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Foucault and Critique: Guest Editor's Introduction to Foucault Circle Selection

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Foucault Studies

FOUCAULT CIRCLE SELECTION

Introduction

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During the annual meeting of the Foucault Circle, Foucault scholars gather to present papers, discuss texts, and engage in lively conversation about the most recent Foucault scholarship. Often the gathering has a theme. The 2012 Foucault Circle in Buffalo, NY, for example, focused on Foucault and prisons. Participants discussed a common reading, documents from the *Groupe d'Information sur les Prisons (G.I.P.*), edited by Kevin Thompson and translated by Perry A. Zurn. While the June 2013 conference in Malmö, Sweden did not have an explicit theme, the scope and breadth of papers presented was exciting, and the venue was spectacular. This was the first meeting of the Foucault Circle outside of North America, and it was notable for the number of participants from different countries—indeed, from different continents (Europe, North America, South America, Australia). And, while there was still a predominance of philosophers present, the conference was robustly interdisciplinary. The next Foucault Circle will take place June 29-July 2, 2016 in Sydney, Australia.

This special section includes three papers (now expanded and revised as articles) that provide a snapshot of the range of work presented at the 2013 Foucault Circle meeting in Malmö. Each author shows that Foucault's method of critique is subversive and non-normalizing.

In a lecture he presented at the French Society of Philosophy in May of 1978,[1] Foucault describes critique as emerging within, and as a response to, sociopolitical developments taking place in 15th and 16th century Europe. Two defining aspects of the 15th and 16th centuries, Foucault argues, are "state centralization on the one hand and […] dispersion and religious dissidence [specifically, the Reformation and Counter-Reformation] on the other."[2] It's not surprising that this restructuring within the state and the church prompts a renegotiation of the relationship between

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[1] Michel Foucault, *The Politics of Truth*, edited by Sylvere Lotringer and Lysa Hochroth (New York: Semiotexte, 1997), 238.

[2] Michel Foucault, "Governmentality," in Graham Burchell, Colin Gordon, and Peter Miller (eds.), *The Foucault Effect: Studies in Governmentality* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 88.

these two sources of authority within society. This historical shift gives rise to a concern with, and the development of, techniques for what Foucault refers to as "government." For Foucault, government includes but is not limited to the administration of a state and its people by a ruler. It also exists as a more general concern about how to direct the conduct of individuals, on the one hand, and manage populations, on the other. Government as a "general problem," he asserts, pertains to "the government of oneself […] the problem of personal conduct, the government of souls and lives" as well as to "the government of children,"[3] "beggars and the poor," "families" and "armies."[4] Foucault argues that at this time, one can observe a preoccupation with questions about "[h]ow to govern oneself, how to be governed, how to govern others, by whom the people will accept being governed, [and] how to become the best possible governor."[5]

Foucault sees techniques for governing originating within the context of the Christian pastoral, specifically in the relationship through which persons are guided toward salvation by another or others to whom they subordinate themselves.[6] Within this "salvation-oriented" relationship, the subordinate individual must accept certain externally generated truths, such as religious dogma; at the same time, she or he is also obliged to submit to, and participate in, "reflective" techniques, "general rules, particular knowledge, precepts, methods of examination, confessions, [and] interviews," which persons "deployed" in order to access and reveal the truth about themselves.[7] As Foucault describes it, both the ultimate truth of salvation and the truth about oneself are therefore attainable only by way of obedience—through, on the one hand, internalizing the particular teachings and doctrines of the authority figure and, on the other, by submitting oneself to that authority in order to produce the "special and individualizing knowledge of individuals."[8]

Foucault is describing here the process through which one is constituted (by external norms, values, and relationships) and constitutes oneself (by way of self-examination) as a subject, a process that is clearly characterized by the interconnection of obedience and truth. Insofar as this type of relationship comes to permeate modern societies, it makes sense that Foucault would later identify it as the basis for the modern hermeneutics of the self and describe the obedience (internalized as obedience to one's own reason) that characterizes it as permanent. Henceforth, the process through which one constitutes oneself as a subject—through which one both accesses and reveals the truth about oneself—occurs within the context of a relationship of permanent obedience, where obedience is characterized by self-sacrifice.

It's clear that governmentalizing relationships as Foucault describes them are relations of power. Indeed, Foucault describes "governmentality" not as a distinct type of power but rather as

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[3] Foucault, "Governmentality," 87.

[4] Foucault, "What is Critique?," 27.

[5] Ibid.

[6] Foucault, "What is Critique?"

[7] Ibid, 26.

