

“Freedom in Postmodernity: A Foucauldian Understanding”

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Abstract

This article deals with Michel Foucault’s notion of freedom. The notion of freedom is mostly present in Foucault’s later works. Foucault’s philosophical approach is intensely critical with regard to the very assumptions that are conventionally held to be necessary for any meaningful vision of freedom, subverting both the essentialist conception of the subject and the teleological vision of the progressive emancipation of humanity. He repudiates the modern idea of liberation through truth about the real nature: there is no liberating truth about the “real” situation, essence and good. Foucault advocates a ‘certain kind’ of freedom that requires neither a concept of the anterior subject nor teleology of liberation. Freedom, according to Foucault, is a practice, a kind of positive resistance. Foucault sees the ethic of the concern for the self as practice of freedom. Although the individual cannot get outside of power relations, which produces his own self, he can participate in the self making; in process of defining himself.

Key Words: Foucault, subjectivity, freedom, postmodernity, power-relations, resistance, aesthetics, existence, art etc.

Introduction

There has been a variety of notions of freedom. We can trace several phases in the process of its transformation. The ancient notion of freedom as political phenomenon, with its priority of a political matrix and acceptance that not all men are free, contradicts the modern liberal one, born through the works of the Enlightenment thinkers. But the enchantment with reason, autonomy, and individuality in modernity seem to have lost its power in the light of the post-modern death of the subject, meta-narratives and metaphysics. If liberalism is concerned with human freedom as such, with a claim that freedom is a “part of the natural condition of man, the state of nature” which exists outside of any social order, the “postmodern vision” seems to be ironical or even cynical about the very idea of freedom. (Inna 2006, 65) Such a variety of notions make us think about freedom in an alternative way. Michel Foucault presents an alternative view on freedom, which opens the way for a critical assessment of its existing version. But, while some authors say that Foucault is “the philosopher of freedom in post-revolutionary time” (Rajchman 1985, 50) others blame him for the pessimistic vision of freedom. The

thinkers with latter criticisms often find the problem in Foucault's post-structuralist understanding of the subject, which denies traditional notions of autonomy and authenticity. According to Foucault There is no place for an independent agency because we are all made into subjects within power relations and there is no escape from power to freedom as power relations are everywhere. Power is omnipresent and it is dispersed, productive and flexible. "If there is no authentic subjectivity to liberate, and there is no outside of power then freedom becomes meaningless." (Oksala 2005, 1) The aim of this paper is to present an analysis on what (or whether there) is Foucault's alternative notion of freedom and if there is one, how can it be practiced in postmodernity.

Denial of Freedom in Foucault's Philosophy

To speak of a Foucauldian philosophy of freedom may appear controversial. After all, Foucault's work is frequently read as denying the very possibility of freedom. His work denies this possibility empirically in its thesis on the carceral society in *Discipline and Punish* (1977) and conceptually in its premonition of the 'death' of the very being called Man to whom freedom apparently refers in *The Order of things* (1994). Foucault's philosophical approach is intensely critical about the very assumptions that are conventionally held to be necessary for any meaningful vision of freedom, as he undermines both the essentialist conception of the subject and the teleological vision of the progressive emancipation of humanity. Foucauldian approach is accepted as a narrowly critical project, which exposes the lacunae in and falsity of existing freedoms and designs for liberation, but is incapable of advancing its own affirmation of freedom. But a deeper analysis of his various other works seems to construct a 'certain kind' of freedom that requires neither a concept of the anterior subject nor teleology of liberation. Such freedom is the central ontological presupposition of Foucault's philosophy that animates its unrelenting critique of the present state of our unfreedom. (Prozorov 2007, 25)

The liberal commentary on Foucault's work denies the very existence or the possibility of a concept of freedom in his philosophical approach. A number of eminent critics including Jurgen Habermas, Charles Taylor, Michael Walzer and Richard Rorty deny the possibility of a Foucauldian affirmation of freedom that would not slip into a contradiction with his theses on the ubiquity of power relations. Foucault's conception of a productive rather than repressive power and his understanding of subjectivity as a construct of that power appears to make meaningless both the notions of 'repression' and 'liberation'. If power does not repress, one cannot liberate oneself from it. Yet, if liberation is disqualified, so is the very notion of freedom, which must presuppose an anterior subject repressed by power in order to be intelligible at all. (Taylor 1984, 174). "Since the very concept of a self-constituting subjectivity is anathema to Foucault, the

