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Foucault, Critique, Subjectivity

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Andrea Rossi^{1*}

Department of Philosophy, Koç University, Istanbul

This article interprets Foucault's intellectual project by analysing the relation between his understanding of critique and the political conditions of subjectivation out of which it emerged. After reviewing some of the most typical criticisms to Foucault's work (and especially those maintaining that genealogy can only be rooted in a non-genealogical and universal conception of power), the argument shows in what sense he conceived of critique as a form of resistance and how the latter, in turn, was theorized as a force co-extensive to the power it counters. The paper goes on arguing that his theory of resistance is not necessarily to be viewed as a metaphysical representation of the immutable nature of political struggle, but might well be interpreted in performative terms, i.e. as a strategic re-inscription of existing political-discursive formations. More precisely, the analysis shows in what way Foucault's articulation of critique represented an attempt to displace the forms of subjectivation that underpin anthropological thought and the government of the self in the modern age.

Keywords: Michel Foucault; politics of subjectivity; critique; resistance; genealogy; anthropology

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Conversely, acting and reacting in the absence of an idea leads to forms that can be named and explained, and thus generates the idea. ("In the beginning it was the deed".)
(Richter, 2009, p. 159)

In its semantics and etymology, critique indicates a separation, a drifting-apart, a rupture – theoretical as well as practical, present as well as ideal – a dislocation of sight, an estrangement. Critique takes distance, it sets-apart. In order to pass judgement, it moves (or moves what it wishes to take the distance from) to a different place: there is no turning which is not also a new beginning.

Yet, where exactly is this “other” horizon said to reside? From what angle does critique allege to speak? Would this be a safe *topos* – a permanent and secure origin, a secrete spring of everlasting freedom? If so, *who* would be tasked to pinpoint and mark out this place and gauge the *necessary distance* of critique? *Who* is to name this territory and define the threshold beyond which a discourse would qualify as critical?

The questions that I am raising concern the way critique fashions its space of difference – the way it breaks away from its present and its milieu of emergence. If critique is estrangement, this would seem to imply that there is something or somewhere it departs from, but also, surely, *something or somewhere else* it gravitates towards. The issue, then, concerns the separation and difference between these two poles: how far may they be set apart? Who or what would decide over the nature of this difference? Why, after all, should we be persuaded – already – that such distance is necessary and in fact unavoidable?

While grappling with these questions, we invariably feel compelled to define the contours of a “special” region – the radius of thought out of which critique (“as such”, “in itself”) is thought to arise – and accordingly to identify the locale and origin of all critical speaking. That such a place might actually exist, however, is far from self-evident. There is probably no abstract formula capable of securing, once and for all, the roots of critique and, in

any case, I do not believe there to be a site – either individual or collective – from where its questioning ought to originate. After all, would not any attempt at preparing a cartography of critique, at measuring its desired or necessary distance, be utterly uncritical and undaring – if only because its alterity would be contradicted, *ab initio*, by the effort to incorporate its objects into a self-identical form?

My concern here is with the movement – the performative dimension, as it were – by which critique may break with its present, the way it could move beyond the given and its conditions of emergence without the warrant of some pre-critical, sovereign gesture. This essay concerns the possibility for critique and its subject to resist, in spite of the absence of a territory or an “I” to be defended, salvaged or liberated.

It is for this reason that I turn to the work of Michel Foucault. This is not because I believe there to be a hidden truth, buried underneath his genealogies, that would need to be dug out and brought to the light of discourse, but rather because his questioning seems to instantiate one of the most compelling attempts to come to terms with the opacity that underlies the critical task in the present. Foucault was by no means the first thinker to engage the philosophical horizon of his present or, for that matter, to name the obduracy of the critical task. And yet, I find in his work a way of approaching the present which is symptomatic of a quite unique kind of refusal – the refusal to lay down the laws and contents of critique on grounds of their historical inevitability and subjective necessity².

² In a sense at least – to the extent that it embraces an ethos of permanent self-questioning – the whole history and practice of modern critique might be said to exemplify this kind of refusal. It would suffice to mention some of the Frankfurt School’s reflections on critique to illustrate how close they came to Foucault’s for example (cf. Butler 2002, McCarthy, 1990). Yet, could the latter ever have spoken of critique as a manifestation of the “objectivity of truth” (Adorno, 1981, p. 29) or as a strife “for a state of affairs in which there will be no exploitation or oppression, in which an all-embracing subject, namely self-aware mankind, exists” (Horkheimer, 2002, p.241)?