[8] Ibid.

a set of techniques that function in the service of both disciplinary power and biopower.[9] Critique, on his view, facilitates negotiation of governmentalizing relationships in ways that do not (re)produce self-sacrifice, direction, and management. In fact, Foucault argues that critique emerges in response, and is inextricably linked to, the spread of governmentalizing techniques: it reflects and in turn asserts concern with the question of "how not to be governed."[10] Rather than presenting itself as a simple opposition to the art of governing, this question reflects a concern with how to navigate a context characterized by governmentalization in ways that expand the field of possible courses of action and modes of thought. This response does not (nor does it aim to) avoid or release persons from governance; instead, it gives rise to a different kind of "art," which Foucault calls the "art of not being governed quite so much […] [of not being governed] *like that*, by that, in the name of those principles, with such and such an objective in mind and by means of such procedures, not like that, not for that, not by them."[11] If governmentalization is the "movement through which individuals are subjugated in the reality of a social practice through mechanisms of power that adhere to a truth," Foucauldian critique functions as the "movement by which the subject gives himself the right to question truth on its effects of power and question power on its discourses of truth."[12]

This response to governmentality, then, might also be referred to as an "art of navigating power relations." Such navigation, of course, constitutes the practice of freedom as Foucault conceives of it. Given that power and freedom are mutually constitutive for Foucault, he sees freedom as the ability to engage power relations in ways that mediate against and attempt to minimize constraints (such as direction and management) while maximizing capacities. This ability shows that persons are not determined by power; it is not that one set of norms and practices holds them in intractable states of obedience, subordination, or domination while another facilitates their emancipation. Rather, subjects are simultaneously constituted as such and subjugated by the same norms and practices, a situation that may complicate, but does not destroy, possibilities for either freedom or subjectivity. The fact that critique is possible not in spite of, but precisely due to governmentalization—that it is not distinct from but emerges out of, and in response to, a context in which obedience and truth are interconnected—is consistent with Foucault's view that persons do not constitute themselves as solely autonomous or obedient subjects, but rather as both simultaneously. Insofar as this is the case, subjects can "give themselves the right" to critique, a right which is, at the same time, always constrained and which is exercised within a context of constraint.

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[9] Foucault, "Governmentality." While Foucault makes clear that disciplinary power and biopower are characteristic of modern western societies, he also makes it clear that they don't simply "replace" sovereign power: "[W]e need to see things not in terms of the replacement of a society of sovereignty by a disciplinary society and the subsequent replacement of a disciplinary society by a society of government; in reality one has a triangle, sovereignty-discipline-government" (Ibid., 102).

[10] Foucault, "What is Critique?," 28.

[11] Ibid, 29.

[12] Ibid, 32.

In sum, Foucauldian critique—as both philosophical method and self-relational attitude—responds to an historical context in which the subject's relationships to itself, others, and truth are relationships of obedience and, as such, are relations of (normalizing) power. Critique constitutes a way of engaging such a context that does not validate prevailing norms and relations of power, but rather inquires into how the current state of affairs came into being, asserts that things can be different, endeavors to create conditions for the possibility of change, and actively cultivates alternatives. It is, in other words, a characteristically *dis*obedient, "insubordinate […] desubjugation of the subject."[13]

Each of the articles in this special section engages with Foucault's work politically. Lynne Huffer's, "Foucault's Fossils: Life Itself and the Return to Nature in Feminist Philosophy," demonstrates that Foucault's genealogical method undermines and disrupts our settled notions of metaphysical and ontological categories. In "Foucault, Laughter, and Gendered Normalization," Emily Douglas examines laughter as a tool of feminist resistance; transgressive laughter disrupts gender norms. Heike Schotten's article, "Against Totalitarianism: Agamben, Foucault, and the Politics of Critique," shows how Foucault's genealogical method can disrupt settled notions of the State, totalitarianism, and morality; this opens up space for emancipatory possibilities.

In "Foucault's Fossils: Life Itself and the Return to Nature in Feminist Philosophy," Lynne Huffer examines the turn to nature in recent feminist philosophy. She argues that the return to the notion of "life itself" by contemporary feminist philosophers leaves unexamined questions of origin. While they hope to construct a posthumanist feminist ethics that does not rely on embattled notions of social constructionism, epistemology and subjectivity, Huffer argues that this return to nature by feminist philosophers has unexplored implications for subjectivity and ethics. Focusing on recent work by Elizabeth Grosz and Judith Butler, Huffer identifies two distinct ways that feminists have turned to nature. Grosz re-naturalizes through developing a Darwinian understanding of nature as dynamic and self-differentiating, whereas Butler is viewed as de-naturalizer because of her focus on matter as discursive. However, Huffer points out that Butler's later work often refers to life or life itself as an unintelligible force. Thus, feminist re-naturalizers and feminist de-naturalizers both end up relying on life as a primary concept from which to build a posthumanist ethics.

