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Processes of Subjectivation: The Biopolitics and Politics of Literature in the Later Foucault

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Abstract: The last few years saw the publication of the lectures given by Michel Foucault at the Collège de France from 1970-71 until the year of his death, 1984. In May 2015, Éditions du Seuil published *Théories et institutions pénales* (1971-1972), which is the last volume of the series. Knowledge of these published lectures has led to a return to the French thinker's work and to a transformation of the studies on subjectivity and politics both in literary theory and philosophy. The study of his work, in particular of his later theoretical production and of its reception, is therefore necessary and urgent. This special issue attends the influence of the later Foucault's legacy, focusing on the central theme of the processes of subjectivation and what are considered to be its two of the most important roots: the literary and the political.

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Azucena G. BLANCO

Processes of Subjectivation: The Biopolitics and Politics of Literature in the Later Foucault

In his final years, from the *History of Sexuality* onwards, Michel Foucault focused his attention on the processes of subjectivation. This, together with his turn to Graeco-Roman philosophy, could be interpreted as a shift towards traditional philosophy, which he had previously rejected. It might even be seen as a contradiction of his earlier proposals of a critique of the concept of subject as understood in modern philosophy, as ahistorical self-consciousness. However, this proposal is directly connected with his earlier projects and, therefore, by no means invalidates his previous work. As Judith Revel states, "one can only appreciate its importance by anchoring it in his earlier work" (Revel, *Foucault* 221),[1] given that the coherence of Foucault's philosophy requires one to abandon the model of linear legibility and to approach it with a model of "discontinuous" reading, not linear but extremely coherent. Foucault himself explained in 1982 that the question of the processes of subjectivation was in the focus of his work from the beginning: "My objective, instead, has been to create a history of the different modes by which, in our culture, human beings are made subjects" ("Le pouvoir" 297).

This special issue finds in the Foucauldian idea of subjectivation the point of connection between two elements present in Foucault's work, which are apparently not connected yet intertwined: an experience of literature as place of resistance and opening to exteriority with respect to the discourses and languages constituted (present in Foucault's "literary" essays of the 1960s) and thus having an important political nature; and the later idea of a power relations apparatus that enables the opening of "spaces of freedom" in which the creative constitution of subjectivity (an "aesthetics of existence," as Foucault called it) is possible. These two elements, literary and political, undergo reformulations and even corrections over Foucault's intellectual career: the problematization in the seventies of the idea of a radical exteriority, which had been represented by literature; the revival itself of the idea of subjectivity at the end of the seventies, in apparent contradiction to the initial critique of the subject and with the emphasis placed upon the experiences of desubjectivation – such as the literary. Beyond readings that establish periods that Foucault had supposedly abandoned in turn, the reading proposed here considers elements that can make his work intelligible in its *discontinuous* coherence. That makes it possible to understand, through a second phase of reading, given the breaks and possible contradictions, the complexity and richness of the legacy of Foucault's thought. We will thus give special attention to the enriching reading by Gilles Deleuze, which we consider key to the transformation of some concepts of Foucauldian origin, and to their articulation in some of the most important theoretical proposals of the day, such as those found in Judith Butler, Jacques Rancière, Giorgio Agamben, Antonio Negri, Roberto Esposito, and their relation to Deleuze's thinking. This issue aims to study these authors' diverse proposals around the idea of subjectivation, biopolitics and veridiction, and their Foucauldian matrix of origin.

In the sense stated above, of seeking an underlying coherence in his thought, Judith Revel has connected these two roots, literary and political, corresponding to two very different periods of Foucault's career, speaking of a "literary birth of biopolitics" (Revel, "La naissance") in Foucault. In the 1950s and 1960s, several authors (Merleau-Ponty, Derrida, Deleuze, but especially Foucault) found in literature the basis for reworking political thought in which power and resistance were not always opposed but which enabled the contemplation of a possibility of creativity, of resistance, from the very interiority of "the meshes of power", to use Foucault's expression ("Mesh of Power"). Literature is, in this sense, exemplary, because it contains the same problem: literary practice, without ever stepping out of language as it is given, manages to produce novelty, to initiate a meaning that exceeds what was already there before. One can, therefore, consider literature a laboratory in which, since the 1960s, a space of thought is created in Foucault that would later be taken up afresh in the political field.

It is our belief, therefore, that this principle of variation, which is capable of explaining this single project in its discontinuous development, is undertaken in Foucault's thought by the same political-ontological demand, though channelled in different ways. Only in its final stage would this project attain the explicit formulation of an "ontology of the present." In reference to this ontological – although not metaphysical but historical and political – substratum, we address the central question of the processes of subjectivation. We consider that only from this matrix is it possible to understand the political nature of literature as well as the ontological background of biopolitics. This special issue is thus formulated out of this supposition, in two main areas, dedicated to literature and politics.

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[1] Translation is mine, A.B.

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As this historical ontology makes clear, the subject that the later Foucault elaborates is a radically historical subject, constituted as subjection and resistance at the same time. In 2009, in *Commonwealth,* Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri judged that this alternative production of forms of being was at the basis of a political constitution of the subject in Foucault. Their interpretation is related to the concept of a constitutive power formulated out of an unorthodox reading of Marx: this would make it possible to think about a production of subjects that not only resist power but that are simultaneously capable of seeking autonomy with respect to it. As Foucault himself stated in "Le pouvoir, comment s'exerce-t-il?," the relations of power should not be understood as mere relations of domination, but as "agonistic" games where there is room for resistance – that is, in which there is a reversibility, an imbalance of forces, a modification of the established directing of behaviours (315).

