The Aesthetics of Existence and the Political in Late Foucault[*]

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> "Maybe our problem now is to discover that the self is nothing else than the historical correlation of the technology built in our history. Maybe the problem is to change those technologies. And in this case, one of the main political problems nowadays would be, in the strict sense of the word, the politics of ourselves."

Michel Foucault

The last period of Foucault's work is often labeled as "the ethical turn". His reflections upon the Greek *epimeleia heautou* ("care of the self"), his Nietzschean ideal of making life "a work of art", and his search for new forms of subjectivity are commonly seen as a shift from his former political "problematizations" in favor of an ethical approach, focused on the so-called "aesthetics of existence". After his courses at Collège de France on bio-power and governmentality, and after the first volume of *The History of Sexuality*, everyone was expecting Foucault to deepen his investigations on "power relations". Instead of these, Foucault opened a new field of questions and problematizations regarding the emergence of the ethical subject. Both his previous analyses on power and his late reflections concerning the self-formation of the subject received a lot of criticisms[1]. In what follows, I

[1] There was a lot of criticisms against Foucault's considerations on power, the most famous probably being the ones made by Habermas (1986, 1987) and Taylor (1986). The former accused Foucault of misinterpreting the legacy of Kant and the Enlightenment project and

shall not refer to the objections against his former investigations, but only to the critique against his ethical turn.

In this paper, I would like to present the role played by the aesthetics of existence in the entire Foucauldian work and to answer some of the objections Foucault received on his late inquiries. Some of these objections concern the immoralism and relativism of Foucault's ethics; others try to prove that the abandonment of power analysis lead Foucault towards an individualistic ethics, lacking political engagement. All these criticisms have a common element, and this is the charge of dandyism and narcissism that allegedly underlie Foucault's ethical turn. The allegation of dandyism was initially expressed by Peter Dews in 1989 (Lightbody 2008); this was made famous and largely articulated in Pierre Hadot's "Reflections on the Notion of the 'Cultivation of the Self'". Hadot accused Foucault of anachronism and of deploying a purely aesthetic notion of self-creation, which risks creating a contemporary form of narcissism.

> By concentrating his interpretation to such a great extent exclusively on the interpretation of the cultivation of the self, on the concern for the self and on conversion towards the self and in a general way, by defining his ethical model as an ethics of existence, Foucault might have been advancing a cultivation of the self which was too purely aesthetic – that is to say, I fear, a new form of dandyism, a late twentieth century version. (Hadot 1991, 230)

Hadot claimed that Foucault's reading of the Greek "care of the self" is anachronistic and it bears the marks of Romanticism and postmodernism. But postmodern thinkers criticized Foucault as well. In *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity*, Rorty accused Foucault of being insensitive to forming a new "we", that is a new set of political arrangements centered on the ideal of solidarity. Rorty claimed that, although Foucault's ethics could be useful for the private projects of self-creation, it remains politically problematic due to its lack of concern about the public sphere (1989, 64-66). The same charge of individualism was later made by Th. McCarthy (1994), but for different reasons.

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thus departing from the modern paradigm of rationality. The latter held that, in the absence of a robust account on what is legitimate power, his reflections on power are inefficient or even incoherent. There is an enormous amount of papers which tried to answer these objections.

McCarthy argued that Foucault's individualism resides in his misunderstanding of what normative ethics really is:

> Foucault's representation of universal morality, geared as it is to substantive codes, misses the point of formal, procedural models, namely to establish a general framework of justice within which individuals and groups may pursue different conceptions of the good or beautiful life. (…) Foucault's aesthetic individualism is no more adequate to this social dimension of autonomy than was the possessive individualism of early modern political theory. (McCarthy 1994, 270-271)

McCarthy's criticism opens up to the other line of objections to the ethical turn of Foucault. This sort of objections is best expressed by Richard Wollin's remarks according to which "aesthetics decisionism" leads to a certain immoralism that entails a "politics of nihilistic catastrophe" (Wollin 1988, 85). At the heart of these kind of attacks lays the traditional desire for an objective decision making procedure, which could be embodied in policies and institutional resolutions.

There are several authors and Foucauldian scholars who answered these kinds of criticisms in brief remarks and in more or less expeditious commentaries. In this paper, I intend to give a more detailed reply to the allegation of narcissism. I will do so by elucidating certain key themes of the aesthetics of existence and by stressing the political implications of Foucault's ethical project.

Preliminaries to the Aesthetics of Existence. Early Problematizations of the Subject

It should be said from the outset that the problematization of subject(ivity) is not only a late enterprise of Foucault, but a constant preoccupation that informs his entire work. As C. G. Prado notes, "basic to his work is the idea that subjectivity is a complex product rather than a preexisting condition" (Prado 2000, 10). This idea echoes Nietzsche's claim according to which the classical representation of the subject is a fiction, among others fictions that deluded Western metaphysics. The Platonic soul trapped in the body, the Cartesian *cogito*, and the transcendental subject of Kant are – in Nietzsche's view – pure mystifications, derived from the false belief in

"eternity" and "objectivity". The common assumption of these concepts is that the self has a substantial existence, which resides in some essential properties like rationality, immutability and the capacity for autonomous action. All of these endorse the idea that there is an ontological substrate of the self that gives the individual a definitive identity and a strong essence:

