratives and their real and symbolic significance not only as historical documents, but also and most importantly for this paper as forceful inscriptions of the process of 'becoming political'—exposing themselves in the public arena—leaving their story behind them either in the form of autobiographies or biographies. As Arendt has put it:

Power is actualized only where word and deed have not parted company, where words are not empty and deeds not brutal, where words are not used to veil intentions but to disclose realities, and deeds are not used to violate and destroy but to establish relations and create new realities (1998, p.200)

Auto/biographical writing and extensively signing and publishing have been historically registered as a critical form of political action, a means to forge political identities; they have indeed become political technologies used to demonstrate 'what the law had erased' (Scott, 1996, p.37). In this light, Scott has commented that to be recognised as an author has been historically linked to recognition as an individual and as a citizen. (1996, p.37) In Arendt's conceptualization action and speech produce meaningful stories creating conditions of possibility for human beings to emerge as unique agents or 'heroes' of their stories, but also as relational subjects. Women teachers' active involvement in the suffrage movement is undoubtedly the highlight of their profound politicisation, their constitution as relational subjects of politics. As Arendt has put it, acting and speaking together is the sine-qua-non condition of all forms of political organization. (1998, p.202) Women's auto/biographical narratives vividly recount how the act of speaking in public was the most fearful experience they had to live and surpass. This 'moment of speaking' became decisively constitutive of the 'female political subject' and critical in the process of making women subjects of politics:

This was the first militant step—the hardest to me, because it was the first. To move from my place on the platform to the speaker's table in the teeth of the astonishment and opposition of will of that immense throng, those civic and country leaders and those members of Parliament, was the most difficult thing I have ever done (Pankhurst, 1959, p.46)

This was in Manchester in February 1904, the rising moment, the genealogical emergence of militancy. The recognition of women's right to speech was crucial to their freedom: action and speech were indeed founding stones in the process of their becoming political. On the grounds of being refused the status of political subjects by law, women attempted to inhabit this subject position by appropriating political actions, they became political through the Arendtian route of exposing themselves in the public sphere. This was a route full of dangers as the above extracts from Wynne-Nevins's narrative have vividly demonstrated. In coming out as political subjects, women had to fight against and overcome a multiplicity of fears which were interwoven in the cultural and historical construction of their femininity. Nevins (1926) has named some of these fears which range from the internalization of Victorian prejudices around what was supposed 'to be proper' for a woman to do, to actually bodily and physical fears—rats, rotten eggs, chairs seized under their feet—emerging from the hostile reactions of their audiences. The way out of these fears was the very actuality of

the moment of speaking and the realization that they were actually being listened. As Arendt has noted: 'Action ... always establishes relationships and therefore has an inherent tendency to force open all limitations and cut across all boundaries' (1998, p. 190). Thus, the moment of discursive appropriation which was at the same time a relational moment of establishing political communication can be charted I suggest, in a nexus of practices and discourses creating conditions of possibility for the very moment of their transformation, their becoming political within a risky and unforeseeable situation. Risk taking is indeed a quintessential element of political action both in the Arendtian conception of the political, but also in the political significance of the parrhesiastic act in Foucault, which I discuss later on in this paper. It is in challenging these dangers that Mrs Fontanella, the heroine of a novel from the genre of suffrage literature, written by Evelyn Sharp—an ardent suffragette herself—invites other women friends to follow her:

You know what it means—almost certain imprisonment for the women who go on that deputation, but also a chance for everyone of us to do something towards winning a great reform. I am going on that deputation. Which of you will come with me? (Sharp, 1915, p.130)

Either through auto/biographical or literary narratives, women activists were indeed able to record these moments and leave their traces in the forms of stories that were written of them and/or by them. As Arendt has suggested: 'acting and speaking men [sic] need the help ... of the artist, of poets and historiographers, of monument-builders or writers, because without them the only product of their activity, the story they enact and tell would not survive at all' (1998, p.173). However to enact these stories through their appearance in the public sphere women were irrevocably disrupting their social position—their confinement within the domestic sphere—and this disruption became both the precondition and effect of doing the political and indeed of becoming political. Moreover, this disruption would involve a series of performative acts of self-creation in which women defining themselves as subjects of political rights took over and sometimes violently appropriated the public/political role usually performed by men:

There was no fear in those days of not obtaining an audience at a Suffrage demonstration; the people pored in bringing with them trumpets, drums and other musical instruments, with pea-shooters and a large assortment of hardware, all of which they proceeded to use. Presently, however, the personality of the speaker began to make an impression on them; the cat-calls and the pantomime songs ceased, and those who had come to scoff remained to listen. The meeting was a success, and the gallant little handful of women were justified. (Woman Teacher, 5.10.1928, cited in Kean, 1990, p.23)

It is indeed crucial to reconsider the importance of the performative in becoming a political subject and revalidate the embodiment of the suffragettes' political actions, their provocative style, the tone of their speech, their clothes and their hats—which were sometimes merely protecting them from garbage and rotten eggs—but also their emotional and even existential excesses, which in certain cases as with the death of Emily Wilding Davison transgressed all boundaries, became unpredictable and unavoidably fatal (See Stanley and Morley, 1988). It is within Arendt's conceptualization of the political action as both unpredictable and boundless (1998, p.191) that such excesses can derive meaning and become intelligible. As Arendt notes:

...action ...acts into a medium where every reaction becomes a chain reaction and where every process is the cause of new processes... while the various limitations and boundaries we find in every body politic may offer some protection against the inherent boundlessness of action, they are all together helpless to offset its second outstanding character: its inherent unpredictability. (pp.190-191)

Thus in what has been historically recorded and recognized as a 'boundless and unpredictable' series of political actions, the suffragists dramatized their conviction that their place was in the public sphere by entering it, exposing themselves in the 'agora' by actions which made self-evident women's capacity as citizens. Through performing citizenship women were indeed enacting and appropriating citizenship for themselves, they ultimately became what they acted.

You probably know that Mrs Pankhurst and I headed the Euston Road procession—walking between the band and the great banner. We were the 'North Country' procession, Lancashirelasses mainly [...] I carried a lovely huge bouquet of ferns, huge purple lillies and lillies of the valley- I can never forget the wonderful beauty of *the spectacle* (in the park)- It was an hour of glorious life!!! (cited in Marlow, 2001, p.67) [my emphasis]

This is a letter from Elizabeth Wolstenholme Elmy, an ardent campaigner for women's rights, who in 1861 had formed an Association of Schoolmistresses and a Society for Furthering the Higher Education of Women. Elizabeth writes to her friend about the Hyde Park Demonstration in June 1908, particularly highlighting the 'beauty of the spectacle', in which femininity in its traditional flowery representation is indeed staged and celebrated. In considering the feminine colours of Wolstenholme Elmy's depiction, here again I will recall Scott's (1996) pithy observation of the inherent paradoxes of feminism in invoking the very (sexual) difference they sought to eliminate.

Relational subjects

At country stations and in working-class districts it was not so bad, but at one station at least, in the business centre of Manchester, the 'gentlemen' hit upon the charming device of pretending that they took us for prostitutes, and answering us as I suppose prostitutes are answered by such gentlemen (Swanwick, 1935, p.201)

What I have found particularly intriguing in the above extracts is the way women's auto/biographical narratives renegotiate their positioning within the political and the social in making sense of how class and gender are interrelated in the discourses and practices of their exclusion. Helena Swanwick, MA and a former Girton College student—a non-working class woman by birth and by circumstances—bitterly criticizes the men of her class—ironically called gentlemen—as she compares their reception of political activists with the well-known discourse of the 'public woman', whose derogatory meaning comes from the years of the Parisian commune. For Helena her involvement in the movement has actually given her useful lessons not only in gender relations, but also in class dynamics. Having

escaped their social position, those women activist were resocialized in the materialities of the classed society, which—isolated as they were in their domestic environments—had failed to grasp. Of course, the disruption of women’s social positioning in the domestic realm and the apprehension that they should have the right to work was framed by wider political and ideological transformations that were taking place at the turn of the century and was finding its place in the Western liberal tradition. The egalitarian rationales of this tradition, stressed the value of work for all, which they related to the right to citizenship. Women’s work was therefore considered as contributing to the development of modern society. Common sense, rationality, fairness, scientific knowledge and thought were imbricated in the male liberal tradition, women had to accommodate themselves within: ‘... women are growing honester, braver, stronger, more healthful and skilful and able and free—more human in all ways ... and this improvement has been at least coincident with, and to some extent due to, the effort to become at least capable of economic independence’ (Collet in Miller, 1990, p.104). Clara Collet’s reference to women beginning to develop and cultivate male virtues resonates with the cultural values of the fin-de-siècle era. Human values were obviously considered to be male values. However, as there were many ways available for women to accept these values, there were also many of defying them. It seems that women teachers found ways of resistance, by tracing the ill-coordinations of the power relations that constituted the discursive regimes within which they lived. In this context, education and financial independence was an interlocking pair of prerequisites for women’s possibility to play a public role:

After going over all the great causes they saw about them, and in particular the women’s cause, to which they were burning to devote their lives, Emily summed the matter up. ‘Well, Elizabeth’, she said, ‘it’s quite clear what has to be done. I must devote myself to securing higher education while you open the medical profession to women. After these things are done’ she added ‘we must see about getting the vote’. And then she turned to the little girl who was sitting quietly on her stool and said: ‘You are younger than we are Millie, so you must attend to that (Strachey, 1978, p. 101)

This is Ray Strachey (1887-1940), a former student of Newnham College and active member of NUWSS (National Union of Women’s Suffrage Societies) from 1916-1921 recounting, the intimate friendship and on-going political alliance of Emily Davies, founder of Girton College and the Garrett sisters, Elisabeth and Millicent. On Emily’s visit to their house, the three friends are planning the future of feminism by Elizabeth bedroom’s fire. Perhaps it is no wonder that when Girton College opened in 1869 as the first university associated college for women in Cambridge, on Davies insistence, each student would have a small sitting-room to herself -fire included- where she would be ‘free to study undisturbed, and to enjoy at her discretion the companionship of friends of her own choice’ (Stephen, 1927, p.76).

Women’s friendships and social networks were indeed the political matrix that would support and sustain their cause, sometimes in very harsh times:

How could she get there, with detectives constantly watching the house? ... Neighbours were friendly. In a black bathing suit, black cap, stockings, long gloves and a mask, Annie [Kenney] crept at midnight [from the house], climbed a wall into the neighbour’s garden and entered their house. Next morning, well-disguised she drove away with members of

the family. Changing from cab to cab, she broke all clues and drove by night to Lowestoft. In fresh disguise, and leading by the hand another Suffragette, dresses as a schoolgirl, she entered the Lowestoft Hippodrome, where teachers from all over the country were assembling ... Annie slipped into the speakers' room, removed her coat, changed her hat, and was ready for the platform! The great gathering of teachers was afire with enthusiasm, when they found that one of the Suffragette mice had thus foiled the Government cat (Pankhurst, 1959, p.270)

In this extract recounted in Christabel Pankhurst's autobiography the social and family networks supporting the movement are vividly depicted. In the well-known conditions of the Cat and Mouse Act, women activists would rely on the help and protection of friends, family and neighbours to defy the restrictions of the law and keep on their struggle. The political subjectivity they were creating was far away from the notion of the independent autonomous and standing alone citizen. It was a political subject organically related to her community; relationality rather than autonomy was its constitutive framework and context of reference. As Arendt has noted politics is always what is happening between the individuals in their acting and speaking together: ' [the] revelatory quality of speech and action comes to the fore where people are with others and neither for nor against them- that is in sheer human togetherness' (1998, p.180). Arendt further notes that 'action is never possible in isolation' and that 'action and speech need the surrounding presence of others' (1998, p.188). It is this surrounding presence, the 'web of the acts and words of other men [sic]' (Arendt, 1998, p.188) that women's auto/biographical narratives insert in the plot of their story and in the range of their characters.

Parrhesiastic acts

At an early hour in the morning some thirty women [...] assembled in the square [...] An inspector came up and said to Miss Billington: 'You must not hold meetings here or allow the procession to stop in the square- If you take no notice of the warning I shall have to take you in charge'. To this Miss Billington calmly replied: 'Oh, very well then, I am quite willing to be taken in charge. The climax came when four policemen barred the way and attempted to seize the banner. With cries of 'You shall not have the banner' Miss Billington and some twenty women engaged themselves in a hand-to-hand struggle with the police- (cited in Marlow, 2001, p.40)