1. The Double Bind of Critique

The critical gesture is an instance of refusal. The way in which governmental and pastoral apparatuses have colonized the horizon of modern politics and thought has produced a counter-movement which, since Kant's time at least, has manifested the agonistic and "polemic" attitude of critique (Foucault 2007a [hereafter PT], pp. 41–81, 147–191; Foucault 2001 [hereafter D&E], II, pp. 1381–97, 1498–1507; Foucault 2008b, pp. 3–40). Modern philosophy is counter-government – detachment from existing forms of subjection, "the art of not being governed quite so much" (PT, p. 45). Deliberately conceived of as a form of counter-conduct – a set of theoretical forays meant to disrupt the very matter of their theorizing – Foucault's project was explicitly thought of in tactical terms. Critique is strategy, a vector within the ampler horizon and limits of political insubordination.³ *Critique is resistance.*

But resistance *to* what and *for* the sake of whom? What political forces is it supposed to mobilize? Why, after all, do we need to invoke the political here? What kind of politics could ever be reclaimed by a discourse that purportedly refuses to set or indicate objectives and common values?⁴

In the last thirty years, a number of critics have pointed to the many conundrums produced by Foucault's ambivalent position, divided as it is between the absolute rejection of any stable "ground" and the defence of the theoretical and ethical value of emancipation. Whereas his anti-humanism appears to crudely deface any moral aspiration, an overt – yet never systematically elaborated – appeal to our capacity for ethics and freedom would seem

³ Contrary to common sense, strategy does not necessarily require the *a priori* definition of a plan or an end. The Greek commander (*stratēgos*) is first of all he who tells and gives the signs (Dillon, 2003). His primary concern is not to set objectives, targets or priorities. There is a playful form of strategy (what, for Derrida, characterizes the ethos of *différance*) that needs no *arkhē* or *telos* and that manifests itself as "calculations without end" (Derrida, 1982, p. 7). As the paper will argue, critique also proceeds by re-arranging and re-inscribing existing discursive and political "signs" (and, in particular, those signs that produce and enfold subjectivity), rather than by identifying and "conquering" new semiotic fields.

⁴ Cf. D&E, II, p. 1495: "The role of an intellectual is not to tell others what they must do".

to pervade his oeuvre. But how could man be liberated, if he is said to have only ever been a phantom of our modern *savoir*? (cf. Foucault 2002 [hereafter OT]) Who is one attempting to set free, and from what? If individual freedom is indeed nothing but a chimera projected by modern apparatuses of subjection (cf., for example, Foucault 2007b, pp. 48–9), how could one conceive of a form of agency able to wrench itself free from the grip of power?

Broadly speaking, one could identify at least two different (and complementary) theoretical strands pursuing this sort of interrogatives in the specialized literature. On the one hand, a number of commentators have stressed how Foucault's reluctance to lay down normative principles eventually led him to a sort of moral impasse – the mark and pinnacle of post-modern scepticism.⁵ His work would appear tainted by a historical determinism making political agency irrelevant, redundant or unreal, precisely to the extent that it fails to delineate – *a priori* – the general horizon of resistance. Individual will would seem to disappear under the weight of omnipresent, all-encompassing epistemic formations (see Jameson, 1991; Wolin, 1986; Taylor, 1984). How, after all, could the “I” manipulate, erode or subvert the very terms of his formation, the constraints imposed by regimes of power/knowledge that occasioned its own existence in the first place? If “the individual is an effect of power” (D&E, II, p. 180), would not agency here only appear as a by-product and spectre of coercion? How could we possibly account for the appearance of subversive forces – decentred and decentring with respect to power?

In a different fashion, other critics have remarked how – far from being immune from the lure of morality – Foucault's genealogies would actually be underpinned by “crypto-normative” assumptions, which he would be either incapable or reluctant to recognize and

⁵ Cf. Taylor, 1984; Fraser, 1981, 1983; McCarthy, 1990; Walzer, 1986; Wolin, 1986. See, in particular, Fraser (1983, p. 68), according to whom Foucault would be unable to provide “some positive, concrete, palpable alternative social vision;” and Walzer (1986, p. 67), for whom the lack of normative principles represents the “catastrophic weakness” of Foucault's project.

which became especially apparent in the implicit universalization of subjectivity that defined his latest production (Habermas, 1986, 1987; Han, 2002, 2003; McCarthy, 1990; Dews 1989). While denouncing the political collusion between “subjectivity” and “freedom”, Foucault allegedly re-instituted a transcendental standpoint (unchained from power and its constraints) from whence to observe the operations of subjection – a position he would either be unable to see or knowingly refuse to avow. The “subject Foucault”, in his theorizing, would place himself on a horizon hovering over the concrete occurring of history (cf. Habermas 1986, 1987; Han 2002, 2003; Dreyfus and Rabinow 1982; Derrida 1978, pp. 41– 2), thus implicitly re-producing – supposedly at a “higher” level – the productive logic of coercion that he criticized. This I take to be the meaning of, among others, Habermas’ remarks about Foucault not thinking “genealogically when it comes to his *own* genealogical historiography”, while still aiming to the “true objectivity of knowledge” (Habermas, 1987, pp. 269, 275).