> But there is no such substrate; there is no "being"' behind the doing, acting, becoming. "The doer" is merely made up and added into the action – the act is everything. (*GM* I, 13)

If the subject is not given, then it is created. For Nietzsche, the problem of self-creation is not just an aphoristic wrinkle, but – as Alexander Nehamas (1985) pointed out – the idea that permeates his entire philosophy. For Foucault, the self-constitution of the subject represented indeed only a late interest. Nevertheless, the field of questions regarding subjectivity had already been a major concern for Foucault ever since the 60s. For instance, in *The Order of Things*, Foucault posed the question regarding man's existence, imagining a world without man, i.e. without our actual conception of "the man":

> Does man really exist*?* To imagine, for an instant*,* what the world and thought and truth might be if man did not exist, is considered to be merely indulging in paradox. This is because we are so blinded by the recent manifestation of man that we can no longer remember a time – and this is not so long ago – when the world, its order, and human beings existed, but man did not. (Foucault 1970, 322)

This question about the existence of man was reconfigured and answered in more than one way in Foucault's work afterwards. Short after *The Order of Things*, Foucault posed again the same interrogation, but the figure of man was restricted to the subject of writing. Thus, in 1969, the figure of "author" was brought into question. Echoing Roland Barthes' reflections about authorship, Foucault was asking if not necessarily the general man, but a specific figure of the man, namely the author, really exists. Claiming that our contemporary notion of the author is a recent product of history, Foucault claimed that the author does not precede the work; he is a rather a function than an autonomous substance (Foucault 1984a, 113). After a year, in his inaugural lecture at Collège de France, Foucault said he wanted to be a "nameless voice, long preceding" him, leaving him "merely to enmesh" himself in language

(Foucault 1972, 215). The thing at stake was the possibility of conceiving the "I" not as a transcendental subject, but as an effect. But, going further from his previous position, Foucault extended his inquiries beyond the analysis of language. The subject was now observed through the lens of new elements such as forces, power relations and social practices. And the archaeological research was mixed with the genealogical approach, which exposed the contingent and less noble emergences of our actual comportment. In *Discipline and Punish*, this method was used to reveal how hierarchical observation, normalizing judgment, and examination produced the modern disciplined subject. And, as M. Huijer notes, Foucauldian genealogy seemed to describe the individual as a "marionette":

> With his archaeological and genealogical analysis, Foucault boarded up the space of disappeared man by means of a complex ensemble of power and knowledge (…). "Man" (in so far as such a being could still exist) was perceived as a marionette, a subservient and silent body that was observed, disciplined and normalized down to the very last detail. (Huijer 1999, 64)

It was clear by now that the subject was an effect of power. The final attack on the classical figure of the subject was given in Foucault's lectures at Collège de France and, most notably, in the first volume of *The History of Sexuality*. The relationship a subject has with power is not of possession, but of embodiment, because power is neither local, nor subjective. It is a complex strategic situation, a pervasive interplay of forces, intentions and (re)actions. Power "comes from everywhere" and it is not "an institution, not a structure, neither it is a strength we are endowed with" (Foucault 1998, 63). Instead of depicting the repressive aspects of power, Foucault emphasized its productive function. What does power produce? To put it briefly, it produces reality. And, as a part of the reality, the subject is also a product of power:

> We must cease once and for all to describe the effects of power in negative terms: it "excludes", it "represses", it "censors", it "abstracts", it "masks", it 'conceals'. In fact power produces; it produces reality; it produces domains of objects and rituals of truth. The individual and the knowledge that may be gained of him belong to this production. (Foucault 1991, 194)

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Discipline and Punish and *The Will to Knowledge* were the last books Foucault published before the so-called "ethical turn". These works depict a fragile subject, which seems dramatically "powerless" in the face of power. Similar to the "man" of human sciences, the "individual" of the control society is not the bright and strong figure imagined by humanism. However, a thing should be clear by now. From the early idea of the construction of man by modern discourse, to the later idea of the production of the individual by universal power, the problematization of the subject was Foucault's constant interest.

The Aesthetics of Existence – A Reconstruction and Other Clarifications

With the second volume of *The History of Sexuality*, Foucault tackles the chances of the subject to withstand power. In the pervasive interplay of power relations, there are multiple resistances[2], which tend to modify the power relations. This idea was already suggested in *The Will to Knowledge*:

> Where there is power, there is resistance, and yet, or rather
> consequently, this resistance is never in a position of exteriority
> in relation to power. (Foucault 1979, 95)

It is true that resistance can never escape power, but nevertheless it can alter power, by changing its direction. Unlike the first volume of *The History of Sexuality*, the second one explores the possibility of conceiving resistance as a form of freedom[3]. It is not a Kantian freedom, which would allow the subject to exercise power, but a sort of "freeness as opposed to power" (Huijer 1999, 66).

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[2] The theme of resistance comes to be necessary when Foucault talks of power in terms of actions and reactions. If Foucault hadn't mention the issue of resistance, then the power relations would have been understood as pure domination, not as forces. But, in Foucault's view, power is rather about force than about domination. I think this is an important nuance, which should not be left out.

