

Ethics and politics in the postmodern condition

Tommaso Valentini, Department of Human Sciences, Guglielmo Marconi University, Rome — Italy

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ABSTRACT. In this paper I analyze the postmodern condition with particular reference to the ethical and political spheres. Postmodernism attempts a radical break with all of the major strands of post-Enlightenment thought. For postmodernists as the French Jean-François Lyotard and the Italian Gianni Vattimo, the orthodox Enlightenment “meta-narrative” of progress and the “speculative” narrative of Hegel and Marx have lost their explanatory force. In particular, Lyotard speaks about five large meta-narratives of Western culture: 1) Christianity (understood also in the secularized form which its values have taken into modernity); 2) Enlightenment; 3) Idealism as a “theory of progressive freedom in history”; 4) Marxism, and 5) Capitalism. According to Lyotard, one can consider “the incredulity” towards these meta-narratives (*métra-récits* or *grands récits*) as postmodern. He points out that after Auschwitz it is impossible to speak of rationality and progress in Western history: In the twentieth century the Nazi genocide showed that history is not a continuous ethical progress towards the best. From the philosophical point of view the precursor of postmodern atmosphere is Friedrich Nietzsche. This German philosopher elaborated a radically anti-metaphysical thought and proposed an ethic of emancipation. Postmodernists refer to Nietzsche’s thought and theorize ethical-political practices aimed at the emancipation of women and socially weak subjects. Postmodernism’s rejection of “totalizing” theories with universal pretensions is complemented by positive celebration of diversity or “difference” and emphasis on the ethical demands of “the other”: this is, for example, the ethical perspective of Michel Foucault.

KEYWORDS: *Anti-metaphysical thought, ethics of emancipation, Jean-François Lyotard, meta-narratives of Western culture, postmodernism*

Characteristics and varieties of postmodernism

Postmodernism is, at the same time, an aesthetic and a philosophical-political movement that characterizes our age. So, postmodernism can be understood as a variety of skeptical, “anti-essentialist” and “anti-humanist” positions across a range of different disciplinary contexts from art, architecture and literature to social theory, philosophy and psychoanalysis. Hostility to the West’s “modernist” assumptions is driven by a series of historical events and developments.

The twentieth-century horrors of world wars, totalitarianism, concentration camps and genocide, and a gradual relentless intellectual disillusionment with Marxism – understood as characteristic symptoms of “modernity” – are important sources of the “postmodern mood.” The exhaustion of artistic modernism provided a further and more literal impetus. Under the combined impact of these factors, the French philosophers Jean-François Lyotard and Jean Baudrillard have taken their leave from all “grand meta-narratives” of history, all universal claims to truth and any remaining faith in the Enlightenment project of rationalizing every aspect of life. Paradoxically, this philosophical postmodernism shades almost imperceptibly into a sociological and historically grounded account of postmodern thought and culture as expressions of the present state of Western society. In both philosophical and sociological variants, however, postmodernism’s rejection of “totalizing” theories with universal pretensions is complemented by a positive celebration of diversity or “difference”, and an emphasis on the ethically indispensable but always elusive demands of “the other”.

In this paper I try to underline the philosophical and social aspects of the “postmodern mood”.

With postmodernism, it is as if we pass through the looking-glass of Western reason: in particular, the postmodern philosophers analyze and criticize the great claims of modern Western reason.

They generally state ironically that what was previously most solid “melts into air” (1). Postmodernism attempts a radical break with all of the major strands of Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment thought. For postmodernists, both the orthodox Enlightenment “meta-narrative” of progress and emancipation, and the “speculative” narrative of Hegel and Marx have lost their explanatory force. Phenomenology (of Edmund Husserl) and existentialism (of Jean-Paul Sartre) are condemned as varieties of humanism or nostalgic philosophies of the subject. As we shall see, Michel Foucault’s thought anticipated many aspects of postmodernism and is a form of anti-humanism.

According to many authors, it is impossible to provide a straightforward definition of postmodernism. Not only are there conflicting views about what postmodernism is, but postmodernist positions are also adopted within a variety of disciplinary settings. There is a wide range of contexts for what are nevertheless related discourses of modernity and postmodernity. These include history and sociology, philosophy, art and art theory, as well as literature and literary criticism.

Postmodernism: four distinct but interrelated contexts of formation

According to David West, the genealogy of postmodernist thought involves at least four distinct but interrelated contexts of formation (2).

The artistic movement

In the first place, postmodernism is an artistic movement that was born in reaction to (rational) modernism and is usually located in the 1960s. Architecture was the first medium to exhibit clear postmodernist tendencies. These include eclecticism, ambiguity and plasticity of the forms.

In contrast to artistic modernism, which affirms the quasi-religious significance of art, postmodernism rejects any absolute distinction between high and low culture, between art and entertainment. Walter Benjamin's germinal essay on the *Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* (1936) is thus an important clue to the understanding of artistic postmodernity. Benjamin discusses the disruption of the "aura" of the great work of art as a result of the easy availability of copies produced by techniques of mechanical reproduction such as printing, photography and sound recording. Artistic postmodernism can be seen as the outcome of this levelling and demystifying tendency (even though Benjamin foresaw a different outcome), which has been reinforced by the extensive role of communications and information technology in contemporary societies.