But does it necessarily follow? Does genealogy have to inhabit an extra-genealogical region in order to dissect power? To put it differently, can a philosophy holding power as a force generating and constraining the conditions of possibility of discourse – of any discourse – of discourse in general – somehow justify its *own* discursive strategies? And on what grounds might such theorizing present itself as a “practice of freedom” (D&E, II, 1527–48)? Within what *limits* might it legitimately do so?

2. The Analytic of Resistance

Despite their differences and specificities, the above two lines of critique might be said to agree in that the explicit theorization of the *subjective* conditions of possibility of resistance ought to underwrite any form of political struggle. To put it differently, they would seem to hold the capacity to establish a set of moral priorities and communicate them in a transparent fashion as the insurmountable horizon of agency, as though political change could not be accounted for without referring to some “pre-political” normative or ontological ground. Their unspoken

presupposition is that there must be – or that, in fact, there always already is – an *outside* to power that explains its *internal* transformations (cf. Butler, 1990, 1997). Foucault’s analyses would thus founder in so far as they refused to reach out to this external mooring and fully to embrace its ethical demand in the struggle against the coercive nature of modern politics.⁶

Yet the belief that an outside is needed in order to “think of” and “make” resistance is – I want to argue – precisely what Foucault sought to demystify, in a way that was neither accidental nor unreflected, but voluntary pursued as a distinctive philosophical ethos. This becomes especially clear when considering the way he thought of critique as a form of resistance that shuns permanent and fixed anchorages. The absence of a “single locus of great Refusal” (Foucault, 1998, pp. 95–6) does not necessarily undermine the reality of struggle. Quite to the contrary, it may render its possibility specific and concrete, in a way that other political ontologies arguably could not.

Consider, for example, Foucault’s account of resistance, as elaborated in *The History of Sexuality Vol. 1* and *Society Must Be Defended* (Foucault, 1998, 2004). Here Foucault explicitly posited that political insubordination emerges out of the *internal* (dis-)articulations of the power/knowledge nexus, rather than through the irruption of *external* forces. His analysis seeks to undo the seemingly necessary tie between epistemic regimes and their effects of subjection, so as to allow identifying the instabilities and critical fractures internal to current discursive and social crystallizations of power (PT, pp. 60–2). This is not to say that the domains of *savoir* and *pouvoir* are antagonistic or incompatible forces that genealogy would simply be tasked to restore to their original purity. It is to suggest, instead, that epistemic regularities can never say *enough* about the concrete ways in which power intersects, appropriates and rests on systems of knowledge. Power is not lodged in discourse,

⁶ In *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, Foucault, for example, stated that: “for the moment my work... far from determining the locus from which it speaks, is avoiding the ground on which it could find support” (quoted in Habermas 1987, p. 278).

as an “essence” is in a “form”.⁷ Epistemic arrangements never dictate in advance “what is legitimate and what is not” (Foucault 1998, p. 100), nor do they impose, by their intrinsic force, a necessary political order. Power is decentred in relation to knowledge: it “is never localized here or there” (Foucault 2004, p. 29) – it does not inhabit truth originally or primordially.

But this also means that power could never secure stable or permanent effects of subjection: in order to attain some form of stability, it must constantly be re-produced and re-enacted or, more precisely, it must *circulate and reproduce itself in its circulation*. Exercising power does not solely consist in laying down linguistic codes of subjection, but also, and more importantly, in enforcing and maintaining – reiteratively – control over the epistemic elements that it institutes (Butler 1990, 1997, 2010). It is precisely in this sense that the analysis of power/knowledge is said to presuppose the “tactical polyvalence of discourse... a series of discontinuous segments whose tactical function is neither uniform nor stable” (Foucault 1998, p.100). The discourses circulated by power and through which power is propagated preserve a sort of “nuclear instability” which makes them capable of exceeding the very forces that construed them: “discourse transmits and produces power; it reinforces it, but also undermines and exposes it, renders it fragile and makes it possible to thwart it” (ibid, p.101). In order to preserve itself, power recursively adjusts itself to the frictions generated by its propagation, without yet ever being able permanently to secure itself against its internal points of resistance.