[3] In *The Use of Pleasure*, Foucault does not approach frontally the theme of resistance, but the shift from his previous analyses is pretty clear. The stake of investigating *aphrodisia* is to illustrate how human beings can acquire a state of freedom (though they are enmeshed in power relations – as the previous writings have shown).

In order to explore this new possibility, Foucault turns back to Antiquity[4] and changes his focus from politics to ethics. But, for Foucault, ethics does not refer to a theory of moral rules, but to a relationship one has with himself/herself. Besides various codes of conduct and the conformity with these codes, morality means the relation of a subject to itself (Foucault 1985, 29). And precisely in this ethical field, is self-creation possible. One can become an ethical subject not merely by complying with actual rules, but also by inventing new forms of self-discipline and by stylizing his existence.

In opposition to his previous analyses regarding the "death of man", Foucault claims that the subject is an open space, which is constantly filled up not only trough biopolitical normalization, but trough self-creation as well. In this sense, the French thinker states that

> (...) in the course of their history men had never ceased constructing themselves, that is to shift continuously the level of their subjectivity, to constitute themselves in an infinite and multiple series of different subjectivities that would never reach an end and would never place us in the presence of something that would be "man". (Foucault 1991, 123-124)

One cannot speak of "Man" as a unique and strong figure, but further more one cannot speak of man as a marionette. In the historical game of power relations, the subject was invented in various modes, and it invented itself in numerous fashions. While the investigation of modernity showed how power manufactured a certain kind of subjectivity, the return to Antiquity proved that the possibility of self-constitution lies at the very heart of power relations. Power is not something that comes upon one like an ineluctable force, but something in which one can obtain a certain degree of control over himself/herself:

> I do indeed believe that there is no sovereign, founding subject, a universal form of subject to be found everywhere. I am very skeptical of this view of the subject and very hostile to it. I

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[4] Foucault published *The Use of Pleasure* in 1984 together with the third volume of *HS*, but the return to Antiquity had begun in 1980, with Foucault's course *The Government of the Living*. Detailed analyses on the Ancient self-techniques came in 1982-1983 with his series of lecture published in *The Hermeneutics of the Subject* (2005).

> believe, on the contrary, that the subject is constituted through practices of subjection, or, in a more autonomous way, through practices of liberation, of liberty, as in Antiquity, on the basis, of course, of a number of rules, styles, inventions to be found in the cultural environment. (Foucault 1988b, 50-51)

Foucault learned from Greek Antiquity[5] to see ethics more as a personal activity than as an impartial debate over rules. Back then, people were not concerned about determining a unique and objective code of conduct; instead, what they were looking for was to "constitute a kind of ethics which was an aesthetics of existence" (Foucault 1984b, 343). The Roman aristocrats found themselves in the same situation, developing their own path of stylizing life. In the second and the third volume of *The History of Sexuality*, Foucault investigated how the Greeks and Romans respectively dealt with a particular domain of their life, namely sexuality. Sex is, for Foucault, just a pretext of illustrating how different subjects and cultures can attain a state of freedom and harmony through different, but coherent forms of self-discipline. And if history proves that different practices are equally effective in their own respect, then morality is something much more complex than the "universal/relative" dichotomy seems to show. Thus, ethics becomes aesthetics of existence.

Shifting from ethics as moral codes to ethics as aesthetics of existence, Foucault opened up a wide space of new and interesting experiences through which the self becomes an ethical subject. To illustrate the richness of ethics, the French thinker proposed four elements constitutive for the relation of the self to itself. (These elements appear not only in an aesthetics of existence, but may be present in a codified morality as well.)

The first aspect of the relation with the self is *the determination of the ethical substance* (Foucault 1985, 26-27) and it represents a formal or an "ontological" element. The question at stake is: what part of the subject requires ethical concern? For ancient Greeks, the ethical substance was "the use of pleasures" (*aphrodisia*), noticing their danger and looking for moderation. For

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[5] It is important to note that, for Foucault, the Antiquity is not the right and unique answer to our questions. (Foucault 1984, 343). He does not regard Greek ethics as a moral solution for today's problems, since the Greeks had many social problems like the subjection of women, slavery and other inequalities. But nevertheless, Foucault thinks the way people conceived ethics in those times could give us relevant suggestions for creating an aesthetics of existence, suitable for the present.

Christians, the ethical substance was the desires of the flesh, and in this way emerged the possibility of committing sins in ones heart (Mt. 5:28). For Kant, the supremacy of "the good will" engages the intentions as the ethical substance.

The second aspect of ethics is *the mode of subjectification*[6] (1985, 27) and this is the material or the "deontological" element. The important question here is: how does a subject relate to a set of prescriptions and to the part of him/her that is determined as ethical substance? The mode of subjectification refers to the manner in which an individual accepts to comply with a rule, and he is justified to think his acts are morally valuable. For Greeks, the mode of subjection was the decision of a free man to live a noble life according to the exigencies of self-mastership. That is why, for them, the ethics was stricter than the moral code. While the moral code had few prescriptions, the ethical life of a Greek had much more self-regulations. For a Christian, the mode of subjection is obeying God's commandments in an effort to follow the sinless demeanor of Jesus Christ. For Kant, subjection to a rule entails the distinction between actions in accordance with duty, and actions from duty. That is why only the latter are morally right.

