THE POWER NOT TO BE (WHAT WE ARE)

The politics and ethics of self-creation in Foucault[1]

Abstract

To some extent, Foucault's later works on ethics provides an opportunity to go beyond some of the controversies generated by his work of the 1970s. It was thought, for example, that Foucault had overstated the extent to which individuals could be "subjected" to the influence of power, leaving them little room to resist. This paper will consider the "politics" of self-creation. We shall attempt to establish to what extent Foucault's later notion of self-formation does in fact succeed in countering an overdetermination by power. In the end, though, it would appear as if Foucault's turn to ethics amounts to a substitution of ethics, understood as an individualised task, for the political task of collective social transformation. What is at stake is whether or not Foucault's insistence on individual acts of resistance amounts to more than an empty claim that ethics still somehow has political implications whilst having in fact effectively given up on politics. It will be argued that the subject of the later Foucault's ethics, the individual, can only be understood as *political* subjectivity, i.e. that the political potential of individual action is not only "added on" as an adjunct, but that individual action is intrinsically invested with political purport.

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1. Self-creation as the way out

Towards the end of his life, Foucault made a decisive ethical turn — a turn towards the self and seemingly away from his previous preoccupations which were considered more politically engaged. It appeared as if Foucault had trapped himself in power[2] and now chose to withdraw into the self.[3] Foucault even insisted that it was not power but the subject that formed the general theme of his research.[4] And yet, his peculiar conception of power not only paved the way for but also appeared to *necessitate* a (re)turn to the self in his later works. A reconceptualised self appeared on the scene: exit self, the product; enter self, the creator. The self is now no longer considered as the passive product of an external system of constraint and prescriptions, but as the active agent of its own formation. Foucault unlocks the self's potential for liberty by returning to ancient Greek and Greco-Roman culture where the hermeneutics of the self was constituted by the practice of "care of the self". There he discovers an aesthetics of existence that is also ethical to the extent to which it maintains the freedom of the subject.[5] In short, the later Foucault appears to be saying that we can be freer by creating ourselves anew.

Accordingly, "care of the self" is presented as a "struggle against the forms of subjection — against the submission of subjectivity".[6] More precisely, proper care of

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[2] Although he does not agree, this question was posed by Deleuze. See G. Deleuze, *Foucault,* trans. Sean Hand (London: Athlone Press, 1988), p. 94.

[3] D. R. Hiley, 'Foucault and the Analysis of Power: Political Engagement without Liberal Hope or Comfort', *Praxis International* **4** (1984)(2), pp. 192-207.

[4] M. Foucault, 'The Subject and Power', in H. L. Dreyfus and P. Rabinow, *Michel Foucault. Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics* (London: The Harvester Press Ltd., 1986), pp. 208-226.

[5] M. Foucault, 'The Ethic of Care for the Self as a Practice of Freedom. An Interview with Michel Foucault on January, 20, 1984', trans, J. D. Gauthier, in J. W. Bernauer and D. M. Rasmussen (eds.), *The Final Foucault* (Cambridge, MA : MIT Press, 1988), pp. 1-20.

[6] Foucault, 'The Subject and Power', p. 213.

the self takes the form of a "refusal" of the self,[7] because what we are is the result of the political "double bind" of modern power structures.[8] This form of power "individualises" the subject, but it also simultaneously "totalises" the subject; it does not empower the subject without also overpowering it. The question then is: "How can the growth of capabilities be disconnected from the intensification of power relations?"[9]

The self, in Greek guise, i.e. as *individual agency* characterised by autarky and auto-affection, seems to provide the answer to this dilemma. It is set in opposition to the material, historical, economic, discursive and linguistic structures, practices and drives that constitute subjectivity and of which the subject is an effect.[10] In short, it is opposed to the subject as *subject*. For as Greenblatt argues, the freedom of the arts of the self does not consist in self-creation itself, but in the experience of self-formation in the face of all the other forces that fashion us.[11]

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[7] The self obviously cannot "refuse" itself completely without negating itself. What the self has to refuse — in the name of freedom — are those aspects of its identity which are coupled to established codes of identity (and moral codes), imposed from the outside and which diminish the subject's freedom. In other words, the limits that define us as agents and which supposedly safeguard our freedom (Kant), also constrain us and limit our capacity for possible action. We shall return to this later. In this regard, also see W. E. Connolly, 'Beyond Good and Evil. The Ethical Sensibility of Michel Foucault', in J. Moss (ed.), *The Later Foucault* (London: Sage Publications, 1998), pp. 108-128.

[8] Foucault, 'The Subject and Power, p. 216.

[9] M. Foucault, 'What is Enlightenment?', in P. Rabinow (ed.), *The Foucault Reader*. (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984), pp. 32-50.

[10] These brief introductory remarks should not cause the reader to misunderstand Foucault. He is not proposing that the subject can ever entirely be "outside" of power, but rather that this fact "*does not* entail the necessity of accepting an inescapable form of domination" (p. 141, my emphasis). This will become clear in the course of this paper. See M. Foucault, 'Power and Strategies', in C. Gordon (ed.), *Michel Foucault. Power/Knowledge. Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972-1977,* trans. Colin Gordon, Leo Marshall, John Mepham and Kate Soper. (Great Britain: The Harvester Press Ltd., 1980), pp. 134-145.