This is how *Daily Mail*: in June 1906, recounts a suffragette fighting outside Mr Asquith's House, which led to the arrest of four women. Teresa Billington-Greig (1877-1964), a teacher from Lancashire was reported to be one of the leaders of the fight. In court Teresa Billington said 'I do not recognise the authority of the Police, of this Court, or any other Court or law made by man' (cited in Marlow, 2001, p.40). This line of defying the Law and returning the act of non-recognition was soon followed by the suffragette's movement. It is in this un-Althusserian act of not turning to the hail of the law that the feminist political subject constitutes itself. As it has been commented 'Butler recognizes that acts of disobedience must always take place within the law using the terms that constitute us.' (Salih, 2002, p.79) Sara Salih further notes that Butler borrows from Spivac (1995) the notion of the 'enabling violation', a violation whose terms and consequences provide the basis—albeit

contaminated—for subsequent resistance against a perpetrator, to name the subject status we necessarily embrace. As Salih comments on Butler’s theorisation of subjection, ‘subjects are always implicated in the relations of power but, since they are also enabled by them, they are not merely subordinated to the law.’ (2002, p.79)

Taking the Butlerian route in the subjects’ relation to power, unavoidably makes connections with the Foucauldian parrhesiastic act to which I have already referred. Foucault (2001) draws on the classic texts of Greek drama to present the notion of the *parrhesia* and its significance in the political technologies of the individual. *Parrhesia* is about telling the truth in risky situations and doing it as your duty as a citizen to criticize power. According to Foucault it is in the parrhesiastic act that an individual assumes her right to speak as a quintessential precondition to freedom. In Foucault’s discussion, there are four essential themes constitutive of the parrhesiastic act: first of course is speaking the truth; second having the courage to speak the truth in situations where there is a risk or danger for the truth teller; third *parrhesia* is a form of criticism either towards another or towards oneself and should always come from below, from the powerless or rather the less powerful—if we want to keep with the foucauldian notion of power—and finally parrhesia, the telling of truth is regarded as a duty and is further related to freedom. So in Foucault’s pithy summary:

Parrhesia is a kind of verbal activity where the speaker has a specific relation to truth through frankness, a certain relationship to *his own life* through danger, a certain type of relation to *himself* or other people through criticism (self-criticism or criticising of other people), and a specific relation to moral law through freedom and duty. More precisely, parrhesia is a verbal activity in which a speaker expresses *his* personal relationship to truth, and risks his life because he recognises truth-telling as a duty to improve or help other people (as well as himself). In parrhesia, the speaker uses *his* freedom and chooses frankness instead of persuasion, truth instead of falsehood or silence, the risk of death instead of life and security, criticism instead of flattery, the moral duty instead of self-interest and moral apathy. (Foucault, 2001, p.19)

The above strikes to me as a most interesting extract not only in terms of the richness of the notions but perhaps more with the number of masculine personal pronouns which have been included to construct these notions and meanings. It is obvious—and actually Foucault makes it quite explicit in his text—that the *parrhesiastis*, the courageous truth-teller is and can only be a man, since women and slaves were excluded from any notion of the political subject in the classical antiquity and not only. It is this right to *parrhesia* that women actually claim and assume when they expose themselves to the public sphere, *the agora* and dare speak publicly and freely, dare to stand and raise the *parrhesiastic* question par excellence: ‘Will you give votes to women?’

The Free Trade Hall was crowded. The sky was clear for a Liberal victory—save for a little cloud no bigger than a woman’s hand! Calm but with beating hearts, Annie and I took our seats and looked at the exultant throng we must soon anger by our challenge. Their cheers as the speakers entered gave us the note and pitch of their emotions. Speech followed speech— Our plan was to wait until the speakers had said their say, before asking our question. We must for one thing, give these Liberal Leaders and spokesmen the opportunity of explaining that their programme included political enfranchisement for women. Annie as the working woman—for this should make the stronger appeal to

Liberals-rose first and asked: 'Will the Liberal Government give votes to women?' No answer came. I joined my voice to hers and our banner was unfurled, making clear what was our question. The effect was explosive! The meeting was aflame with excitement (Pankhurst, 1959, p.50).

This is in Manchester, October 1905 and the rest was history, having resulted in the first arrest and consequent imprisonment of the truth-tellers. All the *parrhesiastic* themes are present in this autobiographical account: the decision to speak the truth and criticise power from a lesser position and to do so in risk, but as a duty to freedom, yourself and of the others. It is I argue in the context of a situation wherein the Arendtian appearance in the public sphere is actualized as the parrhesiastic practice of truth telling that the feminist political subject actually emerges. In such a context to speak at all, was to speak politically, but also to become political. But what was the context which created conditions of possibility for parrhesia to be enacted? I have already referred to the historical and cultural milieu within which women transgressed the limitations of the social and attempted to enter the political. It is now what Butler (1997) has defined as 'the psychic life of power', or the psychosocial conditions that enabled the emergence of the female political subject that I want to consider.