The third component of the relation with the self is *the ethical work* (1985, 27) and this is an ascetic[7] or efficient element. The main interogations are: what are the means by which the individual can become morally praiseworthy? How do you train yourself in order to accomplish your ethical goals? These questions aim at establishing certain techniques and practices of the self through which a person can become the ethical subject he wants to be. These self-techniques

> permit individuals to effect by their own means or with the help
> of others a certain number of operations on their own bodies and

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[6] The French word is "assujetissement". Some translate it as "subjection", others translate it as "subjectivation". In English, it sounds better "subjection", but the problem with this translation lies in the connotation of "submission" the word "subjection" has. The Foucauldian "assujetissement" bears a significant ambivalence. It is not only subjection; it may be self-creation too. The other translation, "subjectivation", does not have the same problem, but it conceals the difference between two related, yet distinct Foucauldian concepts: "subjectivation" as the translation of the French "subjectivation", and "subjectification" as the translation of "assujetissement". The former has only a passive connotation, whilst the latter has an active one too.

[7] The ethical work is "ascetic" in the old, Greek sense. Not that it leads to asceticism, but that it is an *askēsis*, which is an effort of doing something or, to put it simple, a practice.

souls, thoughts, conduct, and way of being, so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality. (Foucault 1988a, 18)

In other writings, Foucault analyzed most of the self-techniques present in Greek and Roman culture: the dialogue, the examination of conscience, meditation, the notebooks (*hypomnemata*) etc. Some of these techniques were taken up by the Christians, who changed them according to their goals. For example, the examination of conscience was practiced in the Christian culture as self-decipherment, a tool for detecting the "evil" that is dwelling in oneself.

The fourth element of ethics is the *teleology of the moral subject* (1985, 27-28). An action is not praiseworthy in itself, but only as a part of a greater whole, which is the ethical conduct; that is why every ethics has an end or a *telos*. Each act aims at establishing a certain way of life. Like the other elements, the teleology of the moral subject suffered significant changes over the time. For the old Greeks, the stake of the ethical work was to acquire complete governance over the self. For the Romans, the purpose was to attain a total detachment from the daily needs and pleasures. In Christian religion, the end of moral life was immortality, living together with God in the Kingdom of Heavens. We may easily see that, of all these ends, the Christian one is the most promising. And Foucault suggestion – even if not expressed as such – was that in the name of the most generous ideal, Western conduct became stricter and stricter, leading to the "juridification of morality". This process did not stop in the twilight of the Middle Ages, but continued during modern period. However, the equivalence between morality and obedience reached a critical point in the present days. In such a context, the search for an aesthetic of existence becomes an urgent task:

From Antiquity to Christianity, we pass from a morality that was essentially the search for a personal ethics to a morality as obedience to a system of rules. And if I was interested in Antiquity it was because, for a whole series of reasons, the idea of morality as obedience to a code of rules is now disappearing, has already disappeared. And to this absence of morality corresponds, must correspond, the search for an aesthetics of existence. (Foucault 1988b, 49)

But why is this kind of ethics labeled as "aesthetics"? This is a question that has not been answered yet. What is aesthetical in self-creation? To respond to this question, we should turn back to Nietzsche's *Will to Power*. For the German philosopher, the world is "a work of art that gives birth to itself" (WP §796) and the man should live his life as "a work of art without an author". The subject is not something given, but an invention, a stake (WP §481). If the subject, and consequently the author, is not a substantial agent, then the author does not precede the work (Foucault 1984a, 113). The self emerges in the act, and the author emerges in the act of creation; the self is the very act itself. The subject is nothing but the process of subjectification. And the relationship I have with myself is nothing else but me. To put it simply, by creating something, I create myself without being the cause of myself. Does this means that, for Foucault, the aesthetics of existence resumes only to artists and their creation?

The answer is "yes" and "no". No, because the production of art objects is not what interests Foucault. The aesthetics of existence is not reserved for the artistic elite. But the answer is also "yes", because not only objects, but subjects as well could be regarded as a work of art. In a famous interview, Foucault expressed his dissatisfaction with our narrow understanding of art creation:

> What strikes me is the fact that in our society, art has become something which is related only to objects and not to individuals, or to life. That art is something which is specialized or which is done by experts who are artists. But couldn't everyone's life become a work of art? Why should the lamp or the house be an art object, but not our life? (Foucault 1984b, 350)

Man's self-constitution is also art creation in so far as the subject brings his life under certain criteria of harmony and perfection. For most of the commentators, Foucault's idea seems to be that existence could be shaped to such an extent it becomes as beautiful as art. Another interpretation is advanced by Timothy O'Leary (2002, 131), who argues that "for Foucault ethics could be aesthetic by virtue of its technical, ascetic *modes,* rather than by virtue of any striving after unity, harmony, or purity per se". O'Leary claims that Foucault uses the term "aesthetics", simply because it involves, as most of artistic practices do, the act of giving a form. For him, the thing at stake is not the final beauty, but the bare process of shaping a personal style. Nevertheless, Foucault often talks about "purity", "harmony" or "perfection", when referring to the

aesthetics of existence. One of these fragments was already quoted here (Foucault 1988a, 18). So what is self-creation really about: beauty or shaping?