[11] Foucault cites Greenblatt as one of the few studies of aesthetics of existence done since Burckhardt. See M. Foucault, *The History of Sexuality. Volume II: The Use of Pleasure*, trans. Robert Hurley

Foucault defines ethics as the "the practice of liberty, the deliberate practice of liberty".[12] If we take this to mean that the essence of Foucault's ethical project is constituted by the struggle for and the practice of freedom, his later works also immediately assume political significance. In other words, if "ethics is the deliberate form assumed by liberty", his later works are essentially dedicated to the political task of reinvesting the individual with the capacity for action — to change itself and the world in which it lives. And this ability to change oneself and by extension the society in which you live, is rooted in the ability "to know how and to what extent it might be possible to *think* differently".[13]

Foucault's genealogies of the subject show how the individual has always been constituted in ways that correlate with social norms, which are in turn engineered by the powers that be. This implies that attempts to resist existing ways of subjectification *[assujettissement]* — which correspond to certain forms of *subjection* — entail opposition to networks of power and governmental rationalities. In other words, the later Foucault shifted emphasis from the problematics of subjectivising subjection [*assujetissement*] to that of subjectivisation [*subjectivation*].[14] He now conceives of subjectivity not as a product of power, but as a result of the techniques of subjectivisation that may indeed have connections with techniques of power but are essentially distinct from them.[15] And since the promotion of new subjectivities or

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(London: Penguin, 1992), p. 11; S. Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-fashioning: From More to Shakespeare* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980); J. Burckhardt, *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy*, trans. S.G.C. Middlemore (USA: Albert and Charles Boni, 1935).

[12] Foucault, 'The Ethic of Care for the Self', p. 4.

[13] Foucault, *The History of Sexuality Volume II,* p. 9.

[14] What is relevant to Foucaultian aesthetics of the self is then not any particular beautiful subject but the *process of subjectivisation* as an art.

[15] *Cf.* R. Visker, *Michel Foucault. Genealogy as Critique,* trans. Chris Turner (London: Verso, 1995), p. 88.

subjectivisation provides the means to counter subjection, it is not only a matter of ethics, but also at once social, philosophical, and most importantly, political.

Foucault proposes three axes of subjectification:[16] (1) the self's relation to knowledge/truth; (2) the self's relation to power; and (3) the self's relation to itself (ethics).[17] In light of this tripartite, freedom would mean the freedom of the subject to relate to itself without that relationship being pre-/overdetermined by power and knowledge. In other words, ethics or "the deliberate practices of liberty" would depend upon the possibility of loosening the connections between the three axes.[18] This is in fact precisely what Foucault proposes: the possibility of an ethical relation to the self that has recourse neither to power nor to knowledge.[19] This brings us to the main question at issue in this paper: to what extent is it possible to conceive of the self independently of knowledge and power? It will consider the way in which the success or failure of this "loosening" affects the political status of Foucault's ethics. If we do not succeed in securing our freedom, does this mean that Foucault's ethics is politically inconsequential? Foucault's conception of power will provide us with the key to answering these questions.

2. Power: the twin root of good and evil

For Foucault, power is not a theoretical question. Every aspect of our experience is insidiously steeped in and consequently determined by power.[20] Because power is

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[16] Subjectification or *assujetissement* means both subjection (in the sense of subordination) and becoming a subject.

[17] *Cf*. M. Foucault, 'Preface (original version) to *The History of Sexuality, Volume II*', trans. William Smock, in P. Rabinow (ed.), *The Foucault Reader* (New York: Pantheon Books 1984), pp. 333-339.

[18] Foucault, 'The Ethic of Care for the Self', p. 5.

[19] *Cf*. M. Foucault, 'On the Genealogy of Ethics: An Overview of Work in Progress', in P. Rabinow, (ed.), *The Foucault Reader* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984), pp. 340-372; Deleuze, *Foucault,* p. 100; J. Simons, *Foucault and the Political*. (London: Routledge, 1995), p. 72.

[20] Foucault, 'The subject and Power', p. 209.

deeply rooted in the social nexus,[21] it is capable of instituting relations between individuals (or between groups).[22] "[T]o live in society", writes Foucault, "is to live in such a way that *action upon other actions* is possible — and in fact going on. A society without power relations can only be an abstraction". However, Foucault stresses that although there cannot be a society without power relations, it does not mean that all established power relations are necessary. That is why the critical analysis of existing power relations — their historical formation, the source of their strength or fragility, the conditions that are necessary to transform some or to abolish others — is a political necessity.[23]

We should nevertheless not deduce from this that Foucault considers power to be the bane of our existence. To be sure, power can assume terminal forms. It can crystallise in institutions and mechanisms that ensure subservience, or in the form of a law that subjugates, or simply in a general system of domination exerted by one group over another. However, when Foucault refers to power he is not talking about the sovereignty of the state, the form of the law or the unity of a domination. These forms of power are not given at the outset as if they constitute power as such, but merely represent the ends or extremities of power.[24]

Power should rather be understood as a "multiplicity of force relations *immanent* in the sphere in which they operate and which constitute their own organization".[25] Power relations do not operate separate and apart form other types of relationships, such as economic processes or knowledge relationships. Nor does it assume a

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[21] *Ibid*., p. 222.