Defying passive interpellations, breaking the boundaries

As Hilda Kean (1990) has commented, there were various reasons that motivated women teachers to become involved in the movement. Some of the followers saw it as their life chance to abandon teaching which they had come to hate, and find another scope in life. Kean quotes Margaret Nevinson, the author of the autobiographical extract that initiated the discussion of this paper, who became a WFL organiser after quitting teaching for good: 'The worst of all my struggles after knowledge was the fact that for young women of my day there was nothing but teaching' (cited in Kean, 1990:12). As Kean comments, women like Nevinson sought to construct a new self through their involvement in feminism and were rather relieved to put behind them a job they had never really liked. Others, 'had to leave their job', since they had found it impossible to do both, teaching and fighting for women's rights. Thus, Emily Davidson 'found that the carrying on of her profession and devotion to the woman's movement were incompatible ... the call had come; a call which had caused her to put aside all self-interest, all personal ambition, all claims and hopes' (cited in Kean, 1990, p.12).

Leaving their job for 'the cause' was mostly a privilege of women teachers from the middle-classes, since not all women teachers could afford such a sacrifice. This did not in any way wither their militant spirit. Kean refers to Mary Thompson, a teacher at South Hampstead who was arrested for raising money for the WSPU, but she was supported by her school and to Florence Down an elementary teacher from West London, who was arrested in a demonstration at the House of Commons (Kean, 1990, p.13). Thus, women teacher's involvement in the suffrage movement had different implications for their lives. By taking active part in feminist politics they did not only fight for equal pay and suffrage. They also sought to construct alternative identities and imagine themselves differently. The first wave feminist movement, the political context within which they were empowered to appear in

the public sphere and deploy parrhesiastic practices created conditions of possibility for their cultural inscription as political subjects and as subjects of politics. In the light of political controversies within the suffrage movement the struggle for the vote was indeed perceived by some women as a mere tactic, a political vehicle that would shatter dominant discourses of womanhood and open up possibilities for different ways of being/becoming a woman. As Cecily Hamilton has put it rather bluntly:

I have never attempted to disguise the fact that I wasn't wildly interested in votes for anyone, and that if I worked hard for women's enfranchisement ... [it was] because the agitation for women's enfranchisement must inevitably shake and weaken the tradition of the 'normal woman' (Hamilton, 1935, p.65)

Clearly women teachers' entrance in the public sphere did not emerge out of the blue. It was interwoven in the nexus of power relations and discursive practices of the fin-de-siècle era in the UK. In making their way out of their home life, women strategically used all the available discourses that were favourable to some sort of female activity beyond the domestic circle: the egalitarian rationales of the Western liberal tradition, the philanthropic discourses, the educational reform movements. Although the positions offered to them existed only within certain limits, there were different options for women teachers to take. The choices they made were largely influenced by their social class, but again within the class-specific routes they followed, there appeared variations and diverging paths which appealed to the different ways subjects make sense of the world around them. As it has been pointed out, 'all available discursive practices are not something any individual can automatically take up' (Davies, 1990, p.342).

In forging their public persona, women brought with them their accumulated personal history and moved among their different subject positions within the social structures. Their public persona was fabricated within the ruptures, contradictions and interstices of hegemonic discourses and dominant power relations. As Walkerdine has noted, 'the material of the individual provides the potential to be the subject and object of a variety of discourses which produce the individual as sometimes powerful and sometimes powerless' (1990, p.9). The different versions of the 'public' woman they created were fragmented, incomplete, and contradictory. Women teachers were subjected to a multiplicity of discourses. At the same time of their subjection, however, they were also able to defy the social and cultural injunctions of how they should be and redeploy them along alternative domains. It is within these incoherent discursive practices that moments of revolt appeared and subversions were made.

History becomes the story book of man kind³

Women teachers' actions unique and unrepeatable as they are can only leave their traces in history through the stories that were told and subsequently written by them and/or about them, and these stories were indeed many. Through these stories the unrepeatable parrhesiastic moments of action and speech were preserved beyond the restricted life span of their actors. As Scott has suggested 'the concern with re-presenting women was comprehensive. It extended to history, to the use of past figures as inspirational models for

feminists, and to the writing of the history of feminism, to clarify the meaning of contemporary struggles.’ (1996, p.157) Indeed, the telling, retelling, writing, reading and rereading of these unbelievable stories have actually formed the discursive registers and provided the cultural codes for the female political subject to be represented, made intelligible and found a position—albeit a marginalised one—in the symbolic order. For the authors of these auto/biographical stories ‘there was no absolute autonomy of the self outside of language, no individuality unless represented as such [...]’ (Scott, 1996, p.156).