I am inclined to think that O'Leary is right. The aesthetics of existence is more about the act of giving a form than to the beauty of the form. It is true that the subject is not a ground to start from, but a task to be done. However, this task is not an objective to be finally met, but a process to be permanently carried on. The self is a work in progress, which is never completed. So, on that basis, I think it is better to speak about constant shaping than about final beauty. One reason is that, in those contexts when he is talking about perfection or harmony, Foucault refers to Antiquity. And it was clear that, for the Greeks, the act of self-formation aimed at attaining a certain state of beauty, since the beauty and the good were the same thing (see the Greek concept *Kalokagathia*). Foucault knew that very well, so he could not employ an anachronistic model, based on such strong metaphysical assumptions. Not to say that Foucault was not a real fan of the Greek model and he did not think Antiquity was a Golden Age (Foucault 1984b, 347). Instead, he thought that the most valuable lesson of the ancients was precisely the importance of an *askēsis* practiced by the self on itself. And Foucault's lesson for us is that we should find new forms of subjectivity that could answer contemporary challenges, not to return effectively to the old ones.

Secondly, I think O'Leary has a point, because the aesthetics of existence is not a "late 20th century version of dandyism", as P. Hadot claimed. Self-Creation must be seen as a way of resistance against normalization, not as a form of self-contemplation. I will try to defend this thesis in the following section.

Answering the Criticisms

As I have already mentioned in the beginning, the main objection against Foucault's ethical project is that it lacks social commitment, and it endorses narcissism. My strategy to answer this accusation is to highlight the public engagement of his aesthetics of existence, by showing how it infuses a politics of minimizing domination.

In these criticisms against the ethics of Foucault, I see two patterns of reproaches. One rebuke would be that, in his entire work, Foucault never attempted to develop a "serious" political project. After making a career of political deconstruction, marked by unmasking the risks without noticing the

benefits of historical progress, Foucault passed to a philosophy of subjectivity, which continued to avoid a normative account on public life. For this kind of critics, "the final Foucault" deploys a political-free investigation, which additionally misinterprets the ancient spirituality as a bourgeois self-complacency. The other pattern of reproach purports that, in moving to ethics, Foucault neglected some important issues of practical philosophy, like: the problem of moral values, of moral justification, of intersubjectivity etc. In modern philosophy, all these elements are deemed to be highly important for the edification of the moral world. Lacking these crucial discussions, Foucauldian ethics necessarily leads to individualism and immoralism. In what follows, I will bring into question the first pattern of criticism, by emphasizing the political significations of an aesthetics of existence.

It is necessary to say that this task is not just an eccentric interpretation of Foucault's late work. The French thinker himself admitted that the aesthetics of existence has a political horizon, though he did not exploit it in detail. In one of his interviews, Foucault was asked if the problematic of self-creation could be "at the heart of a new way of thinking about politics, of a form of politics different from what we know today". Foucault replied:

> I admit that I have not got very far in this direction, and I would very much like to come back to more contemporary questions to try to see what can be made of all this in the context of the current political problematic. (Foucault 1987, 124)

Although the political implications of the aesthetics of existence remained unexploited, the urge of rethinking the political was present in late Foucault. But how to develop a new approach to politics starting from the self? And how is self-creation politically significant?

First of all, I think it is important to stress the twofold emergence of the subject in history. In such conditions, we should keep in mind that Foucault did not simply abandon the power relations analyses, but he *completed* them with his later insights on self-constitution. (Or, I should rather say that, in his final years, Foucault made them *explicit*, since some suggestions were already present in his previous work). Foucault was neither a mere pessimist who saw power relations as a total enslavement, nor a naive optimist who understood self-creation as a triumphant freedom. As a matter of fact, Foucault regarded himself as a "hyperactive pessimist" (Foucault 1984b, 347). We may say that he

was at the same time a pessimist and an optimist. This ambivalence is linked to the dual constitution of man, who is both constructed and self-created. As Frédéric Gros puts it,

> The individual subject only emerges at the intersection of a technique of domination and techniques of the self. It is the fold of processes of subjectivation over procedures of subjection, according to more or less overlapping linings subject to history. (Gros 2005a, 526)

Foucault does not see power as a negative and destructive reality, which aims at crushing individuals. In a manner similar to Nietzsche, Foucault interprets power as a multitude of energies, drives, actions and reactions, that is not oriented towards a single end. In this interplay of forces, there is a great deal of opposition. As I have already mentioned, Foucault (1979, 95) claims that "where there is power, there is resistance". Taking further some Foucauldian remarks, M. Huijer notices that "without resistance, power relations would have the connotation not of force, but of domination" (Huijer 1999, 66). That is why, in the above quotation, Fr. Gros claims that the self appears at an intersection: not just as a product of pure domination, but also as a product of self-practice. And I propose that, in this context, we should understand self-practice in a loose sense, not in a narrow, technical one. It is not all about a specific and painful *askēsis*, but rather about a certain resistance that may occur at some points in everyone's life.