[22] *Ibid*., p. 217.

[23] *Ibid*., pp. 222-223, my emphasis.

[24] M. Foucault, *The History of Sexuality. Volume I: Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley (London: Penguin, 1990), p. 92.

[25] *Ibid*., p. 92, my emphasis.

superstructural position with merely a role of prohibition or accompaniment.[26] Power relations exist or operate *within* other relationships and constitute both the immediate effects and internal conditions of differentiations occurring within them.

The Foucaultian conception of power implies a *process* — a process that, through ceaseless struggles and confrontations, transforms, strengthens or reverses force relations. These force relations can either mutually support each other like links in a chain, or be isolated from one another due to disjunctions and contradictions. In other words, power — which is "permanent, repetitious, inert, and self-producing" — takes effect in *strategies*.[27] These strategies might be embodied in the state apparatus, in the formulation of the law, and in the various social hegemonies, but are not reducible to them. In other words, these strategies do no emanate from a central point, like an institution or sovereign. They are diffuse, local and unstable. They operate from the bottom up instead of the top down, form one moment to the next, at every point. Power is everywhere because it comes from everywhere. It is not a certain strength we are endowed with, but quite simply a *complex strategical situation in a particular society* — the result of the interplay of nonegalitarian and mobile relations that are exercised from innumerable points.[28]

Most importantly, power relations have a directly *productive* role. It does not merely suppress and subjugate, but is enabling and facilitates change. It is always exercised with a series of aims and objectives. However, although it is always purposeful or intentional, it is *never subjective*. The interplay of power cannot be reduced to a decision made by an individual subject.[29]

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[26] *Ibid.,* p. 94.

[27] *Ibid.,* pp. 92-93.

[28] *Ibid.,* pp. 93-94.

[29] *Ibid.,* p. 95.

Also understood in terms of "government" — in the broadest sense of the term — power aims to direct the conduct of individuals/groups while they retain the possibility to direct their own behaviour. As such, power presupposes *freedom*. "Power is exercised only over free subjects, and only insofar as they are free".[30] For if we did not have the freedom to act and to react, the interplay between relations of force would congeal into domination. Slavery, for example, is not a power relation but a physical relation of constraint. Freedom is therefore both the precondition for the exercise of power and also its permanent support, since without the ability or the freedom to *resist* relations of power, the interplay of mobile relations would congeal into a physical determination.[31] If power relations have a strictly *relational* character, as Foucault maintains,[32] then one has to accept the fact that where there is power, there is resistance (counter-power).

One can only resist power from *within*. We are in fact always "inside" power. There is no "escaping" it, for there is no absolute outside where power is concerned. It is what radically defines us. "Between techniques of knowledge and strategies of power", writes Foucault, "there is *no exteriority*.[33] The truth about the self is generated by the self, deciphered and validated by experts, and consequently manufactured in what Foucault calls "'local centers' of power/knowledge". Different forms of discourse — self-examination, questionings, interpretations, interviews — act as the vehicle for a kind of incessant back-and-forth movement of forms of subjugation and schemas of knowledge. These relations of power/knowledge are not static but continually being moulded and transformed. Discourse can therefore both be an instrument of power

[30] Foucault, 'The Subject and Power', p. 221.

[31] *Ibid*.

[32] Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Volume I,* p. 95.

[33] *Ibid*., p. 98, my emphasis.

and an effect of power, but it can also be a point of resistance, the starting point of an opposing strategy.[34]

Although power is *not* domination, the latter remains a permanent threat inherent in the very exercise of power. It occurs when either the active or the reactive force is reduced to total impotence[35] and the free play of antagonistic reactions is rendered fixed and immobile.[36] This is why Foucault insists that power relations are not inherently negative or evil, but dangerous.[37] In cases of domination, power relations give way to *violence*: The exercise of power allows for the possibility of counteraction, whereas violence consists in the direct application of coercion on the body of the other which simultaneously minimises the possibility of independent conduct. Violence entails the general subjection of freedom to power, whereas the condition of possibility of power is potential refusal or resistance.[38]

Accordingly, in a state of domination, the practice of liberty does not exist, exists only unilaterally or is extremely limited. *Liberation* then becomes necessary. However, according to Foucault, the "liberation of liberty" inevitably opens up new relations of power, which in turn bear the inherent danger of domination. Liberation has to be maintained, that is, the reinstated mobility of power relations has to be controlled by *practices of liberty*.[39]

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[34] *Ibid.,* pp. 98-101.

[35] Foucault, 'The Subject and Power', p. 225.

[36] Foucault, 'The Ethic of Care for the Self', p. 3.

[37] M. Foucault, 'Politics and Ethics: An Interview', trans. C. Porter, in P. Rabinow (ed.), *The Foucault Reader* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984), pp. 373-380. *Cf.* p. 343: "My point is not that everything is bad, but that everything is dangerous, which is not exactly the same as bad".