Because of the uneven circulation of power, heterogeneous elements may come to overlap, be conflated, collide or diverge in such a way that the norms underlying a determinate regime

⁷ Cf. D&E, II, p. 1543: “I absolutely do not want to say that games of truth would just be power relations that I want to mask – that would be a horrendous exaggeration. My problem, as I have already said, is in understanding how games of truth can be set up and be linked to power relations”.

might prompt – by virtue of the openings they engender – internal forms of subversion. Hence, the “rules of continuous variations” set in *The History of Sexuality Vol.1* (p. 99): “relations of power-knowledge are not static forms of distribution, but they are ‘matrices of transformations’”. If discursive elements “can come into play in various strategies”, if “identical formulas” can be reutilized for objectives contrary to those initially intended, resistance, then, will never be “in a condition of exteriority in relation to power”, but would emerge precisely in and through coercion (ibid, p. 95).⁸

Seen from this perspective, the subject of resistance would never appear as a “substance” independent from the relations it is engaged in – the receptor of forces imposed from the “outside” – but it would come into being precisely in the midst of the active transmission of power. *Agency is formed in subjection*, by means of the very cultural codes that sustain the circulation of norms (Butler 1990). Yet this is not to suggest that the subject is perpetually bound to reproduce and transmit, faithfully, the norms that produced it in the first place. The “I”, which for Foucault is nothing but an effect of power, can, under certain circumstances, subvert the very terms of its subjection:

That the subject is that which must be constituted again and again implies that it is open to formations that are not fully constrained in advance... If the subject is a reworking of the very

⁸ Accounts of concrete historical instances of this type of resistance can be found, for example, in D&E, I, 1622-3 (on the body as a site of resistance); D&E, II, 1560-1, (on the subversion of scientific discourses on homosexuality) and Foucault 2007b, pp. 191-232 (on anti-pastoral struggles).

discursive processes by which it is worked, then agency is to be found in the possibilities of resignification opened up by discourse.⁹

The subject is construed in and through the intersection and confrontation between power and discourse; it emerges in the game by which political regimes determine the “grammatical” conditions of possibility that make the “I” capable of recognizing itself as a bearer of agency. And yet, precisely because there is no binding attachment between power and knowledge (since language never establishes, once and for all, the grammar of power, just like the latter is incapable of permanently “colonizing” truth), but only a perpetual struggle of mutual appropriations and dis-possession, the subject born in subjection may come to divert and challenge its very conditions of emergence and the forms of power that sustain it. Resistance, in this sense, is not lodged within an uncorrupted essence, nor can it ever safely be stored into an ideal foundation. It is in the confrontation with its most proximate conditions of existence – within the forces generating and constraining it – that the subject may come to enjoy the “freedom” of refusal. Resistance does not *stand on* the ground of ethics: it rather calls for the permanent *testing of its ethical possibilities* (cf. Caygill, 2013).

3. Impure Critique

It is in this sense that critique, for Foucault, manifests itself as resistance, in so far as it feeds on the very same self-questioning that is also elemental to the exercise of the latter. In this respect, the problem concerning the hierarchy and priority between intellectual and political struggle would appear irrelevant since, despite their heterogeneity, these two activities would

⁹ Butler 1995, p. 135. See also PT, p. 66 “In what way can the effects of coercion characteristic of these positivities ... be reversed or released from within a concrete strategic field, this concrete strategic field that induced them, starting with this decision not to be governed?”

seem to unfold on the very same “polemical” field. And yet, if critique is resistance, it is so in a very peculiar way. Critique does not merely “resist”: it simultaneously puts forward *an understanding of resistance* by virtue of which its very existence may be explained and justified. Critique does not solely incarnate a strategic ethos meant to alter or subvert existing power relations; by laying out a theory of subversion *in general* it also simultaneously spells out the conditions of its own coming into being.

But does not this manifest precisely the sort of conceptual contradictions highlighted by Foucault’s critics? Even allowing that he could effectively account for the general conditions of emergence of resistance, would not such generalization have to rest on a pre-genealogical foundation, an original intuition sustained by a transcendental or supra-historical conscience? Does not the analytic of resistance have to postulate “a will constitutive of truth for *all* times and *all* societies” (Habermas 1987, p. 270) – a universal and *a priori* metaphysics of power?

While Foucault insistently maintained that subjectivity has a history,¹⁰ his specific subject-position as a theoretician would appear to be sheltered from the genealogical rigour that he applied to power – as though his philosophy could effectively access the very universals whose privilege he unfailingly denied. Whilst resistance is said to be inflected in the singular – by history and *qua* contingency – Foucault’s *account of resistance* would have made the precariousness of struggle into an imperishable “value” capable of securing a stable definition of the political. And this, to be sure, would suffice to dismiss Foucault’s critical project *tout court*, not only on grounds of analytical inconsistency, but also – and especially – because of a fundamental ethical impasse. By circumscribing the realm of appearance of resistance, he would have also limited, *a priori*, the scope of political action. Similarly, by dismissing the genealogical conditions of emergence of his theorizing, he would have merely replicated the assault launched by the modern subject against its historicity. Theory would seem to deliberate