Silvio Gaggi also identifies the "epistemological skepticism" as key features of artistic postmodernity. Einstein's relativity theory and quantum mechanics, notably in the form of Heisenberg's "uncertainty principle", undermine both notions of absolute space and time and deterministic interpretations of causality. According to Gaggi, artistic and scientific tendencies contribute to both the mood of uncertainty and flux, and the greater openness to non-Western cultures and worldviews, which is characteristic of postmodernism (3).

The fascism and the nazi genocide

A second important context for the formation of postmodernism, however, is provided by the history of Europe and the West in the twentieth century. This history includes two unprecedentedly destructive world wars, the rise of fascism in Germany, Italy and Spain, and a protracted "Cold War" maintained by balanced nuclear terror of "mutually assured destruction". In the meantime, the colonial mission of modern and "enlightened" European nations to civilize "barbarian" neighbors has lost conviction. Former colonies have been relinquished to movements of national liberation and the atrocities of former colonial regimes widely recognized. Most horrifying, the Nazi genocide of more than six million Jews, communists, homosexuals, gypsies and disabled people (and many others) dealt a fatal blow to any complacent reading of Western history as the privileged site of civilization. Erroneously the West saw itself as the embodiment of progress and the very antithesis of barbarism. In Germany, one of Europe's most economically developed, artistically cultured and philosophically creative nations, there had emerged a regime. But the Holocaust is shocking not, or not simply, as an atavistic lapse from the path of progress and Enlightenment, but rather as a demonstration of dangers intrinsic to modernity itself. As Hannah Arendt, Theodor Adorno and Jean-François Lyotard have highlighted, the Holocaust was a very modern affair. The genocide of six million people was carefully planned, administered with bureaucracy and carried out with considerable technological inventiveness. In Zygmunt Bauman's words: "The Holocaust was a unique encounter between the old tensions which modernity ignored, slighted or failed to resolve – and the powerful instruments of rational and effective action that modern development itself brought into being" (4). The combined effect of these catastrophic events of recent European history, from imperialistic slaughter to Nazi genocide, is thus a dual challenge to the West's self-conscious modernity. Is modernity a secure achievement of the West? Is modernity really an achievement at all?

From these criticisms of modern reason and its totalitarian consequences many authors (as Lyotard, Foucault and Jacques Derrida) propose an "ethics of the other" and a "politics of difference".

The collapse of communist regimes and the end of ideologies

Another important episode from this historical period provides a third context for the formation of postmodernism, but one that is, this time, both historical and intellectual in nature. This is the fate of Marxism. It is also in the twentieth century, after all, that Marxism completed its evolution from theory to practice, becoming the official ideology of a number of “actually existing” socialist regimes (5). In the twentieth century we saw the bureaucratization of the socialist idea and the Stalinization of the Soviet Union; we saw party purges, “show-trials”, massacres and the “gulag” of prison camps under Stalin, the Soviet invasions of Hungary in 1956 and Czechoslovakia in 1968. The collapse of communist regimes in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe since 1989 has eroded any remaining confidence in the Marxist project. We can say that Chinese communism survives only by dint of a combination of market reforms and repression. Intellectual disillusionment has been particularly marked in France. In post-war France, Marxism was not only a powerful political force, it also dominated the intellectual scene in a way unparalleled in most other Western countries. Louis Althusser’s structuralist Marxism exerted considerable influence for a number of years. Even within existentialism and phenomenology, Marxist theory was influential. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir were aligned with the revolutionary left for much of their careers. They were all, at various times, members of the French Communist Party. Besides, an intellectual such as Roger Garaudy was secretary of the party; Lyotard and Baudrillard belonged to a variety of Marxist grouping; Foucault was a member of the French Communist Party, albeit only for a short time. Against this political tendency of many French intellectuals, the liberal sociologist Raymond Aron wrote, in 1955, his famous book *The Opium of the Intellectuals* (6). This background is important because Marxism is arguably the most frequent, if not always the most explicit, target of postmodernist critics of modernism. Warnings about the dangers of “totalizing” theory as well as skepticism about the unfounded pretensions of the philosophy of history are most plausibly read as references to Marxism. For intellectuals who regarded Marxism as the best available response to this more liberal Enlightenment, it is not surprising that Marxism’s failure is taken as final proof of the bankruptcy of the Enlightenment project and modernism. As the American sociologist Daniel Bell wrote, we are at the “end of ideology”, i.e., the end of the great philosophical account of history (7). As we can also see with Lyotard, postmodernism rejects all philosophies of history and provides a radical challenge to the most basic categories of Western philosophy and metaphysics.