[38] M. Foucault, 'Politics and Reason', in L. Kritzman, (ed.), *Politics, Philosophy, Culture: Interviews and Other Writings 1977-1984*, trans. A. Sheridan (New York: Routledge, Chapman & Hall, Inc., 1988), pp. 57-85.

[39] Foucault, 'The Ethic of Care for the Self', pp. 3-4.

The moral of Foucault's story is that our immersion in and the all-pervasiveness of power *do not* give cause for fatalism.[40] Because power relations are unstable, they are subject to change; and because there is power everywhere, there is also freedom and the possibility of resistance everywhere. To be sure, power is dangerous and that is why "the permanent political task inherent in all social existence" is the analysis, elaboration and questioning of power relations and the struggle ("agonism") between power relations and non-negotiable freedom.[41]

3. Caught in an infinite regress

We have seen that this political task, this struggle for freedom culminates in the ethical subject's "practices of liberty". The later Foucault imagines "politics as an ethics".[42] However, the political efficacy of an aesthetics of existence is threatened by a dilemma that Balibar frames in the following terms: "the conditions of existence which are to be transformed are woven from the same cloth as the practice of transformation itself; …they are [both] of the order of an 'action upon an action'".[43] The power relation is indeed *constituent*, whereas the more or less stabilised social norms, the norms of behaviour, are *constituted*.

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[40] Foucault maintains that although power is "'always already there', that one is never 'outside' it… does not entail the necessity of accepting an inescapable form of domination". In other words, it "does not mean that one is trapped and condemned to defeat no matter what" (Foucault, 'Power and Strategies', pp. 141-142).

[41] Foucault, 'The Subject and Power', p. 223. Also see p. 225: "For, if it is true that at the heart of power relations and as a permanent condition of their existence there is an insubordination and a certain essential obstinacy on the part of the principles of freedom, then there is no relationship of power without the means of escape or possible flight. Every power relationship implies, at least *in potentia*, a strategy of struggle, in which the two forces are not superimposed, do not lose their specific nature, or do not finally become confused. Each constitutes for the other a kind of permanent limit, a point of possible reversal".

[42] Foucault, 'Politics and Ethics', p. 375.

[43] E. Balibar, *Politics and the Other Scene,* trans. Christine Jones, James Swenson and Chris Turner (London: Verso, 2002), p. 15.

The implication is that liberty might just be within our reach, but never quite attainable.[44] Power in Foucault is the twin root of both good and evil. The self can resist power because it is enmeshed in power, in the very thing that makes resistance necessary. Every act of resistance instates new relationships of power that have to be resisted in turn.[45] As a result, the self faces the danger of being caught in an infinite regress [46] or return of liberation and domination, of self-invention and self-refusal. The trajectory leading from resistance to liberation and from liberation to domination and back again (via resistance) has come to be inscribed *in* the very texture of the individual. Moreover, the constant necessity to resist power complicates the self's relationship to itself. It becomes difficult, if not impossible, for the self to *convert* to itself,[47] if the self's relation to itself is entirely defined by its outwardly directed struggles against power relations.

So where does power leave the subject? In light of the fact that "power *is* 'always already there', that one is never 'outside' it",[48] it seems highly improbable that the subject will succeed in loosening the three axes of subjectification —power, truth and ethics. If the self's relationship to itself cannot be free from power and knowledge, the

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[44] *Cf.* T. Eagleton, *The Ideology of the Aesthetic*. (Oxford: Basil Blackwell Ltd., 1990). According to Eagleton, Foucault is exemplary of what he calls "libertarian pessimism". The oxymoron, Eagleton maintains, is instructive: Foucault's position is libertarian therein that it advocates an aesthetics of existence, that is, "an existence blessedly free from the shackles of truth, meaning and sociality". At the same time, however, it is pessimistic, "because whatever blocks such creativity — law, meaning, power, closure — is acknowledged to be built into it, in a sceptical recognition of the imbrication of authority and desire" (p. 387). Also see C. Taylor, 'Foucault on Freedom and Truth', in D. E. Hoy (ed.), *Foucault. A Critical Reader* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986), pp. 69-102. Charles Taylor points out that although Foucault wishes to discredit the very notion of a liberation from power, his own concept of power does not in fact make sense without the idea of such liberation.

[45] Foucault, 'The Ethic of Care for the Self', p. 4.

[46] Balibar, *Politics and the Other Scene,* p. 19. "Regress" is here used in the philosophical sense of the term, referring to a series of actions (practices or technologies of the self) in which resistance is continually reapplied to its own result without approaching a useful conclusion.

[47] M. Foucault, *The History of Sexuality. Volume III: The Care of the Self*, trans. Robert Hurley (London: Penguin, 1990), p. 64.

very notion of self-creation itself becomes rather incoherent. Let us reassess the terms of our dilemma.

4. Self-creation reassessed

Foucault did indeed stress the fact that the subject's practices of *self*-constitution are "not something that the individual invents by himself. They are patterns… which are *proposed, suggested and imposed on him by his culture, his society and his social group*".[49] Seen from this perspective, self-constitution appears as less of an *auto*-nomous process in which the subject is independent from external determinants, than a reactionary and thus *heteronomous* project.[50] If the subject merely reacts to imposed identities, s/he inevitably remains tied to the latter. And although the individual is then supposedly free to choose his/her own norms, these norms are not of his/her own making.