Huffer claims that the return to nature advocated by these contemporary feminists runs the risk of "universalizing the historically contingent frames of our present world as a new metaphysics of life," doing so, she argues undermines their project of conceiving of a posthumanist subject because it relies on assumptions that connect "life itself" to the human, and consequently does not successfully escape the humanism paradigm. Huffer offers the metaphor of the fossil, demonstrating how Foucault's discussion of fossils and monsters in *The Order of Things* disrupts the frame of life itself as well as humanism. Using Foucault's method of critique and bringing together several of his texts, *The Lives of Infamous Men, Abnormals*, and *The Order of Things*, Huffer convincingly shows that a Foucauldian analysis of the recent return to nature in some contempo-

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[13] Foucault, "What is Critique?" 32.

rary feminist philosophy simply repeats a return to metaphysics and origins that feminists and other critically minded contemporary theorists have attempted to reject.

Emily Douglas, in "Foucault, Laughter, and Gendered Normalization," looks at the transgressive possibilities of laughter for feminists. She begins by pointing out the few places in his work where Foucault explicitly talked about laughter, as well as his own laughter in response to an interview question, and during his lectures at the College de France. She notes that Foucault both used laughter as trangressive, for example, to shatter expectations about gender and sexuality binaries, and claimed that laughter was powerful. Laughter, as a bodily phenomenon, is normalized and gendered. Douglas draws on feminist Foucauldian and phenomenological analyses of female bodily comportment and gender normalization to show how the disciplining of the feminine body restricts (or sometimes compels) women's laughter. Women are sometimes expected or compelled to laugh, and other times prohibited from laughing. In the times and places women are "allowed" to laugh, how they laugh is also regulated: quietly, without too much bodily movement, and in a feminine way—no guffaws or belly laughs.

Having shown that laughter is a significant site of normalization and discipline, particularly for the reinforcement of gender norms, Douglas argues that feminists can and should use laughter transgressively to disrupt normalizing, gender specific expectations and bodily practices. She suggests three ways that feminists can use laughter "to produce anti-normalizing effects: i) laughing when we usually wouldn't; ii) changing our comportment during laughter; and iii) disrupting compulsory laughter (unlaughing)." Each of these is a way of "laughing differently," a way to disrupt the normalized and normalizing gendered expectations and prescriptions that women face daily. She concludes by proposing a feminist *askesis* of laughter whereby feminists engage in these transgressive forms of laughter not only to disrupt the expectations and restrictions around laughing, but also to engage in transgressive laughing as a way to re-make our subjectivity.

Heike Schotten's article, "Against Totalitarianism: Agamben, Foucault, and the Politics of Critique," is both a critical response to Georgio Agamben and a positive valuation of the emancipatory potential of Foucauldian critique. According to Schotten, Agamben's work in *Homo Sacer* does not, as Agamben asserts, productively engage with Foucault's work by correcting his notion of biopower. Instead, Schotten argues, Agamben conducts a moralizing "disciplining" of Foucault. Because Agamben adheres to a rigidly defined and ahistorical notion of biopower within which Nazism generally and the Holocaust more specifically figure centrally, Schotten contends, he can only see the lack of centrality of these phenomena in Foucault's own conceptualization as a failure.

Contra Agamben, Schotten shows, on the one hand, that Foucauldian genealogy is a "methodological choice," the utilization of which leads Foucault to develop a conceptualization of biopower that simply rejects the premises of Agamben's. On the other hand, she shows that Foucauldian genealogy reflects Foucault's political commitments to countering the kind of normalizing, absolutist, and universalizing perspective reflected in Agamben's work. That is, through illustrating the historically contingent nature of biopower, Foucault makes clear that its normaliz-

ing effects need not be uncritically accepted. For Schotten, then, the critical perspective inherent within Foucauldian genealogy opens onto emancipatory possibilities that Agamben's forecloses. She focuses specifically on ways in which genealogy's assertion of what Foucault refers to as "subjugated knowledges" functions to disrupt prevailing modes of thought and existence. Schotten draws attention to the irony of Agamben's explicit claim to speak on behalf of the oppressed and his criticism of Foucault for failing to do so when in fact Foucault's work, as she sees it, both stems from and more effectively cultivates the practice of freedom. "As the method of unearthing subjugated knowledges," Schotten writes, genealogy "is the method of critique, the grounds for a constant and insurrectionary challenge to 'what is'."

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