The philosophical thought after Nietzsche and Heidegger: the deconstruction of Western metaphysics

Postmodernism defines itself by its rejection of any commitment to modernity or Enlightenment, including the dialectic of Hegel and Marx. It is here that anti-humanism (i.e. anti-anthropocentrism) and the critique of the subject, from Nietzsche and Heidegger to structuralism and post-structuralism, play a decisive role in preparing the ground for a more radical break with the Enlightenment project. In particular, in the German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900) we find an anticipation of postmodernism’s ideas (8). He denies that metaphysics is possible and theorizes the age of nihilism; furthermore, he assumes a loss of faith in God and in the immortality of the soul (“God is dead”, and religious values are false). Nietzsche makes use of an idea that derives from Heraclitus in his notion of the “eternal return” (*ewige Wiederkehr*) of things. After all possible combinations of the elements of the world have been realized, there is an interval of a previously undetermined duration, and then the cycle begins again, and so on, indefinitely.

According to Nietzsche, everything that happens in the world repeats itself in identical fashion time and again. Everything returns eternally, including everything that is evil, miserable and vile. But men can transform the world and themselves by means of transmutation of all values (*Umwertung aller Werte*), and can progress toward becoming supermen (*Übermensch*). Thus Nietzsche's affirmation of life is not limited to one's accepting and wishing to live only once, but an infinite number of times. Nietzsche is opposed to all the equalitarian, humanistic and democratic trends of his age. He is a champion of mighty personalities. The highest good is life itself, which culminates in the will of power (*Wille zur Macht*). Man must go beyond himself and become something superior to man, just as man is superior to the monkey: this is the theory of the superman. Nietzsche models his superman on unscrupulous and immoral Renaissance personalities who nevertheless had gigantic capacities for life and who were strong, impulsive and energetic (for example, *The Prince of Machiavelli*).

Nietzsche is particularly hostile to the Kantian ethics of duty, and also to Christian morality. He values only the strong, impulsive life which has the will to dominate. This represents good, whereas weakness, sickness and failure are evil. Compassion is the greatest evil. Thus Nietzsche distinguishes two types of morality. The morality of the masters is that of powerful individuals of superior vitality; this morality applies only to these superior beings and is based on the exigency and on the affirmation of vital impulses. In contrast, the morality of the slaves is that of weak and miserable people, of degenerates; it is governed by lack of confidence in life and the respect for compassion, humility, patience, and the like. Nietzsche says that it is a morality of *resentment*, which opposes everything that is superior and which therefore affirms every form of equalitarianism. Nietzsche attributes this character of resentment to Christian morality.

We can therefore understand the reasons why the thought of Nietzsche has been a point of reference for the totalitarian culture (above all Nazism) and for the postmodernism. Nazism referred to Nietzsche's ideal of the superman. Martin Heidegger and postmodern philosophers referred to Nietzsche's criticisms of Western metaphysics (9). We have to say that also the German philosopher Jürgen Habermas, in his book *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, examines at some length Nietzsche's influence on "postmodern thought." He shows in which way Nietzsche's aesthetic mode of world interpretation became of central importance for Heidegger's and Derrida's critique of the Enlightenment, and for Bataille's and Foucault's attempts to deconstruct reason. Nietzsche's "perspectivism", and his "genealogical" subversion of the language of "good and evil" by means of a theory of power, introduced into contemporary discourse, so Habermas, the seductive idea of an "unmasking critique of reason that sets itself outside the horizon of reason" (10). So Habermas describes Nietzsche's thought, in a critical way, as the "turning point" to postmodernity.

Jean-François Lyotard: the postmodern as the end of "meta-narratives" of the west

The term "postmodernism" first entered the philosophical lexicon in 1979, with the publication of *The Postmodern Condition* by the French intellectual Jean-François Lyotard (1924-1998). During his career, Lyotard occupied a variety of political positions ranging from Marxism and "spontaneist" anarchism to his later identification with the "mood" of postmodernity.

Lyotard describes postmodernity as a "condition" or "mood" that corresponds to the present stage of "postindustrial society." Postmodernity is, therefore, a sign of the obsolescence of modernity. Lyotard defines modernity in terms of the role played in Western societies since

the Enlightenment by “meta-narratives” for the legitimation of both science and state. A meta-narrative in Lyotard’s sense is equivalent to a philosophy of history. The contingent events of history are understood in terms of an all-inclusive narrative, which is supposed to encapsulate “the” meaning of history. The reliance on legitimating meta-narratives is to “the choice called the Occident” (11).

Lyotard proceeds to list a number of forms which meta-narratives (*métra-récits* or *grands récits*) can take. In particular, he speaks about five large meta-narratives of Western culture: 1) Christianity (understood also in secularized form that its values have taken into modernity); 2) Enlightenment; 3) Idealism; 4) Marxism, and 5) Capitalism. According to Lyotard, one can consider “the incredulity” towards these meta-narratives as postmodern. Clearly these “ideologies” or “philosophies of history” are theories of social progress and modernization. He points out that after Auschwitz it is impossible to speak of rationality and progress in Western history: the horrible experience in the death camps have shown that history does not work any rational project, as Marx and Hegel’s dialectic wanted to show (12).