To give a trivial example, if – in a formal wear situation – I refuse to dress in formal attire, I am not only making a gesture of defiance, but I also constitute myself to a certain extent. Or to provide an even more dramatic illustration, if – during a Nazi manifestation – one refuses to do the Hitler salute, one makes a protest, but he/she also creates oneself. (Of course, a true aesthetics of existence implies a long and severe asceticism, but that is not my point here). In everyday life, there are numerous examples of self-creation, some with a greater impact, and some with a lesser one. To refuse a general belief, to dress different, to act and speak in a personal and courageous way, to refuse an identity label imposed by society, to withstand fashionable trends etc – all of these are examples of self-constitution[8] or self-creation. On the other

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[8] I think it is important to note that the word "self-constitution" has two meanings: a narrow one, which refers to the aesthetics of existence, and a broad one, which refers to any kind

hand, the opposite attitudes are examples of normalization. The thing at stake is where the balanced is inclined: to make personal choices or to passively embrace a selfhood.

For Foucault, self-creation is to a large extent a matter of transformation. The main task of the subject is "to refuse who he is" (Foucault 2010, 150) and to experience a radical conversion. This is why a good philosophy should not aim to discover the (possibility of) truth, but to develop

> […] an analysis that relates to what we are willing to accept in our world, to accept, to refuse, to change, both in ourselves and in our circumstances. In sum, it is a question of searching for another kind of critical philosophy. Not a critical philosophy that seeks to determine the conditions and the limits of our possible knowledge of the object, but a critical philosophy that seeks the conditions and the indefinite possibilities of transforming the subject, of transforming ourselves. (Foucault 1997, 179)

But why transformation is so important and how is it linked to the political? A brief answer would be that the practice of change is intimately connected to the act of resistance. The subject needs to transform itself in order to resist domination. The more an individual remains unchanged, the more he is vulnerable to control and normalization. One of the ways in which power operates similar to domination[9] is the closure of the self in a fixed identity. And an individual needs to change himself/herself in order to maintain the self in the space of open possibilities. Furthermore, a relation of power that tends to enhance domination is reversed only by virtue of self-transformation. This sort

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of subjectivation. For instance, if I chose to follow the standard prescriptions – it is also self-constitution. But, in this case, I do not really constitute myself, i.e. I do not constitute myself in a personal way, but I am constituted from outside. If, on the other hand, I chose to stylize my existence, then I can really talk about self-constitution or self-creation. In the fragment above, I use the word in this narrow sense, which refers to the aesthetics of existence.

[9] I stress again that pure domination excludes power relations. In slavery, for instance, there is no power, but only constraints. And that is why we should not understand domination as a manifestation of power. Domination exists only when power disappears, i.e. when the structure of actions and reactions cease to exist. Domination is a kind of relation, which adjoins power, but is not included in it. The relationship between power and domination is that, in certain situations, power tends to get very close to domination.

of neo-Nietzschean experimentalism seeks to displace standard subjectivities in order to change a larger framework of constraints. Moving from a single individual to a larger group, the problem of transformation is crucial, because it engages resistance as a political act. And Foucauldian resistance is informed by the urge to change a state of things characterized by social, political, cultural and economic hegemony.

Transforming yourself is a matter of transforming certain relations of power, which tend to neighbor domination. Given this, the political problem is to reconfigure and establish forms of social relations that decrease the effects of domination (O'Leary 2002, 158). In this respect, Foucault repeatedly gave the example of homosexual communities in which they have stylized their relations in order to resist normalization. If power operates at a micro-level, then the resistance against domination cannot be articulated as a macro-solution. People should not seek for a top-down disposal, which can cure "Society" as a whole. Instead, they can redefine and re-orient power relations by virtue of creating small communities with idiosyncratic habits and stylized interactions. Thus, stylization is configured as a transgression of imposed limits, a subversive way of facing domination and defying the *status quo*. People change themselves, but, in doing so, they change the established order.

If social relations are relations of power then the political stake of transformation is the minimization of control and oppression. And, for Foucault, the reduction of domination is the "the point of articulation of the ethical preoccupation and of the political struggle for the respect of rights, of the critical reflection against the abusive techniques of government" (Foucault 1987, 130). To put it simply, the aesthetics of existence as a political task is the maintenance of democracy. But if one speaks of "democracy", one must be careful in using this word in reference to Foucault's work. I am not entering here in the classical debates regarding the definition and classification of democracy. All I want to say is that, for Foucault, the essence of democracy does not lie in being a form of government based on social consent; but rather in being a system that provides the highest degree of freedom for its citizens (or, to be more accurate, the least possible domination).

In framing the aesthetics of existence within the four elements of an ethics, O'Leary claims Foucauldian ethics has freedom as its *telos* (2002, 159). But posing freedom as the final end of the ethical work seems to be problematic. One might assume that Foucault embraces the Enlightenment project, which strives for achieving an individual or collective liberty anchored in the "human

nature". It would seem that Foucault is returning to Rousseau's observation that "man is born free, but everywhere is in chains". And it would seem that Foucault wants to recover the fundamental rights and liberties of "Man", the noble and bright figure of humanist discourse. But – as I have already showed in the previous sections – this would be a misunderstanding.