Foucault nevertheless insists that the self's creative practices are ways in which we can maintain our freedom against coercive powers. Yet, to be able to indulge in these practices we already have to be free. "Liberty", writes Foucault, "is the ontological condition of ethics. But ethics is the deliberate form assumed by liberty".[51] In cases of domination then, *liberation* forms the political or historical condition for practices of liberty. However, liberation in turn installs new relations of power, which have to be

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[48] Foucault, 'Power and Strategies', p. 141.

[49] Foucault, 'The Ethic of Care for the Self', p. 11, my emphasis.

[50] *Cf.* J. Bennett, ''How is it, then, that we still remain barbarians?' Foucault, Schiller, and the aestheticization of ethics', in *Political Theory* **24**(1996)(4), pp. 653-672. Jane Bennett refers to what she has dubbed Foucault's "ethic of heteronomy": "Moral action is heteronomous both with regard to the web of social, legal, institutional, and other cultural constraints or regimes of power *and* with regard to the recalcitrant materials within the 'individual' body, for example, desires, fears, the process of aging" (p. 665).

[51] Foucault, 'The Ethic of Care for the Self', p. 4.

controlled by practices of liberty.[52] The practices of liberty then appear as a *necessity* emerging after liberation — to maintain freedom.

From this it is clear that the ethicality of an "aesthetics of existence" consists in its ability to maintain freedom. The assumption seems to be that our immersion in power and knowledge undermines our freedom and that we can detach or at least distance ourselves from it in part to create ourselves anew. Three interrelated difficulties arise:

(a) To what extent is it possible to separate the self from power and knowledge, that is, to *liberate* the subject so that it can *practice liberty*?

(b) If this is feasible, the liberated subject has to maintain his/her liberty by constructing a new subject identity. How is this possible without the aid of power and knowledge? In wanting to separate the three axes of subjectification, does Foucault not risk throwing out the baby with the bathwater?

(c) And, thirdly, if every liberation instigates new power relations, do we dare hope for a better future, for better socio-political conditions? And if not, does this not make the self's ethical practices politically inconsequential?

a. The possibility of liberation from power and knowledge

Let us first consider the possibility of liberation from power and knowledge. Deleuze argues that the Greeks have cleared the way for a "double unhooking or 'differentiation' [*décrochage*]: when the 'exercises that enable one to govern oneself' *become detached* both from power as a relation between forces, and from knowledge as a stratified form, or 'code' of virtue". Deleuze continues that the relation to oneself assumes an *independent* status as a result of this differentiation. The paradox is that this independence does not signal a detachment from power and knowledge *in*

[52] *Ibid.,* pp. 3-4.

general, but from knowledge as imposed codes of prescriptive rules and power as a relation between forces.[53] Let us start with the self's relation to knowledge.

According to Foucault, "[f]rom Antiquity to Christianity one passes from a morality that was essentially a search for a personal ethics, to a morality as obedience to a system of rules".[54] And since the latter is "now disappearing, has already disappeared", the self has to create itself by once again choosing its own criteria for ethical conduct. However, despite its supposed freedom from imposed rules, the self remains dependent upon *culturally derived* norms. Foucault furthermore stresses that the assimilation of knowledge of the self — that is the Socratic-Platonic aspect — is a necessary condition of care of the self.[55] However, to know oneself is not an autonomous process. It is the result of knowledge about the self produced by society, generated by experts and internalised by the self. For Foucault, knowledge and truth do not set us free as is often assumed, but are accessory to normalising power that categorises individuals and marks them by their own individuality.[56] In short, the self is inextricably bound to knowledge.

As for the self's relation to power, Foucault's text reads as follows: "there was to be a differentiation between the exercises that enabled one to govern oneself and the

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[53] Deleuze, *Foucault,* p. 100.

[54] S. Lotringer (ed.), *Foucault Live. Interviews 1961-1984*, trans. Lysa Hochroth and John Johnston (New York: Semiotext(e), 1996), p. 451.

[55] Foucault, 'The Ethic of Care for the Self', p. 5.

[56] *Cf.* M. Foucault, *Discipline and Punish. The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (London: Penguin, [1975] 1992). In this work, Foucault joins power and knowledge as "power-knowledge" (p. 27). This juxtaposition opposes the traditional notion that knowledge can exist only where the effects of power are suspended. According to Foucault, power and knowledge are in fact co-constituting — they directly imply one another. In other words, knowledge cannot exist except through relations of power, and power makes possible and produces "regimes of truth". *Cf.* Hiley, 'Foucault and the Analysis of Power', p. 200. This would imply that if the subject remains dependent upon knowledge, it is also per definition tied to power.

learning of what was necessary to govern others".[57] Accordingly, Deleuze's interpretation of the self's detachment from power amounts to a conflation. He conflates "power as a relation between forces" and the government of others. Power relations are *constituent*. In other words, the self is a product of power but it also derives its agency from it. Power is a diffuse network and not reducible to the government of others.[58] To be sure, power does "bring into play relations between individuals (or between groups)", but it "is not simply a relationship between partners … it is a way in which certain actions modify others".[59] The term "conduct" [*conduire*] explains the two-sidedness of power best: to "lead" others [*se conduire*] and to behave or conduct oneself [*la conduire*].[60]