Postmodernism is skepticism about all philosophy of history, all claims to foresee the inevitable goal of history and all political ideologies which promise to lead us to that goal. There is even skepticism about the universal validity of the values that define a particular historical future as good or bad. The “death of God” announced by Nietzsche is closely followed by the death of history and progress. There is even a loss of faith in anything other than the instrumental effectiveness of Western rationality. We can say that the Enlightenment project has fallen victim to its own skeptical onslaught against religious dogma, tradition and authority.

If the mood of postmodernity is defined in terms of incredulity towards meta-narratives, the politics of postmodernity is radically anti-authoritarian. The skeptical mood of postmodernity is also intolerant of grand projects and ambitious political programmes, which are a prominent feature of modern states and ideologies. Attempts to unify society artificially according to some grand “totalizing” theory or ideology are no longer convincing. Even more clearly, the consequences of such attempts have often been disastrous. The twentieth century witnessed unlimited global wars, bureaucratically organized genocide, as well as fascist and Stalinist totalitarianism.

Totalitarianism, for Lyotard and other postmodernists (as the Italian philosopher Gianni Vattimo), is perhaps the quintessential expression of the modernist search for unity and order. Instead, society should be recognized as a “heterogeneity of language games” or “institutions in patches”. Far from being susceptible to theorizing in the unifying style of Newtonian mechanics, society consists of “clouds of sociality” more amenable to a “pragmatics of language particles”. With the demise of totalizing theories of society, the value or even viability of centralized state politics is also brought in doubt. The (central) state cannot deal with the irreducible complexity of contemporary society except by restoring to the totalitarian imposition of unity and order. For the mood of postmodernity, “consensus has become an outmoded and suspect value” (13).

Only the diversity and heterogeneity of social and cultural forms can resist the invasive modernist spirit of “totality”. It follows that only temporary and local consensus is desirable, only provisional contracts should be sought. We can say that postmodernism intensifies the democratic impulses, ensuring respect for the diversity of viewpoints and their right to a voice. Postmodernist principles provide strong arguments for democratic institutions, including the mechanisms capable of preventing absolute state power and civil associations beyond the state.

Michel Foucault: the genealogy of the subject and the birth of biopolitics

The thought of Michel Foucault anticipated many themes of postmodernism: the critique of Western metaphysics, the rejection of Hegel's dialectic and historicism, the will for the political emancipation of citizens, a "microphysics of power". We can say that his ideal masters were the so-called masters of suspicion: Marx, Nietzsche and Freud. He coined the terms "biopower/biopolitics" with which he referred to the practices of modern nations and their regulation of their subjects through "an explosion of numerous and diverse techniques for achieving the subjugation of bodies and the control of populations" (14).

Michel Foucault (1926-1984) studied in Paris at the *École Normale Supérieure*, where he obtained *licences* in philosophy and psychology, before passing the *agrégation de philosophie* in 1951. He taught at the University of Tunis, returning to Paris after the events of May 1968 to become Head of the Philosophy Department at the University of Paris VIII (Vincennes). In 1969 he was elected to the *Collège de France*, where he chose for his chair the title of Professor of the History of Thought. He lectured widely in North America, Brazil, and Europe during the 1970s and 1980s. Throughout this period Foucault was active in a number of political movements, including the *Groupe d'information sur les prisons*, and protests in support of the radical newspapers *Libération*, immigrant workers, and gay liberation. He also took part in anti-racist campaigns and various actions on behalf of Soviet dissidents and the Solidarity movement in Poland (15).

Foucault's distinctive approach to the history of "systems of thought" relies upon his concept of *discourse*, which he defines in terms of rules governing the production of statements in a given empirical field at a given time. The study of these rules forms the basis of his "archaeology of knowledge" (*archéologie du savoir*). He also developed a distinctive genealogical approach to the history of particular formations of knowledge and power such as criminality, sexuality, and forms of *governmentality*. These govern not only the ways in which power is exercised over individuals or groups, but also the way in which subjects of delinquency, sexuality, or government are constituted. Finally, he outlines a distinctive concept of ethics understood in terms of kinds of techniques and relation to the self through which individuals govern their own behavior and make themselves into certain kinds of ethical subjects.

Micro-physics of power, bio-power and governmentality

As we said, Foucault accepts the critical implication of the decentring of the subject effected by both the Marxist theory of ideology and Freudian psychoanalysis, which unmask the subject as the formed and deformed product of social and psychological conditions.

According to him, it is necessary to break irrevocably with the humanist conception of the subject. Furthermore, Foucault's anti-humanism – like that of Louis Althusser, one of Foucault's teachers at the *École Normale Supérieure* in Paris – is explicitly political. According to one of his many programmatic statements, the objective of his work "has been to create a history of the different models, by which, in our culture, human beings are made subjects," (16) subjects in the sense of "subjection" to the authority and power.

Foucault is Nietzschean above all in his conviction that power and knowledge are really two sides of the same coin: "Power and knowledge directly imply one another". He sometimes even speaks of "power/knowledge as an invisible amalgam" (17).