Similarly, the definition of the double constitution of subjectivity has been fundamental in the work of Judith Butler. In *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection*, she considers that the movement that explains this subjectivity-subjection comes from a repression of the founding instant of subjectivity as submission, which allows it, as a turn or fold, to construct a paradoxical subjectivity of a consciousness that is determined by a relation of power, of dependency, of subjection. But this origin remains repressed. This repression constitutes the driving force of the subject who submits and who is self-constituted. This step can only be instantaneous, precursor to the subject being developed. More recently, in one of her latest books, *Senses of the Subject*, Butler again takes up this concept in the constitution of the subject, in which power is an active and preceding part: "My point is to suggest that I am already affected before I can say 'I'" (2).

Subjectivity is therefore historically constituted as "event," and not as "substance," as Foucault himself described in a text shortly before his death in 1984, "l'éthique du souci de soi comme pratique de la liberté". As Thomas McCarthy expressed it, in Foucault the subject is defined as *constitutum* and not *constituens* ("The Critique of Impure Reason" 62). Or, in Deleuze's words, as "derived function" (*Foucault* 139). In 1982, Foucault declared: "my objective, instead, has been to create a history of the different modes by which, in our culture, human beings are made subjects. My work has dealt with three modes of objectification which transform human beings into subjects" ("Le pouvoir" 297). The three modes he refers to are: the epistemological, in which the human being becomes an object of knowledge; the normative-political, in which she receives a subjective identity through her objectification by the work of coercive practices or power relations; and the ethical, which holds Foucault's gaze in this last phase, in which the human being is transformed into subject by the relation that she establishes with herself through certain practices or techniques of self. The new emphasis in the question of the subject is present from the second volume onwards of the *History of Sexuality: The Use of Pleasure* and in the Collège de France lectures from 1979, as well as in other relevant places, such as the 1982 Vermont lectures, *Technologies of the Self*. The historical ontology is here specified as a project of a history of subjectivity undertaken through the guiding thread of the analysis of the practices that the individual puts into play in her self-constitution as subject based on the study of certain techniques of existence in Foucault's analyses of the Stoics (techniques of life or self-government, related with the care of the self). In these, the subject is converted into object for herself, such as the examination of the soul, the interpretation of dreams, ascetic practices in relation to the free use of the pleasures, meditation on death, self-writing, etcetera. Using the privileged example of the Greeks, he explores the constitution of subjectivity as derived from, or product of, knowledge-power (that is, of an exteriority that is, ultimately, that of historical events and practices). He shows how this constitution can be actively redirected using the "spaces of freedom" that those apparatuses enable, toward new forms of subjectivity not imposed by them but rather the result of the exercise of self upon the self and constitutive of "nuclei of resistance" (Deleuze, *Foucault* 136-138). His work on the Greeks, as shown by Frédéric Gros and Carlos Lévy in *Foucault et la philosophie antique* (Foucault and Ancient Philosophy) and *Foucault: Le courage de la verité* (Foucault: Courage of Truth), allows him to retake the political field starting with the question about the constitution of the subject ("Who are we?"). That is, subjectivity not as a space of interior spontaneity, sovereign with respect to the exteriority of material practices, but as a folding of the outside that defines an "inside of thought". The new depth that the question of the subject acquires, as Deleuze has observed in his *Foucault*, lies in that now Foucault discovers the space of possibility of a "power of the truth" different from the "truth of power." This space of possibility is derived from his earlier analytics of power and, although it does not overcome or annul it, presents the possibility of thought as the inside *of* the outside – as a fold, in the words of Deleuze. Foucault's interest, in his later years, in the processes of subjectivation is not, therefore, the return to the modern idea of the subject that had been abandoned in the previous stages of his thought. Rather it is the deepening in the relations between the idea of the subject, the idea of truth and the concept of power, with profound repercussions in what we consider a Foucauldian "politics of literature."

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The relevance of our focus lies, firstly, in interpreting the later Foucault's concept of subject in continuity with the anti-metaphysical and anti-humanist suppositions of his earlier thought, rejecting that this is a relapse in a substantial and idealistic concept of subjectivity as interior spontaneity and an abandonment of the problems of power to which he had devoted his recent efforts. According to Foucault, subjection and subjectivity emerge at the same time as the appearance of the subject, as Negri and Butler, among others, have highlighted. This is possible because in the Foucauldian subject there is no opposition between interiority and exteriority. In this way, the very constitution of the subject is produced as a political gesture in which power and life are inseparable. We therefore distance ourselves from the critiques that have seen a shift towards neoliberalism in the genealogy of the ethics of self, or, in Slavoj Žižek's words, towards the "humanist-elitist" tradition: "Foucault's notion of the subject is, rather, a classical one: subject as the power of self-mediation and harmonizing the antagonistic forces, as a way of mastering the 'use of pleasures' through a restoration of the image of self" (*The Sublime Object of Ideology* 24).

Secondly, our focus contributes the new idea that only by examining the double root, literary and political, concerning the common supposition of historical ontology can Foucault's proposal be properly understood, and thus to interpret the reach of his legacy in the thinkers who are developing it today.

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