

Ethics and Politics *

(Abstract)

From a certain perspective, any alignment of ethics with politics may seem unusual. Politics, as “a mere continuation of war by other means” (Clausewitz reversed), instead of accommodating with ethics, actually rejects it. But when does ethics follow a political line? Michel Foucault wrote about a political history of truth, of knowledge and in his later works he even discussed the politics of the self as a project of a practical philosophy. In order to reconfigure the governmental rationality we must start with an ethical background within which we live. Since the current form of power that governs us is extremely complex, having political economy as a form of knowledge, security devices as a tool and population as a target, a new ethics with a power of a sudden emergency is required. His aesthetic theorizations about the self care have an explicitly political character, re-defining identity as a site for cultural resistance and individual autonomy that might pave the way to freedom. Therefore, the researches on social practices that Foucault has done during his lifetime and also his conclusions should be used by the leaders of society in order to ground it.

Keywords Foucault, ethics, politics, self care, government, *parrhêsia*

Foucault's words in 1982 when he gave the lecture on *The Hermeneutics of the Subject* were:

“(…) je pense qu'il y a à soupçonner quelque chose qui serait une impossibilité à constituer aujourd'hui une éthique du soi, alors que c'est peut-être une tâche urgente, fondamentale, politiquement indispensable, que de constituer une éthique du soi, s'il est vrai après tout qu'il n'y a pas d'autre point, premier et ultime, de résistance au pouvoir politique que dans le rapport de soi à soi”¹.

Since then and until 1984, the year when Foucault passed away, he has written those works that would later on be named *The Late Foucault*, meaning the

ethical turn of his thinking. But what did Foucault understand by the ethics of the self? And even further, how do these ideas lead to praxis, and to politics?

Foucault starts from the questioning of modernity, of the *Aufklärung*, ascertaining that we are still caught in its layout. But rather than seeking a way out from the narrow frame of the Enlightenment, Foucault wants a withdrawal within these limits, that cannot be exceeded, since they are “the contingency that has made us be what we are, (...) the possibility that we can <http://dyntabu.blogspot.com/> not be, the possibility of not doing and not thinking what we are doing and thinking”². Over the body of Kantian interrogations, Foucault borrows the ethics's outfit. *Aufklärung* is not only a historical period, but an attitude, by “attitude”

* *Acknowledgements*: This study is the result of a research activity financed by the project POSDRU/6/1.5/G/14722.

¹ Michel Foucault, *Herméneutique du sujet*, Gallimard-Seuil, Paris, 2001, p. 234

² Michel Foucault, “Ce sunt Luminile?”, in *Ce este un autor?*, Idea Design&Print, Cluj, 2004 p. 76

meaning “the current way of reporting to the present”³, an *ethos*, which names ways of thinking, feeling and acting.

Thus, Foucault still places us within modernity, which is governed by the rationality of the Enlightenment project. Here he declares our identity as subjects, because the way we exist today is thus given by the process of subjectification. Foucault says that the stake of his preoccupations is to “demonstrate the historical formation of a subject of knowledge through a speech given as a set of strategies that are part of our social practices”⁴. Therefore, he will run the entire spectrum of modern subjectivity as it appears in the field of the social practices, each social practice having its correspondent discursive practice. Thus, the mad man as subject, before *Le grand renfermement* (as Foucault calls it that is setting the General Hospital in France in 1656), does not exist. Once established as an institution, he will embody different discourses resulting in psychiatry, psychopathology treaties, etc. And this is just an example. The same thing happens with the criminal subject, or the ill subject, etc.

By defining subjectivity as “the way how the subject makes the self experience within a game of truth by which he reports at himself”⁵, Foucault emphasizes the relation between truth and subject. The truth is permanently in a relation, because, as Foucault says, the truth itself is a relation, and not the ultimate level of reality that the subject must reach. Thus, every time Foucault talks about the subject, about a modality of subjectification, he also talks about the truth. Each subject is accompanied by his truth like a shadow,

a truth that is revealed because of the other, as a result of power relation: “the closing of the subject in the strait jacket of the truth”, as Fr. Gros says.

The experience of desubjectification ultimately sends us to ethics, to the foundation of an ethical concept of subjectivity. Foucault defines ethics as “the type of relationship that you must have with yourself, as a moral issue of your own actions”. The history of the moral subject draws us back until the age of the Ancient Greece. Then we encounter a culture of self, those practices having as a task the *téchne tou biou* that means aesthetics of existence, the construction of the self, seen as a work of art. By comparison, the contemporary culture of the self, where the self should be discovered in its truth, beyond any possible alienation, is nothing more than a reversal.