According to Nietzsche and Foucault, knowledge is always the relative and questionable

expression of a particular constellation of relations of power and force. On the other hand, “the exercise of power is accompanied or paralleled by the production of apparatuses of knowledge” (18). The exercise of power requires knowledge. In Barry Smart’s words: “Knowledge is not neutral or objective but rather is a product of power relations. In other words, knowledge is political in the sense that its conditions of existence or possibility include power relations” (19). The symbiotic relationship between power and knowledge is, as we shall see, at the heart of Foucault’s account of parallel emergence in modern societies of human sciences as “disciplines”. He calls this kind of power “disciplinary power”.

With Foucault’s return to Nietzsche, the concept of power is placed at the centre of his analysis, and it is important for him to avoid any misunderstanding of its nature. He contests a number of common assumptions that, in his view, tend to blind us to the multifarious manifestations and devious stratagems of power. In the first place, we should not be limited by a “juridical” view, which sees power only in the negative, prohibitive functions of a repressive state apparatus, law and police. This view is rendered obsolete by the increasingly positive and productive deployment of power in modern society. Other aspects of the juridical view obscure the nature of this deployment. Power is seen as something that is possessed and consciously exercised by an agent or group of agents over others in order to further its own interests. But power is not a thing that can be possessed or owned in the way such models require. Foucault is unwilling to reify power in this way, preferring to speak of “power relation” rather than “power” in order to emphasize that power is not a thing but a mode of interaction: “Power exists only when it is put into action” (20). Nor can power relations be traced to a single underlying mechanism or source such as capitalism or the ruling class. Power constitutes a much broader and more diffuse field than such theories (like modern liberalism) imply. Nor, finally, is it correct to assume that power always involves straightforwardly “binary” or “top-down” relations. Power is not “a propriety located at the summit of the social order employed in a descending direction over and throughout the entire social domain” (21).

Relationships of domination exercised by one group over another (for example, by the bourgeoisie over the proletariat or by men over women) are predicated on more finely grained and multidirectional relations of power and resistance at the “micro-level” of society. Accordingly, social explanation should give priority to this micro-level: in this regard Foucault speaks explicitly of a “microphysics of power”. In Alan Sheridan’s words: “It is a matter of examining how the techniques and procedures of power operating routinely at the level of everyday life have been appropriated or engaged by more general power or economic interests rather than the converse” (22). Foucault’s more constructive remarks about the emergence of new forms of power in Western societies illuminate these rather abstract critical points. He is particularly interested in what he calls the “threshold of modernity”: the transition from the “classical age” of the seventeenth century to the “modern world” is inaugurated with the French Revolution of 1789. Characteristic of this period is a double operation of power, by which the “repressive hypothesis” implicit in the juridical conception of power as exclusively prohibitive diverts attention from power’s more productive activities. This is significant because, to the extent that we are unaware of these activities, we are less able to resist them: “Power as a pure limit set on freedom, is, at least in our society, the general form of its acceptability” (23).

The repressive hypothesis is increasingly functional to the operations of power as the more exclusively repressive, “classical” mode of government, symbolized in the sovereign’s “power of life and death” over the subject, is gradually replaced by the productive management of individuals and people, which Foucault calls “bio-power”, e.g. “power of the life (*bios*)”. Regimes become “managers of life and survival, of bodies and race: “What might be called a society’s ‘threshold of modernity’ has been reached when the life of the species is wagered on its own political strategies” (24). The rise of bio-power is also associated with the spread of racist theories in the nineteenth century.

The deployment of bio-power involves a series of transformations in the nature of what Foucault calls “governmentality”. This term refers to an increasingly autonomous “governmental rationality”, developed since the Renaissance alongside the narrower *raison d’état* first in Machiavelli’s *The Prince* (25). An important contribution to the emergence of distinctively modern forms of governmentality is made by a number of discourses on the “science of *police* or policy”, written from the seventeenth century onwards. Although *police* and “policy” are now words normally associated with straightforwardly repressive functions of the state, Foucault reminds us of the originally much broader meaning.

Early discussions of policing concerned a lot more than law and order in the contemporary sense. They dealt with nothing less than the welfare of the population as a whole, and so helped to formulate a distinctively “pastoral” conception of power. The centralizing and bureaucratizing tendencies of modern societies have often been highlighted, for example by Max Weber and theorists associated with the Frankfurt School. However, for Foucault what is particularly novel about pastoral power is its attention not just to the state of community as a whole, but to each individual in particular and in detail throughout the course of his or her life. The “individualizing” attention of pastoral power is inspired by the example of the Catholic Church, which, through the confessional and other techniques, develops “a knowledge of the conscience and an ability to direct it” (26). Adapting such techniques, modern states apply a similarly pastoral, and similarly intrusive, attention to the health, wealth and welfare of their populations.