To "govern" others thus makes up *one* side of the power coin. The other side of power consists in exercising power over oneself. It also belongs to the order of "an action upon other actions". Should we then consider power exerted over oneself as "subjective" — contrary to Foucault's own definition of power?[61] Or is it also only one force acting and reacting to other forces in a network of relations that dissolves the autonomy of the subject instead of deriving from it? If power acts as the self's driving force, it would be impossible for the self to be truly independent of power. It could be that Foucault imagined us being independent of that specific form of power that prohibits and subjugates while leaving intact the "affirmative power" that infuses

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[57] Foucault, *The History of Sexuality Volume II,* p. 77.

[58] *Cf.* M. Foucault, 'Intellectuals and Power. A Conversation between Michel Foucault and Gilles Deleuze', in D. F. Bouchard (ed.), *Michel Foucault. Language, Counter-Memory, Practice. Selected Essays and Interviews*, trans. D. F. Bouchard and S. Simon (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1977), pp. 203-217. In this conversation with Foucault, Deleuze seems to be aware of the diffuse character of power: "it is clear who exploits, who profits, and who governs, but power nevertheless seems to be something more diffuse" (p. 214).

[59] Foucault, 'The Subject and Power', pp. 217, 219.

[60] *Ibid.,* pp. 220-221.

[61] Foucault, *The History of Sexuality Volume I,* p. 95.

the "practices of liberty". The question is whether we can clearly separate the two. The power that *subjects* us is the very power that "subjectivises" us. This was, after all, Foucault's very point of departure and also that which traps him in power in the end.

b. The possibility of self-creation

We are consequently left with a dimension of subjectivity derived from power and knowledge that cannot relinquish its dependence upon them.[62] The upside of remaining tied to power and knowledge is that the self retains the resources needed for "self-creation", although the latter can no longer be considered an autonomous process. Unless power amounts to domination, it furnishes the self with the ability and the freedom it needs for resistance. But if every act of resistance unleashes new power relations, no alternative subject identity can signal a final liberation. It amounts to "an ethic for which freedom lies… in a constant attempt at self-disengagement and self-invention".[63]

Besides freedom, resistance also implies that one knows what to resist. Foucault, the sceptic would say we have to resist everything, that everything is dangerous. At other times, he seems to distinguish the empowering forms of power from those forms that disempower us. He even believes that we can tell them apart, despite our immersion in power. After the events of May '68, for example, Foucault believed that the masses no longer needed the intellectual to gain insight, that "they *know* perfectly well, without illusion… and are certainly capable of expressing themselves". However, he continues, "there exists a system of power which blocks, …and invalidates …this knowledge, a power not only found in the manifest authority of censorship, but one

[62] Contrary to Deleuze's insistence. *Cf.* Deleuze, *Foucault*, p. 101.

that profoundly and subtly penetrates an entire societal network".[64] So even if we can tell the good power from the bad power, this insight is ultimately undercut by power itself.

Foucault's point is that the "bad" form of power is insidious, invisible and extremely dangerous. It is dangerous because it is *totalising,* and because it is totalising, reform is useless. Reform is imposed from the outside in an effort to rectify a situation already entirely enmeshed in totalising power.[65] Revolutionary action, on the other hand, is initiated by those concerned. It occurs when individuals engage "in a struggle that concerns their own interests, whose objectives they clearly understand and whose methods only they can undermine". When we denounce a particular source of power, we also question the totality of power and the hierarchy that maintains it. It is always a "specific struggle against the particularized power" exerted over individuals.[66] But the system cannot be defeated through isolated actions. It is a long struggle; it is repetitive and seemingly incoherent. "But the system it opposes, as well as the power exercised through the system, supplies its unity".[67] And as for what replaces the system, Foucault is quite clear: "to imagine another system is to extend our participation in the present system".[68]

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[63] J. Rajchman, *Michel Foucault. The Freedom of Philosophy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985), p. 38.

[64] Foucault, 'Intellectuals and Power', p. 207.

[65] *Ibid.,* p. 208.

[66] *Ibid.,* pp. 214, 216.

[67] M. Foucault, 'Revolutionary Action: 'Until Now'', in D. F. Bouchard (ed.), *Michel Foucault. Language, Counter-Memory, Practice. Selected Essays & Interviews*, trans. D. F. Bouchard and S. Simon (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1977), pp. 218-233.

[68] *Ibid.,* p. 230.

c. The possibility of politically engaged practices of the self

We are thus left with the individual and with what appears to be his/her singular and repeated acts of resistance with no prospect of ever seeing the promised land. But if we just fight *against* something instead of fighting *for* something, does that not make Foucault's ethics politically inconsequential?