The Foucauldian reflective approach has a practical dimension, because it is not about the self in the texts of the French thinker, but it is about the relationship of the self with itself, it’s about a history of the forms and modalities of one’s relation to the self by which the individual constitutes and recognizes himself qua subject, it is then a true politics of the self⁶. The way of the self to itself goes through the other.

The question is how much of itself goes with the other and vice versa. There is the same report between the self and itself, and between the self and the other. This fact reveals a relationship of power: “We are the others to the very extent that we actually accept this power game”⁷.

³ ibidem, p. 70.

⁴ Michel Foucault, *Adevărul și practicile juridice*, Editura Idea Design&Print, Cluj, 2004, p. 93.

⁵ Michel Foucault, “Theatrum philosophicum”, Editura Casa Cărții de Știință, Cluj-Napoca, 2001, p. 248.

⁶ Frédéric Gros, , “Le souci de soi chez Michel Foucault. A review of «The Hermeneutics of the Subject»: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1981–1982”, in *Philosophy Social Criticism* 2005; 31; 697, p. 700.

⁷ Michel Foucault, *Adevărul și formele juridice*, Editura Idea Design&Print, Cluj, 2004 ,p. 160.

This self-other report, set by power relationships, is best illustrated by Foucault's discussion of the Oedipal figure of the ancient tragedy of Sophocles, "King Oedipus". The French philosopher's hermeneutics starts with the following denounce: Western political power, from Plato onwards, by setting the Platonic political project, is "monumentally blind". It is based on the belief in an invincible antinomy between knowledge and power. Foucault states that we have to destroy the great myth which states that truth does not ever belong to political power. The first to say it was in fact Nietzsche.

By analysing the Oedipal figure, Foucault argues that Oedipus, the exponent of a political power, is the one who knew everything, even holding an exceeding technical knowledge (he kills Fate, solves the mysteries of the Sphinx, all these in order to be able to gain political power). But by "(...) knowing too much, he [actually] knew nothing".

"Oedipus is the man of excess: the man who has everything and even more: in his power, in his knowledge, in his family, in his sexuality"⁸. However, this power holder, knowing everything, did not manage to know himself. And when he finds himself he loses his power. Moreover, the gesture of removing his eyes with a deep symbolic meaning is not a self-imposed punishment, but a false re-affirmation of the self. At the end of the play, Oedipus is blind because he saw himself from the outside; and this look is like an outer truth which he does not recognize. It's a different truth, not his. A truth which he sees subdued, but which he refuses to see by removing his eyes. So, it is a truth outside of him, and it takes Oedipus into possession with a strong power of non-existent reality; his

gesture of rebellion, his act of resistance is the fact that he "becomes" blind. In fact, Oedipus is not self-mutilated in order to fulfil a promise made to the citizens of Thebes, but he reiterates himself, as the one that he was before his blindness, before knowing the truth of himself, as the power holder. Oedipus "deserved" to lose his power. And this is because his power was based on incomplete knowledge, which did not include the self-knowledge moment. This is the "key" to the metaphor of Oedipus in the foucauldian interpretation: in order to know how to govern the others, you need to know how to govern yourself.

Following Nietzsche, Foucault says that "political power is not absent from [the sphere of] knowledge, [but] it is interwoven with knowledge"⁹. Among the features of power, the fact that it is related to knowledge is prevalent, representing its conceptual shadow: "No power is exercised without the extraction, appropriation, distribution and retention of knowledge"¹⁰. So, political excellence requires, first, a self-finding, which sends us to an ethico-political foucauldian project conceived as a critique of the entire Western thinking from Plato to Nietzsche. This project states that wisdom and political function are incompatible: one is either philosopher or king. Therefore, Foucault will diagnose our civilization with a real "oedipal complex", not, however, psychoanalytical, but one related to the issue of power/ knowledge, as in "King Oedipus", in which Sophocles is not talking about incest, but he is talking about establishing truth and about power.

The "upside down" image of Oedipus is the figure of Diogenes the Cynical, the true king, in fact the anti-king, who de-

⁸ idem

⁹ idem

¹⁰ David Macey, *Michel Foucault*, Gallimard, Paris, 1994, p. 264

nounces the illusion of political royalty. He has as an emblem the cynical *parrhêsia*; he is the prophet of *parrhêsia* (the courage of truth), because cynicism is a form of philosophy which closely reunites “telling the truth” and self-care. *Parrhêsia* is a political notion. It is neither freedom of speech, broadly speaking, nor honesty. It is much more than that. It has deep political roots in the Athenian democracy and it also has moral consequences¹¹. The epistemological discourse of *parrhêsia* is an analysis that points at the paradigm of thinking of the ancient world. The structure of this type of discourse involves the moral qualities of both the issuer and the receiver. It focuses on the qualities of courage: the *Parrhêsias*’s courage to tell the truth, and the courage to accept it:

“La *parrhêsia* est, donc, en deux mots, le courage de la vérité chez celui qui parle et prend le risque de dire, en dépit de tout, tout la vérité qu’il pense, mais c’est aussi le courage de l’interlocuteur qui accepte de recevoir comme vraie la vérité blessante qu’il entend”¹².