As Foucault’s conception of “power/knowledge” would lead us to expect, the rise of pastoral power fosters a new knowledge of “man.” It is no surprise, then, that the threshold of modernity also sees the emergence of a number of new disciplines within the humanities and social sciences: statistical disciplines of economics, demography, epidemiology and sociology. Typically, these describe general laws governing the normal behavior of the population as a whole; in fact, they give rise to the notions of population and normality as we understand them. These disciplines enhance the state’s ability to control and care for the health of its population, to ensure adequate human resources for its military activities, to promote economic growth and so on. But pastoral power also requires detailed and systematic knowledge of individuals and, consequently, a radical break with the Aristotelian view of knowledge as exclusively concerned with the generality of *genus* and *species*. The more individualizing disciplines of medicine, psychiatry, psychoanalysis and education study individuals in all their potential eccentricity. Thus, in *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault describes how, with the emergence of modern prison, “a specific mode of subjection was able to give birth to man as an object of knowledge for a discourse with a ‘scientific’ status” (27). Similarly, the clinic and the asylum were sites for the development of modern medicine and psychiatry.

As these examples suggest, though, pastoral power is not purely a matter of knowledge but

involves, in addition, a range of unmistakably material practices and interventions. These take two principal forms: the global “regulatory controls” of a “bio-politics of the population” and an individualizing “discipline” or “anatomy-politics of the body”. It is the latter modality of pastoral power that is most interesting and distinctively modern. Alongside the emergence of human sciences there is an unprecedented expansion of disciplinary practices, deployed by both state and non-state institutions (in some cases initiated variously by “do-gooders”, reformers, helpful doctors or concerned aristocrats). Disciplinary power is directed primarily at the body; it is designed to produce “subjected and practiced bodies, ‘docile’ bodies” (28). But at the same time it aims at psychological effects. In Barry Smart’s words: “Discipline is a power which infiltrates the very body and psyche of the individual. Which transforms the life and time of the individual into labour-power, that property essential to the capitalist mode of production” (29). A variety of techniques are developed to this end, including detailed schedules and timetables, exercises and training, examinations, report-keeping, isolation of inmates and so on. Emblematic of such practices is Bentham’s *Panopticon*, which Foucault describes as an “architectural figure” of disciplinary power. Jeremy Bentham (1748-1832) designed a prison building with individual cells radiating from a central observation point, ensuring the permanent visibility of the inmates to the warder but their complete invisibility to one another. In Foucault’s words, the *Panopticon* is a way of “arranging spatial unities” in order “to induce in the inmate a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power” (30). As this example also makes clear, in the modern period there is a “reversal of visibility” between sovereign and subject. The focus of attention is no longer the sovereign but the humble individual, who is the object of an ever intensifying surveillance. Similar disciplinary techniques are developed in a range of “carceral” institutions modeled on the prison (in schools, hospitals, asylums, factories and barracks), all concerned with “increasing the utility of individuals”. These characteristically modern institutions are not so much humane products of a more enlightened and rational age as more efficient and more intrusive instruments of an expansive power. The constitution of the subject as an object of disciplinary practices and objectifying disciplines is, however, only half the story. Of equal significance for the genealogy of modern subjectivity is a parallel series of processes, constituting the individual subject *as subject*, (“subjection” to the authority and disciplinary power). Thus Foucault’s history of sexuality traces the emergence of a series of discourses and practices that are designed to make the subject more reliably and extensively responsible for itself. The explosion of discourses on sexuality in the nineteenth century, with their minute attention to the details of “perverse” sexual variation from the norm, is related to the emergent bio-politics of population, but it also contributes to the more intimate constitution of the subject as subject. Important episodes in this story are the Catholic confessional, Freudian psychoanalysis and the promotion of “sexuality” from a relatively unimportant fact about bodies to something decisive for the individual’s sense of identity. Foucault’s analysis implies a critique of the “depth hermeneutics” practiced in different ways in both psychoanalysis and the confession. The deep truths about the mind or the soul which these practices of patient interrogation are supposed to uncover really function as instances of power. Far from uncovering some hidden meaning or truth, they inscribe in the subject “truths” they themselves produce. In the process, the subject is enticed into assuming responsibility for more and more regions of his or her life.

“Ethics of the other” and “politics of difference”

Foucault’s account of power has radical implications for political theory and practice. In particular, it undermines any “totalizing theory” which, like Marxism, seeks to unify the diversity of social and historical events within a single explanatory framework. Theorizing the complex field of relations of power as an organized totality is a strategy which, even in the hands of critical intellectuals or socialist militants, contributes inevitably to the reproduction of domination. As the experience of bureaucratic state socialism demonstrates, rulers rely on totalizing theories in order to legitimate their authority and exercise power more effectively. During conversations with his friend and colleague Gilles Deleuze (1925-1995) (31), Foucault intimates a less authoritarian role for theory. Just as relations of power are complex and dispersed, so should resistance be multicentred and diverse. The multiplicity of power relations requires an equally multifarious resistance to instance of power, which can nonetheless be conceived as interconnected or as a network.