For Foucault, freedom is neither an Existentialist "possibility of possibility", nor a Hegelian final end. The French thinker rejects any conception of freedom as a transhistorical substance. Foucault is a philosopher of relations, and this is why his account of freedom is similar to his account of power. Freedom is relational and it is a historically determinate possibility which emerges only in the interplay of certain power relations. As O'Leary puts it, freedom is "not an ideal state for which we strive, it is a condition of our striving" (2002, 159). Not a transcendental condition from which we derive our autonomy, but a contingent situation of being capable to withstand certain forces. Freedom resides in my concrete and limited possibility to oppose an injunction, a demand, a constraining situation etc. To give some examples, freedom exists in the possibility to break the conduct code of my workplace, in the capacity to protest against the authorities, in the potential rejection of a label imposed on me, or in my capacity of saying "no" to an informal rule very appreciated in my circle of friends. Trough all these rejections and violations, I am opposing a state of domination and thus I am taking some risks: of being sanctioned, blamed, marginalized etc. Given these risks, I cannot say that I am totally free, but however I have the capacity of govern myself in a different manner. Such alternative possibility is freedom as the condition of ethics.

If freedom is the condition of ethics, then how could at the same time freedom be its *telos*? Another question is: how could this stubbornness of mine have political significance? Is not it just a caprice, an evidence of selfishness? The answer to the first question is that freedom can be both a condition and a task, because the aim of the aesthetics of existence is to maintain a high degree of freedom. O'Leary claims that one criterion of evaluating an ethics is the extent to which "its deliberate form manages to preserve a maximum of freedom and a minimum of domination" (2002, 160). We can understand this in the following way. Every decision an individual makes puts him/her on a certain track, by closing up different possibilities. Making a decision means to open up a field of actions, but at the same time it means to close others. For example, if I choose to enroll the army, I will have the occasion to hold a gun in my hands, but I will close the possibility to criticize my superiors. On the other hand, if I

chose to work at a university, I would close the possibility of having a gun, but I would have the opportunity of criticizing my superiors' ideas or even questioning their institutional decisions. Each of these contexts is permeated by power relations. But the question is: which of them preserve for me a maximum of freedom and a minimum of domination?

The same evaluation goes for social and political contexts. A law regarding the intensification of surveillance through CCTV cameras purportedly opens the possibility of living in a safer society, but closes to some extent the possibility of "privacy". On the other hand, rejecting such a law opens the possibility of higher intimacy, but closes the possibility of higher security. The question is again: which of these situations maintain a maximum of freedom and a minimum of domination in our society? The problem of freedom is the locus where ethics meets politics. And the resistance against domination does not take only the form of massive protests and collective struggles, but it also manifests as a relation subject has with itself. If one is a homosexual, one does not have to participate in a gay parade in order to resist domination. Instead, that person might refuse the label of "homosexual" as a defining identity, even if he/she has admitted to be gay. That person could think of himself/herself as an open project, not as a sexually defined individual. In fact, this is what Foucault did in his life. And his example shows us that one could still engage with a communal cause without letting him be absorbed by a given identity. Noticing the public engagement of the aesthetics of existence, McGushin states that

> [f]or Foucault the aesthetics of existence always takes place in, and responds to a community, and defines itself in terms of its attachment to, or ruptures with, that community. (McGushin 2007, 301)

Like the ancient ethics, the aesthetics of existence is concerned not only with the personal venture of self-creation, but involves the others as partners and even purposes of the ethical work. Contrary to Habermas' accusation, the problem of subjectivity is traversed by the vein of intersubjectivity, since *epimeleia heautou* (the care of the self) entails *epimeleia ton allon* (the care for others). It is not that the aesthetics of existence would not be regarded as ethics in the absence of other individuals, but the others are always presupposed in the relationship one has with oneself. Foucault admits that "care for the self it is ethical in itself, but it implies complex relationships with others in the measure

where this *ethos* of freedom is also a way of caring for others" (1987, 118). In this respect, Fr. Gros claims that

> [w]hat interests Foucault in the care of the self is the manner by which is integrated in the social fabric and constitutes a motor for political action. Care of the self was exercised in a largely communal and institutional framework. (…) It is not a matter of renouncing the world and others, but of an alternative modulation of the rhis relation to the other by care of the self. (Gros 2005b, 701)

A good illustration of this claim would be the problematization of *parrhesia*, which represented an important focus for late Foucault. Some commentators even believe that *parrhesia* is the crucial feature of the aesthetics of existence (see, for instance, Simpson 2012). The term *parrhesia* refers to truthful or fearless speech. In reading the Greeks, Foucault states that it is the commitment to "say what has to be said, what we want to say, what we think ought to be said because it is necessary, useful, and true" (2005, 366). The fact of Foucault talking about truth may seem puzzling at first glance, but we should realize by now what he has in mind when he uses the word "truth". Like Nietzsche, Foucault sees truth as a useful fiction. Truth exists in the power relations, and it functions not only to establish domination, but also to stem its impact. An inspired depiction of Foucauldian truth is offered by O'Leary, who claims that such a fiction

> relates to reality by opening up virtual spaces that allow us to engage in a potentially transformative relation with the world; to bring about that which does not exist and to transform that which does exist. (O'Leary 2009, 87)