Over the years there have been different and diverse audiences of these stories, as well as different ‘makings of them’. Most of these stories mainly remain in the selves of academic libraries as long-out-of print volumes or as unvisited, forgotten documents in dispersed archives. What I suggest is that despite or perhaps because of their ‘greyness’⁴, these dusty genealogical documents become more and more significant for contemporary audiences seeking to redefine the political in the era of a profound crisis of politics, an era when the individual is governed rather than represented, let alone govern herself or others. It is in this context that rethinking the political subject in tracing genealogical lines of her constitution becomes so timely and so urgent.

References

- Arendt, H. (1998) *The Human Condition*, [1958] (Chicago, The University of Chicago Press)
- Butler, J. (1997) *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection*, Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Cavarero, A. (2000) *Relating Narratives: storytelling and selfhood*, (London, Routledge).
- Davies, B. (1990) Agency as a form of discursive practice: A classroom scene observed in *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 11(3), 341-361.
- Deleuze, G. and Guattari, F. (1988) *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, Trans. Massumi, B., (London, The Athlone Press).
- Foucault, M. (1986) Nietzsche, Genealogy, History’ in Rabinow, P. (ed.) *The Foucault Reader*, Harmondsworth: Peregrine, pp.76-100.
- Foucault, M. (2001) *Fearless Speech*, Pearson, J. (Ed.), (Los Angeles, Semiotext(e))
- Gillmore, L. (1994) *Autobiographics: A feminist Theory of Women’s Self-Representation*. Ithaca and (London, Cornell University Press).
- Griffiths, M. (1995) *Feminisms and the Self, The Web of Identity*, (London, Routledge).
- Honing, B. (1992) ‘Towards an Agonistic Feminism: Hannah Arendt and the politics of Identity’ in Butler, J. and Scott, J.W. (Eds.) *Feminists theorize the political*, (London, Routledge), pp.215-235.
- Hamilton, C. (1935) *Life Errant*, (London, Dent)
- Kean, H. (1990) *Deeds not Words. The Lives of Suffragette Teachers*, London: Pluto Press.
- Kottman, P. (2000) ‘Translator’s Introduction’ in Cavarero, A. *Relating Narratives: storytelling and selfhood*, (London, Routledge).
- Marlow, J. (2001) (Ed.) *Votes for Women: the Virago Book of Suffragettes*, (London, Virago)
- Miller, J., (1990) *Seductions: Studies in reading and Culture*, London: Virago.
- Pankhurst, C. (1959) *Unsackled: The Story of How We Won the Vote*, (London, Hutchinson)
- Purvis, J. (1991) *A History of Women’s Education in England*, (Milton Keynes, Open University Press).

- Purvis J. and Holton, S. (1999) *Votes for Women (Women's and Gender History)*, (London, Routledge)
- Riot-Sarcey, M. (1998) *Le réel de l' utopie: essai sur le politique au XIX^e siècle* (Paris, Albin Michel)
- Salih, S. (2002) *Judith Butler*, (London, Routledge)
- Sharp, E. (1915) *Rebel Women*, (London, United Suffragists)
- Scott, J., W., (1996) *Only paradoxes to offer: French feminists and the rights of man*, (Cambridge, Massachusetts, Harvard University Press)
- Stanley, L. with Morley A. (1988) *The Life and death of Emily Wilding Davison*, (London, The Women's Press)
- Strachey, R. (1978) *The Cause: a short history of the women's movement in Great Britain [1928]*, reprinted with a new preface by Barbara Strachey, (London, Virago)
- Swanwick, H. (1935) *I have been young*, (London, Victor Gollancz)
- Swindells, J. (1995) *The Uses of Autobiography*, London: Taylor and Francis.
- Walkerdine, V. (1990) *Schoolgirl Fictions*, London, Verso.
- Wynne Nevinson M. (1926) *Life's Fitful Fever, A Volume of Memories* (London, A.&C. Black)

¹ Lines of flight is a term used by Deleuze and Guattari in their theorization of nomadic subjectivities. See Deleuze and Guattari, 1988.

² See Arendt, 1998, p.236

³ See Arendt, 1998, p.184

⁴ As Foucault has noted genealogy is grey meticulous and patiently documentary (1986, p.76)