¹⁰ Cf. PT, p. 150: “I have tried to get out of the philosophy of the subject through a genealogy of this subject, by studying the constitution of the subject across history which has led us up to the modern concept of the self”.

in a space deprived of temporal gravitation, while exploiting that region in order to posit the universal and unifying laws of power-knowledge.¹¹

To be sure, there could be no definitive rebuff to this criticism, especially given how easily Foucault's discourse slipped into apparently universal or totalizing claims.¹² In a way, the ambiguity of his writing is and remains one of its defining characters and there is arguably no way of recomposing its fragments into a coherent narrative. Yet, I want to argue that it is precisely because this uncertainty is *structural* that one should not concede too quickly that genealogy is a philosophically muddled exercise. Rather than the symptom of theoretical inconsistency, such ambiguity might well betray an implicit (yet consistent) questioning of existing philosophical standards. Hence, while Foucault did indeed draw a "picture" of resistance, this does necessarily mean that such "picture" was a mere "representation", or that this "representation" was meant to fix some everlasting truth (cf. Foucault 1998, p. 102).

If critique is a form of resistance and resistance is said to act by displacing extant forms of subjection, it might well be that the very truth that critique utters about power and resistance also simultaneously enacts a strategy aimed at upsetting the very order that it brings to description. If resistance is *said* to be immanent to power, this very saying (the utterance concerning the "nature" of resistance: a discourse that can but occur in a determinate time and place, "here" and "now") might also be viewed as the result of a contingent coagulation or dispersion of forces, that is, a "mere" event in the history of problematizations, rather than the affirmation of an ever-lasting political truth. Foucault, as seen, explicitly maintained that "the present" – the current constellation of power – is the origin and point of attack of critique.¹³ If this is the case, then, it might be possible to show, in principle, how critique (its fundamental

¹¹ Cf. Han 2002, p. 143: "Power-knowledge, far from being a contingent and historically given configuration, appears here as a metaphysical entity, endowed with a quasi-transcendental function".

¹² Cf., for example, the following statement: "There is no power relation without the correlative constitution of a field of knowledge, nor any knowledge that does not presuppose and constitute at the same time power relations" (Foucault 1979, p. 27, quoted in Han 2002, p. 142).

¹³ Cf. PT 129-143; D&E II, 1381-97, 1498-1507 and, in particular, D&E, II, 1043: "We have to know the historical conditions that motivate different kinds of conceptualizations. We need to have a historical awareness of the situation in which we live".

categories and strategies of intervention) originates out of and against – that is to say, in confrontation with – historically-specific cultural matrices. Critique addresses its present *performatively*: its impurity is the mark of the historical density which it invariably has to traverse.

4. Anthropology

But how to identify *this* present – the present of critique? How to retrieve that field of forces that made the articulation of a theory of power and resistance possible in the first place? Where to locate the confines that critique alleges to transgress? If philosophy is invariably tied to its present, each and all of Foucault’s analyses of scientific rationalities, technologies of power and forms of subjection could undoubtedly provide – each in their own way and within their specific domain – an answer to the question of the conditions of emergence of critique. In this respect, there is not – nor could there be – any privileged entry point from which to unlock the truth of Foucault’s oeuvre in its entirety. Here, accordingly, I can only gesture at a specific analytical “front” – one which I am aware is not the only key to understanding Foucault’s theorization of resistance, but which may still offer some important insights into its essence: I am thinking of the anthropological theme, as elaborated, in particular, in *The Order of Things*.

I read the figure of Man¹⁴ as one of the paradigms of production of modern political subjectivity, both in its “compulsory” and revolutionary forms: a structure of experience that haunts at one and the same time man’s theoretical self-understanding (via the human sciences) and practical self-governing (through biopolitical technologies of rule [Foucault 1979; 2007b; Dillon and Lobo-Guerrero, 2008, 2009]). I thus want to argue that Foucault’s

¹⁴ I capitalize the word ‘man’ when referring to the *epistemic* figure of subjectivation of modern *savoir*.

conception of political struggle is, among other things, a mechanism of de-subjection installed within and against the anthropological machine and that, accordingly, the proclamation of the death of Man is to be read as a counterpoise to the *political* impasse generated by the *aporias* of modern modes of subjectivation (cf. D&E, II, pp. 893–4).