It has an agonistic structure, as Foucault often said. As for the compatibility between *parrhêsia* and the ancient democracy, Foucault observes that the democratic institutions cannot find a place for *parrhêsia*, because they lack what he calls “ethical difference”. He considers it to be a crucial aspect of Greek political philosophy. This principle is set to individualize someone among the social and political actors, making him or her fit to lead; but it is the difference made by truth, or truth as difference. To the extent that political actors constitute themselves as ethical subjects, they can have excellence in politics.

The Cynical practices self-sacrifice, in order to have power when dealing with the others. His mission is like a medication given to humanity, but the patient is compelled to take his treatment, since the cynical’s mission is polemical by its nature. The Cynical raises the problem of a different way of life, a true way or “la vie autre”, the cynicism itself being *le scandale vivant de la vérité*. Foucault speaks about the cynical-king as a militant fighter:

“Le combat cynique est un combat, une agression explicite, volontaire et constante qui s’adresse à l’humanité en général, à l’humanité dans sa vie réelle avec comme horizon ou objectif de la changer, la changer dans son attitude morale (son *êthos*) mais, en même temps et par là-même, la changer dans ses habitudes, ses conventions, ses manières de vivre”¹³.

This other way of being is focused on the relation with the other, but this relationship is not seen as an easy alternative, among others, but as a battle in the distance who sees another life, another world. So, you need to know to govern yourself in order to govern effectively others, and this self-care is an intensification of the relations with others.

Foucault today

How should we read Foucault's texts today? What relevance do they have to our present, or to our future? He himself says “I would like my books to be a kind of tool-box which others can rummage through to find a tool which they can use however they wish in their own area..”¹⁴. The most important legacy lies in the fact that Foucault has shown us that everything is political, whereas the balance of power is omnipresent.

¹¹ Michel Foucault, *Le courage de la vérité*, Gallimard, Seuil, Paris, 2009, p. 5

¹² *ibidem*, p. 14.

¹³ *ibidem*, p. 258.

¹⁴ Michel Foucault, *Dits et Ecrits*, t. II. Paris: Gallimard, 1994, pp. 523-524.

“If politics, according to the received wisdom, is the art/science of governance, if governance is the directing of power relationships, and if power, for Foucault, is all-pervasive, then so is the «political»: every facet of human life carries a political dimension and stands subject to «political» analysis”¹⁵.

In some of his texts, Foucault speaks of a “reinvention of politics”, of new, original forms, of political creativity and imagination resuscitated. This program does not hide at its back an unfinished project of a practical philosophy, but also paves the way of a political innovation and experimentation. What has been most often criticized at Foucault's program is precisely this lack of non-theory, the fact that his affiliation to Nietzsche leads to a dead end (after American commentator Charles Taylor) or to aporia (after Habermas). So to say that Foucault passes as *un*-political, if not *anti*-political. But the “project” has arrived from valuing foucauldian political struggle¹⁶, the descriptive analysis of how we govern each other and ourselves, seen “as a pro-paedeutic to suggesting «new options, new possibilities» in the social realm-what we might characterize as the politics of suggestion and exemplification rather than of prescription and legitimation”¹⁷. We might speak of an approach of political philosophy, seen as a critical activity, as James Tully said, because of Foucault's “categorical imperative” is that of a continuous problematization:

“These philosophical investigations [are] thus in a reciprocal relation to the present, as a

kind of permanent critique of the relations of meaning, power and subjectivity in which we think and act politically and the practices of freedom of thought and action by which we try to test and improve them”¹⁸.

But we might also speak of a practical activity, as Mark E. G. Kelly said:

“It is thus not a political philosophy that seeks to prescribe politically on the basis of abstract reasoning, but rather a philosophy that attempts to understand politics while at the same time consciously undertaking the role of an intervention in the political”¹⁹.

Given that political philosophy has lately become a disguise for moral philosophy, as Alain Badiou warns us, Foucault might be in the frame of it, especially because of his preoccupations with the philosophical ethos of permanent critique. Although atypical and unclassifiable, foucauldian political thought is an important contribution to contemporary political thinking that is to “reformulate the concept of freedom and contributing to a new form of critical-theoretical work, applicable to the entire spectrum of contemporary practices of government”²⁰.

