

Power and Resistance in the Later Foucault

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The eight year gap between the publication of Volume I (1976) of *The History of Sexuality* and Volumes II and III (1984) has provoked a fair amount of debate within scholarly circles. Does it represent a fundamental rethinking of the analysis of power and knowledge begun in Volume I, or is something else at stake? And what does the shift in emphasis regarding power and resistance after these eight years ultimately entail?

James Miller's influential, if often flawed, biography of Foucault has provided one of the leading interpretations of this gap in Foucault's publishing career. On Miller's account, the turn towards governmentality and technologies of the self represents something of a tacit admission of failure on Foucault's part regarding his Volume I rendering of power and resistance.¹ Now, it seems to me that there is something right about this reading – we can map a shift in Foucault's consideration of power and resistance in this period, culminating in the 1982 essay, "The Subject and Power," which it seems to me can be read as a perverse re-writing of the themes of Volume I. However, the idea that this eight year period represents a 'hard break,' or an introduction of an incommensurability between resistance as tactical reversal (Volume I) and resistance as

¹ Miller, James. *The Passion of Michel Foucault*. New York: Anchor, 1993. Miller seems to locate this break or shift as occurring at the same time as the 1977-78 Collège lectures. "Foucault begin predictably, by talking about security and bio-politics. But then, abruptly – shortly after the course had started, his associate recalls – 'he stopped. He could not go on. And it was clear that this problematic, of bio-politics, was over for him – it was finished. His approach changed. But he still didn't know where he was going.'" (299)

autonomy through heteronomy (II and III) seems to misrepresent the actual trajectory that Foucault's thought traversed in this period. And this illusion of an incommensurability has led many commentators to exclusively focus on either the 1976 or 1982-4 version of power and resistance in Foucault's work – Judith Butler as an example of the first type², and Richard Rorty as an example of the second³ – leading these commentators to a terribly one sided vision of the later Foucault's understanding of the intrinsic link between power and resistance.

My task in this paper, then, is the following. I want to illustrate my reading of this 'continuity thesis' in Foucault's later work through a sketch of the trajectory of his thought in this eight year period. [In many ways, my paper is a kind of footnote to the paper given by Chris Blakley yesterday, in that I fundamentally agree with his account of fascism and state racism as the guiding thread in Foucault's later work.] My strategy for this sketch is a short overview of the movement of Foucault's work in this period, and I will turn to a few of his major lectures in order to make this trajectory clear. What emerges through a consideration of these lectures, and others like them, is a notion of resistance which is much thicker and viable than that initially offered in Volume I. While Foucault does not entirely abandon the Volume I account of power and resistance, he substantially rewrites it in light of his continued analysis into the roots of biopower and State racism in the West. The point of this re-reading of the path of Foucault's thought is

² See Butler's 1993 Bodies that Matter for perhaps the clearest example of this – performativity seems to me to be heavily dependent upon the notion of tactical reversal as the means of resistance. I am sensitive to the idea that Butler's recent work (two recent essays on critique in Foucault) might well overcome this flaw in her work, but I think this remains an open question given her thought as a whole.

³ See Rorty's Contingency, Irony, Solidarity, where he turns to the issues surrounding the technologies of the self and caring for oneself as emblematic of Foucault's ironism.

to grasp the rich notion of resistance in Foucault's work that is often overlooked or entirely missed by his interlocutors.

Without a doubt, one of the most famous passages in Volume I of the *History of Sexuality* concerns the relation between power and resistance in the 'Method' section. There, Foucault says: "Where there is power, there is resistance, and yet, or rather consequently, this resistance is never in a position of exteriority in relation to power."⁴ What he seems to mean is this: because power is not coercive in the sense of direct threat of violence⁵, it must be understood as an asymmetrical set of relations in which the existence of this multiplicity of nodal points or relations necessarily entails the possibility of resistance. Foucault describes this inherent possibility of resistance as locatable within tactical reversal, or in the reappropriation of local conflicts which, according to the rule of 'double-conditioning,' can have effects beyond the merely local and thus within the 'strategic.' Put more strongly, Foucault's analysis in the 'Method' section of Volume I leads to a conception of resistance in which it is the possibility of reversal within specific force relations, the contestation of specific objects and impositions of power on subjects,

⁴ HS, 95.