Socrates as the *parrhesiastes* par excellence is the one who takes great risk in questioning the accredited truths and practices of the Athenian society. His ethical work upon himself engages Socrates in tensed relationships with his fellow citizens, who are criticized for not taking care of themselves, or for their insufficient reflection. The same case goes for the Cynics, who challenged the comfortable thinking and behavior of their contemporaries. This was Nietzsche's case as well, who – in Rorty's view (1989, 96-108) –, made his life

a work of art precisely by his critical stance towards his inherited cultural present. For Foucault, the critique of the present as a voice of an alternative present is one of the most important features of philosophy. In today's world, the activity of inventing new forms of criticisms is an urgent task that links the aesthetics of existence with political engagement. Interpreting Kant's "What is Enlightenment?", the French thinker claims that

> we must obviously give a more positive content to what may be a philosophical ethos consisting in a critique of what we are saying, thinking, and doing, through a historical ontology of ourselves. (Foucault 1984d, 45)

So far, I have tried to answer the first line of objections regarding late Foucault's lack of public commitment. The other pattern of criticism states that – in the absence of a normative and procedural account of ethics – the aesthetics of existence leads to immoralism and individualism. Such objections are inspired either by a Habermasian perspective, or by the exigencies of analytic moral philosophy. This allegation is both easy and difficult to answer. It is difficult, because the whole collection of debates and arguments involved in these critiques is too vast and complex to approach in an article. But, at the same time, it is easy to answer such an objection, because it is anchored in a completely different field of presuppositions. Given the present situation, my strategy of answering is the latter. That is why I will lay open those presuppositions without entering in detail. Instead I will show that Foucault's ethics is constructed on a different set of assumptions, which have led him to a radically distinct purpose.

Following Habermas, Th. McCarthy argues that Foucault's representation of traditional morality, focused on codes and universal values, misses the point of "formal, procedural models" of modern ethics (McCarthy obviously refers here to Kant). In McCarthy's view, this point is to "establish a general framework of justice within which individuals and groups may pursue different conceptions of the good or beautiful life" (McCarthy 1994, 270-271). In other words, Foucault's ethics lacks a rational model of ethical evaluation. This is why it would be unable to advocate between moral disagreements, or to give an account of moral progress.

The presupposition of such a demand lies in the expectation that "serious" ethics can reveal moral truths and, in this way, it can set out an

objective decision making procedure. For the critics who share a view like this, the essential aim of moral philosophy is to find a practical solution, which can be embodied in laws, policies and other institutional regulations. But to ask this from Foucault would obviously be a misunderstanding. I am not saying that such a request is unreasonable *per se*, but rather that it is a mistake to ask a philosopher to give an account of something which he precisely rejects. And some critics are accusing late Foucault for not giving a normativist account of morality. But this is precisely what Foucault avoided his entire life. For him, the positive task of philosophy is the critique itself; not the discovery of an objective truth, neither a "politics of imperatives". Asking late Foucault a thing like these is like asking late Wittgenstein to give a more metaphysical and etymological account of meaning and truth. It is reasonable to judge an entire philosophy for lacking a thing or another, but we cannot ask that a certain piece of one's philosophy to contradict his entire view, just to be in accordance to an objection that we address precisely to his general perspective. In this regard, we cannot judge Foucault's aesthetics of existence for lacking a normative stance, since the critique of such a stance was a constant target for Foucault. Another answer to the objection above would be that we do not have to be Foucauldians all the way. We can learn the lessons of both Habermas (or Kant, or analytic ethics) and Foucault. The former would give us objective solutions for our public choices, and the latter would give us a critique of its potential dangers. In this sense, Foucault's philosophy could function as an excellent therapy.

However one might say that Foucault's ethical project it is still wrong, because it is contradictory. The contradiction lies in the fact that, on one hand, Foucault was repudiating a normative point of view, but, on the other hand, he urged us to do something about ourselves. Foucault is at the same time anti-normative and normative; and this is contradictory. A possible answer would be that it would be an error to take Foucault's use of normative terms as a politics of imperatives. When Foucault uses words like "we should", "we must", "we have to", these words do not bear moral weight. As we have already seen, he is pointing at a possibility rather than formulating an injunction. But nevertheless, the aesthetics of existence is publicly engaged and is depicted as a desirable model. This means an advisable model, i.e. an imperative one. Another answer to this last objection would be that Foucault's recommendations are not imperatives in a Kantian sense. His attitude is not entirely normative, but descriptive to a large extent. I mean descriptive in the same way that was Aristotelian ethics. In *Nichomachean Ethics*, Aristotle does

not offer a codified morality, but a model of happiness, conditioned by the cultivation of character. Ethical virtues are not imperatives, but conditional standards (If you want to be happy, you have to be virtuous). And – since I've mentioned Aristotle – we should bear in mind that the Greek *ethos* meant, among others, "character", "habit" or "custom". Though he was not fond of Aristotle, Foucault is not that far from the Stagirite. Foucauldian ethics is not a theory of moral regulations, but an account of ethical habits. It is not a normatively based code of conduct, but a general outlook, a perspective on a contemporary version of "good life". Not a single version, but a multitude of possibilities through which the selves folds and unfolds in an uncodifiable fashion.

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