In Sheridan’s words: “Because ‘power’ is multiple and ubiquitous, the struggle against it must be localized. Equally, however, because it is a network and not a collection of isolated points, each localized struggle induces effects on the entire network. Struggle cannot be totalized – a single, centralized, hierarchized organization setting out to seize a single, centralized, hierarchized power; but it can be *serial*, in terms of *horizontal* links between one point of struggle and another” (32). Similarly, social and political theory should be a “local and regional practice”. Rather than a single “master” theory, there should be a plurality of theories engaging with power at different points and to different ends. The proper stance of the intellectual is also revised: «The intellectual’s role is no longer to place himself “somewhat ahead and to the side” in order to express the stifled truth of collectivity; rather it is to struggle against the forms of power that transform him into its object and instrument in the sphere of “knowledge”, “truth”, “consciousness”, and “discourse”» (33).

Intellectuals should not put themselves forward as representatives of the people or vanguard of the proletariat. They should be authors of “politics of difference, diversity and autonomous organizations”. Examples of these types of intellectuals are Judith Butler (a disciple of Foucault), Julia Kristeva and Luce Irigaray: in particular, they attempt to understand women in their irreducible difference. They are feminist and theorize woman from a woman’s point of view in order to discover a “feminine feminine”, and so overcome a long tradition of regarding woman as a lack, as deficient and subordinate other of man. They seek to liberate “the feminine from male philosophical thought”: therefore they are critical of the ways in which psychoanalysis and philosophy universalize an essentially male representation of humanity. Because language, society and culture are all constituted on the basis of this false universalization of male perspectives, interests and desires, women can only gain full representation by means of thoroughgoing social reconstruction. On the basis of the political thought of Foucault, they criticize Western culture and present themselves as intellectuals of “rupture, renovation and revolution” (34).

Notes

(1) See Marshall Berman, *All That Is Solid Melts into Air*, London, Verso, 1982. This phrase is used by Karl Marx to describe the “bourgeois epoch” in K. Marx and F. Engels, *The Communist Manifesto* (1848).

(2) See David West, *Postmodernism in Continental Philosophy. An Introduction*, Polity Press, Cambridge UK, 2010, pp. 209-241.

(3) See Silvio Gaggi, *Modern/Postmodern: A Study in Twentieth-Century Arts and Ideas*, University of Pennsylvania Press, Philadelphia, 1989.

(4) Zygmunt Bauman, *Modernity and the Holocaust*, Cambridge, Polity Press, 1989, p. XIV.

- (5) The question whether Marxist theory should be held responsible for the defects of actually existing socialism has a long history within Marxism: see, e.g., György Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness*, [*Geschichte und Klassenbewusstsein*, 1923]. Trans. by Rodney Livingstone, Merlin Press, 1967; and Cornelius Castoriadis, *The Imaginary Institution of Society*, [*L'institution imaginaire de la société*, 1975], trans. by Kathleen Blamey, MIT Press Cambridge, 1987.
- (6) See Raymond Aron, *The Opium of the Intellectuals*, [*L'Opium des intellectuels*, Paris, 1955], Transaction Publishers, 2009. Raymond Aron (1905-1983) was the foremost political and social theorist of post-World War II France known for his skeptical analyses of leftist ideologies. He was well known both in the United States and the United Kingdom, serving as Andrew D. White Professor-At-Large at Cornell University. He also taught at Columbia and Oxford. He authored more than forty books, including *Main Currents in Sociological Thought*, and *The Imperial Republic: The United States and the World, 1945–1973*, all published in new editions by Transaction. See also Stephen W. Sawyer – Iain Stewart (eds.), *In Search of the Liberal Moment: Democracy, Anti-totalitarianism, and Intellectual Politics in France since 1950*, London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2016.
- (7) See Daniel Bell, *The End of Ideology: On the Exhaustion of Political Ideas in the Fifties*, Harvard University Press, Harvard, 1960, 2000, second edition. Daniel Bell (1919-2011) was an American sociologist, writer, editor, and professor emeritus at Harvard University, best known for his seminal contributions to the study of post-industrialism. He has been described as “one of the leading American intellectuals of the postwar era.” His three best known works are *The End of Ideology* (1960), *The Coming of Post-Industrial Society* (1973), and *The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism* (1976). He described himself as a “socialist in economics, a liberal in politics, and a conservative in culture.” See also Nathan Liebowitz, *Daniel Bell and the Agony of Modern Liberalism*, Westport, Greenwood Press, 1985.
- (8) See Clayton Koelb (ed.), *Nietzsche as Postmodernist: Essays Pro and Contra*, New York, State University of New York Press, 1990; Dave Robinson, *Nietzsche and Postmodernism*, Totem Books, Flint (Michigan), 1995; Ken Gemes, *Postmodernism's Use and Abuse of Nietzsche*, in “Philosophy and Phenomenological Research”, V. 62, N. 2, 2001, pp. 337-360.
- (9) See Gianni Vattimo, *The End of Modernity: Nihilism and Hermeneutics in Postmodern Culture*, Jon R. Snyder (trans.), Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, 1988; Louis P. Blond, *Heidegger and Nietzsche: Overcoming Metaphysics*, London, Continuum, 2010.
- (10) Jürgen Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, [first German edition: *Der philosophische Diskurs der Moderne: Zwölf Vorlesungen*, Frankfurt a.M., Suhrkamp, 1985], Translated by Frederick G. Lawrence, Cambridge, MIT Press, 1990, p. 96; see also Ludwig Nagl, *The Enlightenment – A Stranded Project? Habermas on Nietzsche as a “Turning Point” to Postmodernity*, in “History of European Ideas”, V. 11, 1989, pp. 743-750.
- (11) Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, [French first edition: 1979], Translated by Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 1984, p. 8.
- (12) About the Hegelian and Marxist dialectic see also Andrea Gentile – Tommaso Valentini (eds.), *Dialectic. The Different Meanings of a Theoretical, Historical and Political Concept*, in “Areté. International Journal of Philosophy, Human & Social Sciences”, V. 4, 2019, pp. 7-362.
- (13) Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, p. 66.
- (14) Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction*, (first French edition: 1976). Translated by Robert Hurley, London, Allen Lane/Penguin, 1978, p. 140.
- (15) See the biography of James Miller, *The Passion of Michel Foucault*, New York Simon, 1993.
- (16) Michel Foucault, *Afterword: The Subject and the Power*, in H.L. Dreyfus and P. Rabinow, *Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics*, Brighton, Harvester, 1982, p. 208.
- (17) Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, (French first edition: 1975). Translated by Alan Sheridan, London, Allen Lane/Penguin, 1977, p. 27.
- (18) Barry Smart, *Foucault, Marxism and Critique*, London, Routledge, 2013, p. 84.
- (19) Ibidem, p. 81.
- (20) Michel Foucault, *Afterword: The Subject and the Power*, in H.L. Dreyfus and P. Rabinow, *Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics*, Brighton, Harvester, 1982, p. 219.
- (21) Ibidem.
- (22) Alan Sheridan, *Michel Foucault: The Will to Truth*, London, Routledge, 1990, p. 83.
- (23) Michel Foucault, *History of Sexuality*, V. 1, *An Introduction*, Allen Lane/Penguin, London, 1978, p. 86.
- (24) Ibidem, p. 137.
- (25) See Graham Burchell – Colin Gordon – Peter Miller, *The Foucault Effect: Studies in Governmentality*, Chicago, Chicago University Press, 1991.