⁵ See Foucault's discussion with Michael Bess from 1980, published in issue 4 of the *History of the Present* (Spring 1988). "Power should not be understood as an oppressive system bearing down on individuals from above, smiting them with prohibitions of this or that. Power is a set of relations. What does it mean to exercise power? It does not mean picking up this tape recorder and throwing it on the ground. I have the capacity to do so – materially, physically, sportively. But I would not be exercising power if I did that. However, if I take this tape recorder and throw it on the ground in order to make you mad, or so that you can't repeat what I've said, or to put pressure on so that you'll behave in such and such a way, or to intimidate you – well, what I've done, by shaping your behaviour through certain means, *that* is power. ... I'm not forcing you at all and I'm leaving you completely free – that's when I begin to exercise power. It's clear that power should not be defined as a constraining force of violence that represses individuals, forcing them to do something or preventing them from doing some other thing. But it takes place when there is a relation between two free subjects, and this relation is unbalanced, so that one can act upon the other, and the other is acted upon, or allows himself to be acted upon. Therefore, power is not always repressive. It can take a certain number of forms. And it is possible to have relations of power that are open." (2)

that is fundamental to the creative possibilities for resistance within power. The problem⁶ in this rendering of power and resistance is that resistance becomes entirely reactive in this model, or merely a reacting-to power and not a positive action on its own terms.⁷

Foucault's concern, then, can perhaps be summed up in the following way: how can one have a positive means of resistance which does not devolve to re-action or negation? The answer, as we know, emerges in the 1980's through discussion of caring for oneself and Foucault's genealogy of the critical attitude. But in order to get from 1976 to 1982 ("The Subject and Power"), we need to briefly consider the path of Foucault's thought in this period. Because Chris Blakley gave us a rather detailed discussion of this path yesterday, much of this will seem familiar. Nonetheless, I think that a sketch of this trajectory is in order.

In an interview, Foucault clearly says that it is Part 5 of Volume I that is the most important in the book, and yet, the most neglected.⁸ In this chapter, entitled "Right of Death and Power over Life," Foucault's ultimate concern is to understand the roots of state racism or National Socialism, and to do so through an investigation of what he calls biopower. It seems to me that throughout the various shifts in Foucault's analysis in this

⁶ [Or, at least the problem that I will argue Foucault finds with his HS I analysis...]

⁷ In this account of resistance, effective agency seems to boil down to a sort of rear-guard action – one battles against power from within power by reacting against it, by means of a kind of tactical negation, and the possibilities for such resistance from within power seem vague indeed. As a result, says Thomas McCarthy, it is difficult "to identify just what it is that resists." [McCarthy, Thomas. "The Critique of Impure Reason: Foucault and the Frankfurt School." Critique and Power: Recasting the Foucault / Habermas Debate. Michael Kelly, ed. Cambridge: MIT Press, 1994. 258. It should be noted that the alternative thrust of McCarthy's critique, i.e. that Foucault's later work emphasizes the creation of a self at the cost of any discernible subjection via power relations, is not engaged in this paper.] And according to Lois McNay, "[t]he emphasis that Foucault places on the effects of power upon the body results in a reduction of social agents to passive bodies and cannot explain how individuals may act in an autonomous fashion." [McNay, Lois. "The Foucauldian Body and the Exclusion of Experience." Hypatia 6 (1991): 125-137.]

⁸ See the interview "The Confession of the Flesh" in Michel Foucault, Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews & Other Writings 1972-1977, ed. Colin Gordon (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980), 194-228, esp. 222-228, for this statement.

period, this basic concern does not change. The idea of a ‘non-fascistic way of life’ becomes for Foucault the guiding thread through the analyses of governmentality, technologies of the self, and the idea of critique. On this reading, then, the return to the Greeks, so often taken as an abandoning of his attempt to grapple with biopolitics and state racism, must be understood as the fruit of a genealogical deepening of his inquiry. The preliminary analyses of biopolitics in Volume I do not extend beyond the Christian era; in his later lectures, culminating in the publication of Volumes II and III, Foucault’s deepening analyses lead him to trace the roots of pastoral power and the Christian confessional back towards Greek and Roman technologies of the self. Taken in conjunction with his discussion of Kant as offering a model of critique as limit-attitude in “What is Critique?” and “What is Enlightenment?”, the link between Socrates (as touchstone, provoking truth-telling in interlocutors) and Kant (the analytics of truth and the reversal of the priority of ‘know thyself’ and ‘care for oneself’) comes into clear relief.⁹

⁹ See Foucault’s “What is Revolution?” in The Politics of Truth (Foucault, Michel. The Politics of Truth. ed. Sylvère Lotringer. New York: Semiotexte, 1997. 83-100.), where Foucault describes the importance of Kant in the following way:

Kant seems to me to have founded the two great critical traditions which divide modern philosophy. Let us say that in his great critical work, Kant posited and founded this tradition of philosophy that asks the question of the conditions under which true knowledge is possible and we can say that a whole side of modern philosophy since the 19th century has been defined and developed as the analytic of truth.