Foucault would never sacrifice the process for the purpose. Politics in its teleological guise leaves a series of victims in its wake: (1) the present is devaluated and ultimately sacrificed in the name of a better future. By being subordinated to some ideal moment in the future, it no longer exists as an autonomous entity; (2) Individual human actions face a similar fate. They are condoned only in as far as they contribute towards realising the political *telos*. The present political struggles that Foucault's advocates, on the other hand, turn on the question, "What are we today?"[69]. "They are a refusal of these abstractions, of economic and ideological state violence that ignores who we are individually, and also a refusal of a scientific or administrative inquisition which determines who one is". If one side of this resistance is to "refuse what we are", the other side is to invent, not discover, who we are by promoting "new forms of subjectivity".[70] He uses genealogy as diagnostic tool, a tool self-consciously situated in the present amidst the very web of power it analyses. It therefore cannot provide an outside point of view and is not interested in sacrificing the present to some future ideal.[71] No promise of a better future can do away with the necessity for resistance in the present. Besides, Foucault considers his ethics as "anti-strategic", as irreducible to

[69] Foucault, 'The Subject and Power', pp. 212, 216; Foucault, 'What is Enlightenment?', p. 34; Lotringer, *Foucault Live,* p. 407; M. Foucault, 'Kant on Enlightenment and Revolution', trans. Colin Gordon, *Economy and Society* **15**(1986)(1), pp. 88-96.

[70] Foucault, 'The Subject and Power', pp. 212, 216.

[71] Hiley, 'Foucault and the Analysis of Power', p. 196.

the question of political success.[72] It is well known, for example, that Foucault supported the Iranian Revolution of 1978-1979. Even though the revolution resulted in new political repression, Foucault refused to dismiss the moral achievement of those responsible for the revolution.[73]

So yes, in the end, Foucault did get trapped in power, but he refused to become an instrument of power[74] by offering normative criteria for distinguishing acceptable from unacceptable forms of power.[75] He got trapped because he, like all of us, has always been trapped. The point is this is not a bad thing. The pervasiveness of power might dispel the myth of autonomous self-creation but it does facilitate heteronomous practices of freedom — a difficult freedom which is not freedom *from* power, but freedom *through* power, despite power and because of power.

5. The crux: substituting ethics for politics?

What can then be said about the relation between ethics and politics? It would seem that despite numerous qualifications the later Foucault's turn to ethics nevertheless amounts to a substitution of ethics for politics[76] — it would appear to leave no room for the possibility of *political* subjectivity. This is meant in two senses: the possibility

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[72] M. Foucault, 'Is it Useless to Revolt?', trans. James Bernauer, *Philosophy and Social Criticism* **8** (1981), pp. 5-9.

[73] G. Gutting (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Foucault* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 144.

[74] Foucault, 'Intellectuals and Power', p. 208.

[75] *Cf.* N. Fraser, 'Foucault on Modern Power: Empirical Insights and Normative Confusions', *Praxis International* **1**(1981)(3), pp. 272-287. Fraser (p. 286) precisely argues that Foucault cannot provide a politically engaged critique of modern forms of power when his analysis has as one of its consequences a suspension of a normative framework for criticising exercises of power.

[76] After all, in an interview Foucault admits that "what interests me is much more morals than politics". However, he immediately qualifies this statement, by adding, "…or, in any case, politics as an ethics" (Foucault, 'Politics and Ethics', p. 375). Ethics in Foucault refers to "the kind of relationship you ought to have with yourself, *rapport à soi*… which determines how the individual is supposed to constitute himself as a moral subject of his own actions (Foucault, 'On the Genealogy of Ethics', p. 352). Morals,

for a subject to effectively act politically, but also, and more importantly, the possibility of a notion of subjectivity which thinks the subject politically, that is, where politics is not "added on" to the subject as an adjunct.

Many critics consider Foucault's aestheticised ethics as individualistic. According to Hiley, for example, self-creation is a feat of individual heroism that Foucault fails to reconcile with a notion of community or polity.[77] And to add insult to injury, Best and Kellner claim that he construes the individual as a peculiarly inefficacious entity, reducing subjectivity from a multidimensional form of agency and practice … to a decentred desiring existence".[78] Moreover, his extremely pessimistic realism allows Foucault to excuse himself from the obligation to work macro-politically.[79] His turn to ethics then substitutes what can only be an *individualised* task of ethics for the political task of *collective* social transformation — which he apparently sees little scope for. But what prevents the individual as ethical subject from engaging in collective practices of mobilisation for reasons other than self-realisation? According to White, Foucault does not promote arts of the self that fashion "juridical" subjects who would be capable of cooperating politically in a polity or social movement.[80] These would be juridical subjects because they would accept the validity of

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on the other hand, entail a set of values and rules of conduct (Foucault, *The History of Sexuality Volume II,* p. 25).

[77] D. R. Hiley, 'Foucault and the Question of Enlightenment', *Philosophy and Social Criticism* **11** (1985), pp. 63-84. Also see Hiley, 'Foucault and the Analysis of Power', p. 206, where he reiterates that Foucault's constant concern for the self induces a withdrawal from politics.

[78] S. Best and D. Kellner, *Postmodern Theory. Critical Interrogations* (Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 1991), p. 290.