Man – Foucault suggested in *The Order of Things* – is empirically constituted as the negative and finite space circumscribed by the quasi-transcendentals of labour, life and language (OT, pp. 235–329). Whereas early modern subjectivity (what corresponds to Foucault’s classical age, that is, seventeenth and eighteenth century European culture) was typically fashioned by the interplay between a representing subject and the representability of the infinite order of being (ibid, pp. 51–85), modern empirical sciences redefined the “I” as a fragment produced by historical forces, conceived of as the origin and cause of all that which is. Since the late eighteenth century, man has been surrounded and constrained by “opaque” economic, biological and linguistic processes, ones that are thought to hold sway over being in general and human beings in particular. Underneath the visible characters of the existing, labour, life and language opened up an abyss and a profundity that founded the concrete existence of the knowing subject. The quasi-transcendentals define Man’s psychosomatic features in advance of (and independently from) its knowing. They compress the subject into a finite atom of existence, fated to be swept away by the very temporal processes that brought it into being.

Yet, if the forces of finitude are indeed primordial dynamics constituting and exceeding the consciousness of Man, how could the latter ever retrieve their original sense and turn them into objects of scientific inquiry? How could Man ever speak truthfully of its own empirical determinants, if these define all that which Man is not – if they appear precisely as the ‘outside’ of subjectivity? Note how these questions could not yet be formulated within the space of classical *savoir*, in so far as the latter was still underwritten by the pre-given and unquestionable harmony between the object (being, God, nature) and the subject (man) of representation: man, here, could still trust that the cosmos was arranged in such a way that

allowed him to access – partially, and within the limits of his finite understanding – the source of truth (ibid., pp. 335–40). Yet, once this natural concordance was done away with – once that God became “dead” to knowledge, as it were – the problem arose of how the subject could still grasp the reality of his material existence. How could man bring to consciousness the very forces that gave material form to his intellectual faculties? How could he fill up the place left empty by the obliteration of the divine?

Man, Foucault maintained, was made into an empirical-transcendental doublet (ibid., pp. 331–73; see also Foucault, 2008a; Han, 2002, 2003; Deckens, 2000): while still bound to the compass of its factual limitations, the subject was simultaneously called to “embody” a transcendental horizon. Beyond and at the roots of his physiological determinations, it discovered an a-historical, un-productive polarity – an “I” independent of all empirical limitations and endowed with the unmediated perception of its consciousness’ reality. Man thus carved out a transcendental locale from where it could redeem, in the form of self-transparent knowledge (the *cogito*), the “im-proper” time of history to which his empirical existence was said to be subjected (the unthought). Man, at first said to be produced and regulated by the forces of life, labour and language, re-asserted its theoretical sovereignty through the engulfment of those very forces, to the point where it could (ideally) coincide with them and, thus, with itself. The self that emerged out of this configuration embodied the ideal of the Same – the virtual homogeneity of the heterogeneous forces that give Man its form (OT, pp. 370–3; Fortier, 1997, pp. 160–5; Salanskis, 2003, pp. 68–70). This, for Foucault, is what defines modern humanism in general and the human sciences in particular. Their “great eschatological myth” consists of the assumption that

the knowledge [*connaissance*] of man is such that, thanks to it, man could be freed of his alienations, freed of all the determinations of which he was not master, that he could, thanks to this knowledge that he had of himself, become again or become for the first time master and possessor of himself. (D&E, I, p. 691)

The Same, though, is no mere epistemological abstraction. It also concretely fuels modern governmentality, in a way that is foundational to the moment of self-subjection on which biopolitical and economic apparatuses typically revolve.¹⁵ Space does not allow going into the details of how the Same is translated biopolitically. It is nonetheless possible to hint, in passing, at how two of the most characteristic (bio-)economic doctrines of modernity (namely, liberal and Marxist economics) are, in different ways, presupposed precisely on the endeavour to realign the subject, in its ideal freedom, with the forces of production that are thought to determine his biological existence.

This comes most clearly to the fore in Smith's account of valuation, where *homo oeconomicus* is said to be able to assess, from the standpoint of a subjectivity abstracted from all empirical determinations of space and time, the *real value* of the labour that he has or will perform:

Equal quantities of labour, *at all times and places*, may be said to be of equal value to the labourer. In his ordinary state of health, strength and spirits; in the ordinary degree of his skill and dexterity, he must *always* lay down the *same* portion of his ease, his liberty, and his happiness. (Smith 1978, p. 50, emphasis added)

The very same attempt to retrieve the subject's foundational identity, however, might also be found, under a different guise, at the roots of scientific socialism, in so far as the latter is

¹⁵ Cf. Kant's *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, in which moral prescriptions are said to be both independent from the empirical constitution of man and capable of determining his practical conduct in the world: "But such a completely isolated metaphysics of morals mixed with no anthropology [or, as stated later, 'mixed with no alien addition of empirical stimuli'] is not just an indispensable substrate to all theoretical securely determined cognition of duties, but at the same time a desideratum of the highest importance for the actual execution [*wirklichen Vollziehung*] of its prescriptions" (Kant, 2012, 25).

thought of “as the *positive* transcendence of *private property* as *human self-estrangement*, and therefore as the real *appropriation* of the *human* essence by and for man; ... as the complete return of man to himself as *asocial*(i.e., human) being” (Marx 1970, p. 135, emphasis in the original). Political economy, as a privileged matrix of modern governmentality (Foucault 2007b, 2008c), appears as the locale of an experiment in subjectivation – an exercise undertaken in view of Man’s anthropological realization.