But there exists in modern and contemporary philosophy another type of question, another kind of critical questioning: it is precisely the one we see being born in the question of the Aufklärung or in the text on the Revolution. This other critical tradition poses the question: What is our actuality? What is the present field of possible experiences? It is not an issue of analyzing the truth, it will be a question rather of what we could call an ontology of ourselves, an ontology of the present. It seems to me that the philosophical choice with which we are confronted at present is this: we can opt for a critical philosophy which will present itself as an analytic philosophy of truth in general, or we can opt for a form of critical thought which will be an ontology of ourselves, an ontology of the actuality. It is this form of philosophy that, from Hegel to the Frankfurt School,

I want to turn to a few of Foucault's lectures in order to briefly outline the trajectory of this transition in Foucault's consideration of power. In these lectures, and in others, we find a Foucault in transition: here, we see Foucault actually engaging in this deepening of his genealogical inquiry. Let me briefly engage these lectures so as to try to unpack some elements of this movement.

One of the first milestones in the transition towards an analysis of governmentality occurs in the 1978 "Sexuality and Power," given in Tokyo. In this lecture, Foucault's analysis locates the roots of 'pastoral power' to consist in a set of 'new techniques' or "new mechanisms of power that Christianity introduced into the Roman world."¹⁰ This is a tacit admission that the analysis of Christianity in Volume I underdetermines the role of the flesh in Christianity – after more adequate analysis, Foucault comes to see that what is fundamental to the transition from the Roman to the Christian is the set of mechanisms and exercises which deal with a recalcitrant flesh resistant to the word of God. We find in this lecture one of the first formulations of the transition from Volume I to Volumes II and III: as Foucault says, "it is by the constitution of a subjectivity, of a self-consciousness perpetually alert to its own weaknesses, to its own temptations, to its own flesh; it is by the constitution of a subjectivity that Christianity came to make this basically average, ordinary, relatively uninteresting morality function between asceticism and civil society."¹¹ With the advent of the 'interiorization' so central to Christian subjectivity, we can see here one of the first renderings of the revised notion of power: power is not always exercised in the kind of

through Nietzsche and Max Weber, has founded the form of reflection within which I have attempted to work. (99-100)

¹⁰Foucault, Michel. Religion and Culture. ed. Jeremy R. Carrette. New York: Routledge, 1999. 121. Hereafter RC. 121.

¹¹ RC, 126.

agonistic force relation described in Volume I, but can also function through the structuration of subjectivity through various non-dominating techniques and apparatuses.

The 1979 lecture “Pastoral Power and Political Reason” offers perhaps the clearest discussion of the relation between the Christian pastoral and the rationality of the State. In the first half of the lecture, Foucault discusses the advent of pastoral power, while in the second, he turns to a genealogical analysis of governmentality. Two central points are introduced here: first, we should note that Foucault locates the roots of the Christian confessional in the 1st or 2nd Century, and not in the 13th, as he had previously. His continued genealogical inquiry into the emergence of confession as a technology of the self exposes both the continuity and the novelty of Christianity in comparison with, say, Plato’s sparse writings on the shepherd. Second, and perhaps more importantly, Foucault introduces the idea of Christian mortification of the flesh in terms of a relation to oneself.¹² What emerges in this lecture is an understanding of the particularly insidious alliance between the emergence of governmentality and the Christian pastoral which results in the police becoming the specific technology of the State. In policing all aspects of life, the police, as instrument of the State, comes to take over the role of pastoring to a population or flock.

The last lecture under consideration here is the 1980 “About the beginning of the hermeneutics of the self.” It is in this lecture that Foucault offers perhaps the first clear articulation of the central issues of his final work. As he says,

I think that if one wants to analyze the genealogy of the subject in Western civilization, one has to take into account not only techniques of domination but techniques of the self. Let’s say: one has to take into account the interaction between these two types of techniques – techniques

¹² RC, 143.

of domination and techniques of the self. One has to take into account the points where the technologies of domination of individuals over one another have recourse to processes by which the individual acts upon himself. And conversely, one has to take into account the points where the techniques of the self are integrated into structures of coercion or domination. The contact point, where the individuals are driven [and known] by others is tied to the way they conduct themselves [and know themselves], in what we can call, I think, government. Governing people, in the broad meaning of the word, governing people is not a way to force people to do what the governor wants; it is always a versatile equilibrium, with complementarity and conflicts between techniques which assure coercion and processes through which the self is constructed and modified by oneself.¹³

