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# Semi-agency

Birgit Mara Kaiser

Unlike other terms in this vocabulary, semi-agency is not an established expression with a critical heritage. It is not even listed in the *Oxford English Dictionary* – and, hence, is not really an English word. Regardless, it cropped up in *Terra Critica's* discussions (see Kaiser 2012) and therefore made its way into this volume. What does feature in the OED is the prefix “semi-” meaning in common use “half, partly, partially, to some extent.” When coupled with “agency” here and with the **perspective** of critical practice in mind, however, the prefix points to something else than merely a quantitative halving. This entry explores both sides of the term – “semi” and “agency” – with recourse to feminist theory, to argue that “semi-agency” signals not so much “half of something” but rather a kind of (boundary) articulation, always **entangled** with the **affective**, material, circumstantial forces it emerges from.

Let us begin with Toril Moi’s description of Hélène Cixous’s work, especially Cixous’s poetico-theoretical writings from the mid-1970s, as “theoretical (or semi-theoretical)” (Moi 1985, 102). The hesitation that Moi’s proviso in parenthesis seems to betray is that Cixous’s work is not “really” theoretical but something slightly different. And indeed, in the course of her argument, Moi is highly critical of Cixous’s theoretical work and she thus indeed employs “semi-theoretical” to signal a deficiency. Moi

144 judges Cixous's work to be marred by its "lack of reference to recognizable social structures as by its biologism" (126) – a misreading of Cixous's project, as Peggy Kamuf has shown. Moi dismisses Cixous's project as a less than theoretical "textual jungle" (1985, 102) in which style and poetry stand in the way of real theoretical – that is, for Moi also always politically effective – **work**, which makes references to "recognizable social structures."

When Kamuf zooms in on Moi's use of "semi-theoretical" in regard to Cixous ten years later, she points out that, used in Moi's way, the prefix "semi-" adheres to an unquestioned "familiar set of distinctions that includes expression vs. thought, style vs. substance, **metaphoric** vs. literal, and poetic vs. theoretical" (Kamuf 1995, 73; bold added). Moi uses "semi-" to express indeed a diminishing (a halving) of the desirable faculties of thought that promise political empowerment. What might we gain, Kamuf asks, if we run with Moi's assertion of a "semi-theoretical" work but were instead to treat the nomination in less conventional and depreciative ways? Is not "theory" in its distinction from and critique of the traditions of Western metaphysics the very assertion that acts of thinking "uncontaminated by contingency, particularity, or experiential differences" (73) are impossible? Thus, is theory not by definition semi-theory? Is it not, Kamuf suggest, the very **affirmation** that affective, material, circumstantial, existential factors cannot be sidelined as irrelevant to thought and that thought cannot be kept uncontaminated by those forces? If this is the case,

then there is no telling absolutely when and where the semi-theoretical and semi-political may shade off into the semi-poetic or semi-fictional or some other semi-recognizable mode since such distinctions are rendered rather dubious by the contaminating non-category of the "semi-." (74)

It is these contaminations that Moi finds politically, feministically unproductive – and that, on the contrary, Kamuf (with Cixous) affirms as precisely politically, feministically productive.

Importantly, the consequence of the possible multiplication of “semi-”modes of thinking and of their blurry distinctions Kamuf points to (and something that Cixous’s writings indeed enact) does not repudiate the effectiveness of these modes nor is it a surrender to their murkiness. Rather, they are openings “onto a responsibility to that which is only glimpsed beneath the effacement of the prefix *semi-* on all names and general concepts” (74). Thus, if we follow Kamuf, prefixing a name or concept with “semi-” can signal something that is “not altogether there, it does not name a presence, nothing that *is*; rather, it calls for something to present itself otherwise” (74). In this sense, Kamuf precisely affirms Cixous as a semi-theoretician, whose work calls for “theory” and “thinking” to present themselves (always again) otherwise, and otherwise than in the traditions of Western metaphysics and the Cartesian subject.