Why do governments disregard moral principles in their political approach? In Foucault's view the answer is: because they are trapped in the paradigm of power – knowledge. It should be concerned only with life, or *vida nuda* as Giorgio Agamben named it. “The entry of *zôê* within *polis*”²¹ in the biological sense, gives rise to a biopolitics, one that “makes life and its mechanisms enter the explicit field of calculations and makes power – knowledge an agent of trans-

¹⁵ Thomas Flynn, “Symposiums Papers: Foucault and the Politics of Postmodernity”, in *Noûs*, Vol. 23, No. 2, 1989, p. 188

¹⁶ Leslie Paul Thiel, “The Agony of Politics: The Nietzschean Roots of Foucault's Thought”, in *The American Political Science Review*, Vol. 84, No. 3 (Sep., 1990), pp. 907-925.

¹⁷ Thomas Flynn, op. cit., p. 188.

¹⁸ James Tully, “Political Philosophy As a Critical Activity”, in *Political Theory*, 2002; 30, p. 535.

¹⁹ Mark E. G. Kelly, *The political philosophy of Michel Foucault*, Routledge, New York, 2009, p.1.

²⁰ Paul Patton, “Foucault”, in *Mari gânditori politici*, All, București, 2008, p. 486.

²¹ Giorgio Agamben, *Homo sacer*, “Idea Design & Print”, Cluj, 2006.

formation of human life²². Thus, in modernity, history deals only with the body, politics has become biopolitics and the governmental practice of liberalism is an appropriation of the living body, a controlled integration of bodies within the social system.

In order to avoid any other truth effects of the modern power, which is a disciplinary power, in order to evade it, the solution can only be ethics. A political ethics and a continuous problematization of the limits of our contingency is paving the way to freedom. The aim of Foucauldian autonomy is not to achieve a state of impersonal moral transcendence, but rather

to refuse to submit to the “government of individualization” by constantly questioning what seems to be natural and inevitable in one's own identity: an interrogation of the “contemporary limits of the necessary”. Perhaps all these make Foucault, as Paul Rabinow said, the greatest moralist of our time.

In my view, Foucault's later writings on the care of the self, intend to develop a critical alternative for this sort of “aestheticization” of the subject by looking more intensively at possible forms of active resistance that could strengthen individual autonomy and also effect changes in social conditions. What he offers, is in some respects a more positive account of the subject, who might also transgress the limits of bio-power through the search for alternatives to modern self-subjugation.

²² Michel Foucault, *Istoria sexualității*, vol. I-*Voința de a ști*, Univers, București, 2004, p. 134.

Bibliography

- Agamben, Giorgio, *Homo sacer*, Idea Design & Print, Cluj, 2006
 Foucault, Michel, *Hermenentica subiectului*, Polirom, Iași, 2004
 Foucault, Michel, *Ce este un autor?*, Idea Design&Print, Cluj, 2004
 Foucault, Michel, *Adevărul și practicile juridice*, Editura Idea Design&Print, Cluj, 2004
 Foucault, Michel, “Theatrum philosophicum”, Editura Casa Cărții de Știință, Cluj-Napoca, 2001
 Foucault, Michel, *Le courage de la vérité*, Gallimard, Seuil, Paris, 2009,
 Foucault, Michel, *Dits et Ecrits*, t. II. Paris: Gallimard, 1994
 Foucault, Michel, *Istoria sexualității*, vol. I-*Voința de a ști*, Univers, București, 2004
 Macey David, *Michel Foucault*, Gallimard, Paris, 1994
 Kelly, Mark E.G., *The political philosophy of Michel Foucault*, Routledge, New York, 2009
 Flynn, Thomas, “Symposiums Papers: Foucault and the Politics of Postmodernity”, in *Noûs*, Vol. 23, No. 2, 1989, p. 188
 Thiel, Leslie Paul, ”The Agony of Politics: The Nietzschean Roots of Foucault's Thought”, in *The American Political Science Review*, Vol. 84, No. 3 (Sep., 1990), pp. 907-925
 Tully, James, “Political Philosophy As a Critical Activity”, in *Political Theory*, 2002; 30
 Gros, Frédéric, ” Le souci de soi chez Michel Foucault. A review of «The Hermeneutics of the Subject» Lectures at the Collège de France, 1981–1982”, in *Philosophy Social Criticism* 2005; 31; 697
 Gros, Frédéric, “Situarea cursului”, in Michel Foucault, *Hermenentica subiectului*, Editura Polirom, Iași, 2004
 Patton, Paul, “Foucault”, in *Mari gânditori politici*, All, București, 2008

Cristiana ARGHIRE, doctorand al Facultății de Filosofie și Științe Social-Politice, Universitatea „Al. I. Cuza” Iași, cu o teză despre supozițiile filosofice din gândirea politică a lui Michel Foucault. Domenii de interes: filosofia politică. E-mail: cristiana_arghire@yahoo.com