Through a rehearsal of many of the themes of his final work [– most notably, the transition from Stoicism to Christianity with Cassian as the contact point (a point that he elsewhere describes as the transition from the problem of penetration to the problem of erection¹⁴) –] we can glimpse elements of the rationale underpinning the rendering of power as the structuring of possible action in “The Subject and Power.” What Christianity introduces is not a radically new type of subjectivity; rather, Christianity introduces a new set of techniques and mechanisms which utilize and recast Greek and Roman techniques. Foucault’s genealogical inquiry into the emergence of biopower and state racism led him to an encounter with the fundamental Greek and Roman technologies of self through which subjects came to conduct their own conduct, or engage in a relation to themselves which did not devolve to a state of domination. Through techniques like self-writing, subjectivities were forged in a positive manner. Foucault’s inquiry into a ‘history of the present,’ with the recovery of techniques of the self in Greece and Rome, illuminates the fundamental role played by a positive means of

¹³ RC, 162.

¹⁴ See “Sexuality and Solitude” for this discussion. (RC 182-187, esp. 186) The problem can perhaps be better described as the shift in concern from penetration as social relation to others towards the kind of relation to oneself we might encounter in Augustine.

fashioning one's subjectivity (albeit with various modifications and modulations) in the history of the West.

We should now see how the 1982 “The Subject and Power” should be read as a re-writing of the ‘Method’ section of Volume I – with a positive account of resistance to power in hand (the relation to oneself and care for the self as a site for resistance), Foucault is able to overcome what he took to be the fundamental shortcoming of the ‘Nietzsche hypothesis’ regarding power and knowledge. In this essay, Foucault describes the nature of power as the *modification of action by action*; put somewhat differently, power is no longer conceived as the abstract relation of forces but as the structuring of the field of possible actions by means of action. While this description does not represent a reversal of his earlier work, it does serve more than a merely symbolic function: in “The Subject and Power,” Foucault's account of power more clearly specifies the inherent points of resistance within power itself. Power functions through the structuration of possible actions and capacities of free agents, and this structuration is effected through government, which designates “the way in which the conduct of individuals or of groups might be directed... to govern, in this sense, is to structure the possible field of action of others.”¹⁵ With a shift away from the so-called ‘war model’ of power outlined in Volume I, Foucault reconfigures the modes of resistance implied in his construction of power. In place of a model which is based upon the differential, asymmetrical relations between forces, the account offered in “The Subject and Power” paints a portrait of power in which power functions by structuring a field of possible action in which a subject must act. The structuration of the field, however, does not imply external coercion by power

¹⁵ Foucault, Michel. “The Subject and Power,” in Hubert L. Dreyfus and Paul Rabinow, Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics. Chicago: U Chicago Press, 1983. 221.

itself – power functions by guiding the actions of a fundamentally *free* subject, but always with the possibility that the subject can traverse the field in new and creative ways.

In other words, the analysis of power in “The Subject and Power,” through the emphasis on the effect of action upon action, also serves to highlight the positive manner in which the subject is able to act upon his or herself, or the relation of oneself to oneself. While Foucault does not abandon the idea of force relations outlined in Volume I, he does complicate and recast it – if power functions through the structuration of a field of possible actions, resistance to power should not only be understood in terms of agonistic force relations, but in terms of a creative traversing of the field of possible action. Resistance – positive resistance – is no longer merely reversal, but consists in a subject’s becoming-autonomous within a structured set of institutions and practices through immanent critique.

If we understand the guiding thread of Foucault’s later work to center on the question of fascism, both as a historical phenomenon and as the infection endemic to contemporary Western subjectivity, the imperative behind Foucault’s return to the Greeks becomes clear. Genealogical analysis into pastoral power and governmentality reveals the modification of Greek and Roman technologies of the self in, for example, the Christian confessional. In light of this genealogy, we can see that a non-negative means of relating to oneself – caring for oneself as a positive fashioning of a subjectivity – has been with us since the time of the Greeks. In Greek and Roman technologies of the self, we find a version of power which does not merely dominate, but incites us to forge our own subjectivities within a problematic field, or a field of possible actions and capacities.

Although the introduction of Christianity and the police state inverted the priority of self-knowledge and care for oneself, introducing the individualizing and totalizing power of governmentality, Foucault locates within Kant and Kantian critique the resources for a reversal of this prioritization. Critique, as a kind of 'limit-attitude,' becomes for Foucault the means by which a subject can positively resist power through a testing of the limits of domination and subjection. If power operates in terms of the 'conduct of conduct,' or in the modification of action by action, critique allows us to view the field of possible action in terms of its possibility, and not only in the terms given us by power and knowledge. Through critique, through (and only through) the critical engagement with institutions and practices, we can more effectively resist our governance and our docility.

Thank you.