It is from this angle, that “semi-” is attached here to agency. If we were to start from the conventional understanding of agency as the “ability or capacity to act or exert power” (OED), then semi-agency is not half of that capacity; that would retain implicitly either the desire for the full capacity, or the acceptance of a diminished part of it, with the full capacity still as a yardstick. Both of these options continue to adhere to a metaphysics of presence. Following the angle described by Kamuf instead, the non-category of “semi-” calls for agency “to present itself otherwise” (1995, 74) than within a logic of presence. Here, semi-agency is closer to the other (in fact: the first) definition of agency that the OED gives, namely that of “a person or organization acting on behalf of another.” *I is another*, we might say, to echo Arthur Rimbaud’s countering of the Cartesian idea of a willful, self-transparent subject in his *Lettres du Voyant* already in 1871.

With this in mind, let us then return to critical discourse, where agency as a term has surfaced over the past decades, especially in work that questions subjectivity as sovereign consciousness. In this vein, for example, Judith Butler speaks from a social constructivist perspective about subjectless, performative agency

146 that is bound to the discursive formations in which it emerges. We can locate agency, she writes already in *Gender Trouble*, “within the possibility of a variation on that repetition” (Butler 1990, 145) upon which any identity understood as practice is based; that is, within the difference permitted by the iterability of signs, an iterability upon which any signification depends. And later, in *Excitable Speech*, Butler explains that agency and sovereignty must not be confused: “[a]gency begins where sovereignty wanes. The one who acts (who is not the same as the sovereign subject) acts precisely to the extent that he or she is constituted as an actor and, hence, operating within a linguistic field of enabling constraints from the outset” (1997, 16). Agency, therefore, has purchase in contemporary critical discourse precisely to the extent that it questions and reroutes conceptions of sovereign intentionality, and that it foregrounds praxis, action, and reiteration within discursive fields as inscribing difference and inventing “new” habits. It would, however, not be wise to abandon agency for action altogether, as Tim Ingold suggests in *The Life of Lines*.

Worried that agency continues to “separat[e] the doer from the deed” (Ingold 2015, 145) and thus adheres to traditional forms of the sovereign Subject (a worry that seems to ignore precisely the work feminist theory has done on the term), Ingold wants to let go of it. He suggests focusing on “*action without agency*” (145) instead in order to stress what he calls “the doing-in-undergoing of humanifying” (152). What we **risk** losing in such a move, though, are the *enabling* constraints (Butler) agency addresses, or – from a (new) materialist perspective – the “*agential cuts*” (Barad 2007, 175) crucial to any emergence of difference. Put otherwise, what we risk losing in the move Ingold suggests is the critical **transformation** that Butler, Karen Barad, and others foreground with *agency* or *agential*. Certainly, action is “doing-in-undergoing” as Ingold suggests, and the stale opposition of subject/object as well as the sovereign Subject are obsolete. But on the basis of a performative, quantum universe (which also underlies

Ingold's work), we also need to assess what comes to matter as a non-linearly-causal consequence of action. Crucially, as Barad stresses, "[d]ifferent agential cuts produce different phenomena" (2007, 175). What action is directed at-for and where action orients itself within-toward is therefore critical (in the sense of being decisive and interventionist). Agency permits precisely the pursuit of this: what is effected, what is shifted and what is de/re-stabilized in the course of the actors' constitutive operations in discursive fields? In that way, action as intra-action remains tied to performative, material-discursive forms of agency, which are themselves a productive, **creative** mode of critical practice.

Agency is a matter of intra-acting; it is an enactment, not something that someone or something has. Agency cannot be designated as an attribute of subjects or objects (as they do not preexist as such). *Agency is a matter of making iterative changes to particular practices through the dynamics of intra-activity ...* Agency is about the possibilities and accountability entailed in reconfiguring material-discursive apparatuses of bodily production, including the boundary articulations and exclusions that are marked by those practices. (Barad 2007, 214; emphasis added)

From this perspective, agency is not an attribute. Instead, the intra-actions and cuts create *specific* phenomena and practices and not others: "cutting together-apart" (Barad 2012, 46). Severing agency from action, as Ingold suggests, would lose this precision and the investment in rerouting practices and exclusions.

Ultimately, agency is then always already semi-agency, namely "nothing that *is*; [but that] calls for something to present itself otherwise" (Kamuf 1995, 74): a form of (boundary) articulation **entangled** with the affective, material, circumstantial forces that drive all intra-action; a form of enactment of **world** that makes a difference, that effects a change; the practice of acting within enabling constraints (Butler) or as intra-acting with-in a material-discursive field (Barad).

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