However, it is essential to note how this “order of things” is not only defined by its emphasis on the self-realization of subjectivity. More importantly, *Man is given form, concretely, by the recursive and “calculated” failure to produce its self-identity*. The gesture by which the subject is meant to recompose the empirical and the transcendental can never be a definite or irreversible one. The human sciences are somehow doomed to an “essential instability”, to infinitely “create and recreate” the positivity of Man without ever managing “to say what man himself is at the bottom” (OT, pp. 380, 414; D&E, I, p. 687). Modern finitude is deployed “in an interminable cross-reference with itself” (OT, 346). Man is not constituted by the im-mobilization of its “essence”, but by its permanent mobilization for the sake of self-production. It is the projection of its virtual recomposition – rather than the real reappropriation of its “deepest truth” – to keep subjectivity in motion within the empirical-transcendental spiral.

From a temporal point of view, *The Order of Things* frames this question as “the retreat and return of the origin”: the “I” produced by the forces of finitude must take hold, in knowledge, of those very forces that “originated” it, in order to retrieve the *arkhē* of its finite existence (OT, pp. 358–65; cf. also Han, 2005). Modern *savoir* endeavours to crystallize the *contingency* of self-production into an a-temporal life-form which is supposed to coincide – permanently – with its own origins. And yet, the structural impossibility of this exercise is precisely what maintains subjectivity (*qua* production) in place, as enduring precariousness – a precariousness that, however, could hardly ever be lived out as such, as it is systematically concealed by the attempt to overcome and fix it into forms of self-identity. Man inhabits the

time that separates its present from the imminent return of its origins and that dooms it “to that strange, stationary anxiety which forces upon it the duty of repeating repetition” (ibid, p. 364).

In the endeavour to superimpose what is most foreign to itself (the primitive powers of life, labour and language) to the unmediated insight of a foundational “I”, the modern self is set-up and kept into subjection, as a fragile construction, longing for absolute freedom and yet invariably constrained by the ideal of self-mastery that such freedom heralds.

5. Speaking of Resistance

In what way, then – towards what direction and to what effect – could Foucault’s *theory of resistance* be said to reverse the anthropological order set-up by modern governmentality? How does it deflect and re-signify its pre-ordained course?

We are now in the position to show in what sense these questions revolve on *the way* the ‘analytic of resistance’ targets and orchestrates the precariousness that founds the anthropology of subjection. The issue, I want to suggest, concerns how Foucault’s discourse on political struggle – understood as a *contingent* and historically-situated practice – re-inscribes the experience of *contingency* that already underlies the governmental production of the “I”.

As seen, the analytic of finitude institutes a political space that construes a subject permanently caught in the process of attaining its “end”. In a very similar – if not identical – way, the analytic of resistance appears to be predicated on the ontological contingency and instability of power:

so many things can be changed, fragile as they are, linked more to contingencies than to necessities, more to what is arbitrary than to evidence, more to complex but temporary

historical contingencies than to inevitable anthropological constants. (D&E, II, 1001; see also PT, 65, and Foucault 2007b, 119–20)

Is Foucault here envisioning contingency as a universal truth of human experience, thus inadvertently replicating the *aporia* of the analytic finitude? If this were the case, though, why would he define contingency precisely as the opposite of an “anthropological constant”? No doubt, it will always be possible to view this as another instance of Foucault’s logical inconsistency, as though contingency here was only another disguised name for the universal that it sought to suppress. Yet, reading a text according to the axioms of logics is only one among a wealth of interpretative strategies and, in fact, I would suggest that the above statement could reveal something more decisive and essential when read in light of Foucault’s wider intellectual project and his manifold observations about the historicity of knowledge. If political insubordination is said to arise out of the contingency of power relations, this does not necessarily imply that, behind or beneath it, there is a universal, ‘wild’ ontology that is thought to resist all stable formalizations. The ‘strategic analysis of power’ and its emphasis on the precarious nature of subjection might well be a re-inscription of that *historical* constellation that, in the present, regulates the individual as infinite and infinitely-reiterable strive for self-mastery.