- (26) Michel Foucault: *Afterword: The Subject and the Power*, in H.L. Dreyfus and P. Rabinow, *Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics*, Brighton, Harvester, 1982, p. 214.
- (27) Michel Foucault (1975), *Discipline and Punish*, London, Allen Lane/Penguin 1977, p. 24.
- (28) Ibidem, p. 138. See also Michel Foucault, *Naissance de la biopolitique. Cours au Collège de France 1978-79*, Paris, Gallimard-Seuil, 2004; Roberto Esposito, *Bíos: Biopolitics and Philosophy*, translated by and with an Introduction by Timoty Campbell, Bristol, University Presses Marketing, 2008; Thomas Lemke, *Biopolitics: An Advanced Introduction*, translated by E.F. Trump, New York – London, New York University Press, 2011; Johanna Oksala, *Foucault, Politics, and Violence*, Evanston, Northwestern University Press, 2012.
- (29) Barry Smart, *Foucault, Marxism and Critique*, London, Routledge, 2013, p. 113.
- (30) Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish* (1975), London, Allen Lane/Penguin, 1977, pp. 200-201.
- (31) See, for example, the conversation (transcript of 1972) between Michel Foucault and Gilles Deleuze, which discusses the links between the struggles of women, homosexuals, prisoners etc and class struggle, as well as the relationship between theory, practice and power. This transcript first appeared in English in the book *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews by Michel Foucault*, edited by Donald F. Bouchard, Cornell University Press, 1980. See also Yoshiyuki Sato, *Pouvoir et resistance: Foucault, Deleuze, Derrida, Althusser*, Preface de Étienne Balibar, Paris, L'Harmattan, 2007; Isabelle Garo, *Foucault, Deleuze, Althusser & Marx. La politique dans la philosophie*, Paris, Demopolis, 2011.
- (32) Alan Sheridan, *Michel Foucault: The Will to Truth*, London, Routledge & Kegan, 1990, pp. 139-140.
- (33) Michel Foucault, *Intellectuals and Power, in Language, Counter-memory, Practice*, trans. D.F. Bouchard and S. Simon, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, 1977, p. 208.
- (34) See Linda J. Nicholson (ed.), *Feminism/Postmodernism*, London, Routledge, 1990; Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, London, Routledge, 1990, second edition 1999; Sara Ahmed, *Differences That Matter: Feminist Theory and Postmodernism*, Cambridge University Press, 1998 ; Dawn C. Wallin, *Postmodern Feminism and Educational Policy Development*, in "McGill Journal of Education", V. 36, N.1, 2001, pp. 27-44; A. Lanre-Abbas Bolatito, *Feminism in the Postmodernist Age*, in "The Journal of Social, Political and Economic Studies", 28, 2003, pp. 355-368.

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