Willful Subjects

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Willful Subjects. By Sara Ahmed.

Durham and London: Duke University Press. 2014.

Willful Subjects, the latest book from the very prolific Sara Ahmed, is an intriguing text that continues a line of development that can be traced back at least to the earlier text *Queer Phenomenology* (Ahmed 2006). The many admirers of that book will be delighted with the lines of continuity that Ahmed follows whilst also being engaged with some innovative new thinking that successfully advances her project of bringing philosophical reflection to bear on a range of socio-political and cultural issues. As the title indicates, Ahmed takes the will and willfulness as her themes and sets about constructing what she calls a queer archive. This is by no means a simple historical account and nor does it settle on the willful subject alone. Rather it teases out all the errant ways in which the will has been and could be thought through a highly detailed reflection on, and analysis of, how the word and its related terms come to matter. She treats will not as a property of the subject but as experiential (24), as intending towards some practical possibility. Accordingly Ahmed ranges across not simply philosophy where the terms already have a rich grounding – Augustine, Aquinas, Kant, Nietzsche, Rousseau and Hegel are recurrent figures – but pays particular attention to literature, starting with a short story called *The Willful Child* from the Grimm brothers. The novels of George Eliot are an equally strong influence, never just as passing references but as extended platforms for Ahmed's own reconfigurations of the supposed historical negativity of willfulness.

Like her earlier books, *Willful Subjects* reveals Ahmed as a consummate and supremely confident scholar, albeit one who is sometimes capable of producing exasperation in her reader, or at least this one. On the one hand I am strongly drawn into her passion for the material in hand - the chapter on 'Willfulness as a Style of Politics' with its astute reflections on racist and sexist discourse works particularly well - and find that the writer's own buzz of ideas invokes an energy in me to follow through on related but half-thought ideas. On the other hand, there were many occasions when I wished she would simply stop the incessant word play – mainly characterised in an obsessive use of the rhetorical device of chiasmus - and get to the substantive point. Ahmed's argument, no doubt, is that an initial surface reading often willfully obscures a deeper and reversible structure of meaning, but surely some phrases do intend what at first appears and there is little else to uncover. I have been reading Ahmed with pleasure for a very long time, and greatly appreciate her willingness to shake the bone of significance a little longer, so it is alarming to feel that there is any danger of her falling into self-parody. Nonetheless, I felt compelled (willed?) to keep reading and emerged revitalised.

In the twists and turns around the nexus of relations between good and bad will, general and particular will, and willfulness itself, something new begins to emerge that suggests a more positive horizon of possibility for oppressed people everywhere – children, disabled people, racial others, women – who have been marked as having too much or the wrong kind of will. It is not that Ahmed simply wants to encourage willfulness as disobedience, but to ask what it would be to accept the charge of willfulness. As she puts it: 'Willfulness could be understood as a necessary horizon for politics' (165). Ahmed's insights, as always, are both intellectually fertile and provocative; *Willful Subjects* will not disappoint.