In order to clarify this point, it is essential to stress again the way in which the dynamics instituted by the empirical-transcendental doublet *produce the ‘I’ as productivity* – as capacity of, and necessity for, self-making (rather than, for example, as an ego subjected to interdiction or disciplinary normalization). The subject construed by biopower appears as *autonomous activity* geared at the self-realization of the Same. Its emergence, accordingly, unfolds in two moments, whose operations are conceptually distinct, even though in practice they are indistinguishable (cf. Butler, 1997, pp. 14–5; 2002, p. 225). The “I” is “firstly” instituted by the norms that lay down and regulate its coming into presence as a subject, in its potential for self-conduction. The agency so produced, however, would remain “inert” were it not for its capacity actively to set itself at work and measure up to the responsibility for its autonomous self-

making. Seen from this perspective, therefore, processes of subjectivation always contain a moment of “independence” or “liberation” from power – an “opening” where the “I” is left to the “freedom” of its self-making.

This “moment”, as seen, is what defines the contingency of bio-political subjectivation. Yet, I want to argue that this is also, at the same time, the “moment” of critique – its ground and space of resistance. Whereas in regimes of modern governmentality this “space” is saturated by the teleology of the Same, critique redefines it precisely as the “gap” in which the subject can divert the productive energies of agency *against* the very power that originated them. In the mismatch between production and self-production, in the virtual “instant” in which the “I” is left to make itself, there also lies the possibility for it to question the direction of its becoming-subject. The analytic of resistance plays the “game” of subjectivity (its thrusting-forward towards self-transparency) against its original teleology, so that its conditions of subjection are re-signified as potentiality for emancipation. The (codified) instability of identity is thus turned into a site of resistance, one where the ‘I’ can question the necessity of its self-accomplishment and virtual fulfilment. *The precariousness produced by the governmental dispositif is reworked as the possibility of evading the imperative of self-actualization.* The mechanics of governmental subjection – the instability of every “I” that it construes – is made to function as the instrument of their virtual undoing and as the spring of critique itself.¹⁶

Critique arises as the *difference* between the productivity of power and the capacity to restyle the self in ways that could not be evinced from the functioning of existing norms; it *introduces a distance* within the virtual sameness of anthropology and, in fact, it is arguably nothing other than the gesture that sets this distance. In this sense, critique will never be able to posit its norm in advance of its concrete occurrence, as a moral imperative to be achieved

¹⁶ Cf. D&E, II, pp. 893–4 “For me, what needs to be produced is not man as nature would have fashioned him or as his essence prescribes it. We have to produce something that still does not exist and which we cannot know what it will be When I speak of the death of man, I want to put an end to all those who want to fix a rule of production, an essential aim in this production of man by man”.

or retrieved out of what history has forgotten or must yet accomplish. Critique refuses this logic of normation – *this refusal is its force*. To dismiss Foucault’s reluctance to lay down moral standards would thus amount to missing the point that this, in a way, is the very “norm” that founds its ethics. On the other hand, to depict critique as an attempt to unveil the *true* nature of power would be to ignore that critique is first of all a performative and not an ontological exercise.¹⁷ This exercise defines the trajectory of Foucault’s critique as the torsion by which the subject re-problematizes, from within, its conditions of emergence and action. *Critique is the theoretical motion by which the terms of subjectivation that already hold sway over the subject come to be questioned and displaced by that very subject.*¹⁸

But this, I would suggest, is in no way a demand for the egotistic empowerment of the subject of critique. At stake here is not a “cult of the self” or a struggle fought in the name of the inalienable rights of a self-contented individual. To the contrary, the rejection of one’s conditions of subjection is and remains a questioning of the demand for self-realization which fuels and reproduces modern governmentality, and which invariably occludes political action. Critique is a problematization of the “politics of subjectivity” and in no way its glorification. If “one of the main political problems nowadays [is] the politics of ourselves” (PT, p. 190), this does not amount to restoring the individual to its full and inalienable potentialities. The question would rather be the opposite: how could critique shelter politics from the unreasonable imperatives of self-actualization and “compulsory freedom” that it has set for itself, as the aims of a politics of subjectivity?

¹⁷ Cf. PT, p. 60: “one can use two words [power and knowledge] whose function is not to designate entities, powers (*puissances*) or something like transcendentals, but rather to perform a systematic reduction of value for the domains to which they refer, let us say, a neutralization concerning the effects of legitimacy”.

¹⁸ “Critique is the movement by which the subject gives himself the right to question truth on its effects of power and question power on its effects of truth” (PT, p. 47).

Notes on contributor

Andrea Rossi is a Research Fellow in the Department of Philosophy at Koç University, Istanbul. His research lies at the intersection of political theory and continental philosophy, and focuses, in particular, on the archaeology of modern political subjectivity. His most recent publication is ‘The Labour of Subjectivity. Foucault on Biopolitics, Economy, Critique’ (Rowman and Littlefield International, 2015).

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