[79] Eagleton, *The Ideology of the Aesthetic,* p. 387. According to Eagleton, Foucault's work consequently "represents a kind of negative or inverted ultra-leftism, in which a resolute revolutionary negation is at once clung to and disowned. The dream of liberty must be cherished, but this impulse has fallen, historically speaking, on hard times, and caustically refuses the possibility of its own realization".

[80] S. White, 'Foucault's Challenge to Critical Theory', *American Political Science Review* **80** (1986) (2), pp. 419-432.

consensually and rationally chosen rules and norms.[81] Foucault's insistence on individual acts of resistance would appear to be nothing more than an empty claim that ethics still somehow has political implications whilst having in fact effectively given up on politics. For Foucault explicitly defines liberation as an *ethical* task — a task for the individual rather than the collective. And if it is an expressly ethical task, its supposed political consequences are thrown in doubt. Whatever political purport or potential individual action might have, would have to be "added on" as an afterthought instead of being an intrinsic feature.

To be sure, the subject of Foucault's ethics *is* the individual, but this individual is no longer exclusively the *subject* (in the sense of subordination) of subjectification [*assujetissement*] or what Judith Butler calls "the body" which emerged in *Discipline and Punish* "as a way of taking over the theory of agency previously ascribed to the subject… understood in terms of appropriation and possession".[82] The individual now appears as a node in a network of power/knowledge. Being constituted in and through power, this "individual" is something other or something more than a distinct singularity. Not that Foucault is herewith personifying power and depersonifying or dehumanising persons by making them into effects of power. The individual is still vulnerable to subordinating forces but also invested with the possibility of resistance

[81] To be sure, Foucault is wary of consensus politics, but he never claims that a society can or should function without certain rules and norms (Foucault, 'Politics and Ethics', pp. 377-379). What he questions is "whether the system of constraints in which a society functions leaves individuals the liberty to transform the system… a system of constraint becomes truly intolerable when the individuals who are effected by it don't have the means of modifying it" (pp. 294-295). In M. Foucault, 'Sexual Act, Sexual Choice: Foucault and Homosexuality', in L.D. Kritzman (ed.), *Michel Foucault. Politics, Philosophy, Culture: Interviews and Other Writings 1977-1984*, trans. A. Sheridan et al. (London: Routledge, 1988), pp. 286-303.

[82] J. Butler, 'Bodies and Power, Revisited', *Radical Philosophy* 114 (2002), pp. 13-19.

through subjectivisation [*subjectivation*].[83] For, as we have seen, the subject's entrapment in power renders it far from inefficacious and the all-pervasiveness of power does not give cause for fatalism. "Individual" action, understood as an acting or reacting relation of force, cannot simply remain localised (or be conceived as individualistic) for it has the potential of causing a chain reaction or ripple effect through the social fabric.[84] Foucault's insistence that power is never subjective, that is, that it cannot be reduced to an individual subject's decision or action can also be understood in this light. Moreover, since it is neither localised nor isolated, the individual ethical subject's "practices of liberty" would then also have the potential of effecting larger-scale political changes from the bottom up, and liberation would not only be an ethical but also a political task.[85] In fact, if we are to accept Foucault's claim that power is all-pervasive, the individual's practices of liberty become a necessary condition for political action. In the later Foucault then, politics only becomes possible if ethics succeed.

This reading is furthermore supported by Foucault's preface to the English edition of Deleuze and Guattari's *Anti-oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. Therein Foucault describes what he calls an "Introduction to the Non-Fascist Life", or an ethics based on inherently "de-individualizing" principles: "The individual is the

[83] As Butler points out, the "effect" in Foucault "is not the simple and unilateral consequence of a prior cause. 'Effects' do not stop being affected: they are incessant activities, in the Spinozistic sense. They do not, in this sense, presuppose power as a 'cause'; on the contrary, they recast power as an activity of effectuation with no origin and no end" (*ibid*., p. 19).

[84] To be sure, force relations can either mutually support each other like links in a chain, or be isolated from one another due to disjunctions and contradictions (Foucault, *The History of Sexuality Volume I,* p. 92).

[85] It might be argued that, apart from a few exceptional individuals such as Nelson Mandela, for example, there is little evidence of individual action effecting societal change. This might be due to the fact that few individuals make use of their power to resist. Most people are still tied to the identities around which ethnic, national and racial conflicts are fought. They knowingly or unknowingly choose

product of power. What is needed is to "de-individualize" by means of multiplication and displacement, diverse combinations. The group must not be the organic bond uniting hierarchized individuals, but a constant generator of de-individualization".[86] The centrality of the ethical perspective in Foucault's later work therefore does not signal an abdication of political engagement, but precisely a call for political struggle understood, first and foremost, as a "politics of ourselves".[87]

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to abide by imposed and internalised identities and relinquish the power of subjectivisation. It is, after all, the easier route to take.

[86] M. Foucault, 'Preface', in G. Deleuze and F. Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus. Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1977), pp. xi-xiv.

[87] The expression "politics of ourselves" comes from a lecture "Christianity and confession" that Foucault delivered at Dartmouth College in November 1980 (M. Foucault, 'Christianity and Confession', in S. Lotringer and L. Hochroth (eds.), *Michel Foucault. The Politics of Truth* (New York: Semiotext(e), 1997), pp. 199-236.

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