notion of human emancipation becomes nonsensical.” (Prozorov 2007, 26; Wolin 1994, 263) The ‘exclusion’ of Foucault from the discourse on freedom rests on his critics’ understanding that freedom is held to be a necessary property of a self-actualizing subject, ontologically prior to power relations and for this reason justified in his resistance to it. In other words, subjective identity, that Foucault considers an artifact of power relations, is, presented as an ontological precondition for freedom particularly in Charles Taylor’s account (1984, 171-72). Further, Taylor concludes on Foucault’s account that, “there can be no such thing as a truth independent of its regime, unless it is that of another so that liberation in the name of ‘truth’ could only be substitution of another system of power for this one.” (Taylor 1984, 173) According to Taylor, Foucault gives us no reason to think that the succeeding system of power will be any better than the present one, and hence there is no justification for a struggle to change it. So, Foucault objects to domination while denying that there can be anything like liberation from it; and he portrays dangers while insisting that any attempt to deter or better them would inevitably reproduce them in new guise. Foucault offers no hope of a society in which power would not operate. For this reason, Charles Taylor argues that one of the central weaknesses of Foucault’s critical project is that for him there can be “no escape from power into freedom.” (Taylor 1984, 153) one can only step from one system of power to another. Does Foucault leave us in that despondent situation? Foucault proposes to offer the scope of freedom within the dominating power relation and regimes of power/knowledge.

Foucault’s Affirmation of Freedom

Foucault’s anti-essentialism with regard to subjectivity and his radical constructivism with regard to power are held to be the reasons, responsible to disqualify Foucault from any discourse on freedom. (Prozorov 2007, 26) However, it would be completely erroneous to conclude that Foucault’s thought is not only an identification of man’s prison but also celebration of them, that the result of his writing is to produce a sense of entrapment within ways of acting and thinking which leaves no space for escape. (Bernauer 1987, 377). In answer to these criticisms, Foucault insisted that the fact that “power is everywhere, does not mean that nothing is possible- it means, rather, that everything is possible: if there are relations of power throughout every social field,... it is because there is freedom everywhere.” (O’Leary 2002, 157) Taylor argued that power in Foucault’s sense “does not make sense without at least the idea of liberation”. (Taylor 1984, 173) Power by definition requires a target. Foucault says goodbye to this modern/romantic notion of freedom as liberation from power through truth about authentic selves. For Foucault there is no liberating truth about the real situation, essence and good. Freedom doesn’t consist in breaking the “repressive deadlocks” and reconciling the self with the authentic self. (Inna 2006, 68) The Foucauldian notion of

freedom, which is 'practical' and 'Nominalist' can be distinguished from a Hegelian and Marxian view which would see freedom as an 'ideal' waiting to be realized. (Rajchman 1985, 92-93) There is development of Foucault's thought starting with the disciplinary power he proceeds with the work on governmentality and "ethics". Still Foucault does not come up with any narrative of repressed freedom that must be liberated. Foucauldian freedom seems to be formulated more in terms of "positive means of resistance which does not devolve to re-action or negation." (Inna 2006, 73)

Resistance: A Way of Freedom

Foucault does not mean to give the impression that we are trapped by modern forms of government, though critics accuse him of portraying a world without hope. Foucault suggests that resistance is possible because all subjectifying power endows subjects with some capacities required to be agents, even when it is oppressive. For Foucault the omnipresence of power, both as strategic game or state of domination, means the omnipresence of the resistance to it. He states that: "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 1980, 95) There cannot be power relations without at least the possibility of resistance. Each power relation generates an adversary reaction on the part of others. Resistance is possible when power pushes toward its limits. There are points of insubordination at which it is possible not to escape power per se, but to escape the particularly strategy of power relation that directs one's conduct. For Foucault there is no state of liberation beyond power relation, but liberty is exercised in constant, active resistance to whichever power relations subjectify individuals in ways that provoke their resistance. (Simons 1995, 81-82) For Foucault, freedom is rooted in our unwillingness to comply rather than in an essential autonomy. Foucault counseled modernity to embrace the refusal of the kind of individuality which has been imposed on us for several centuries; and acknowledge the need to sacrifice the identity of the man it had come to know and trust. He urges us to refuse what we are, meaning that we should refuse to remain tied to the identities to which we are subjected. Power and resistance are constituted reciprocally: the latter is only possible where there is the former and vice versa. Henry Krips opines that resistance is no longer to be seen mainly as a planned and aggressive individual reaction to her/his subjugation. One should understand resistance so that it can be nonactive/unintended and dispersed, "manifested in localized acts of defiance which together form a global pattern of resistance that transcends the intentional engagement of any of the agents." (Krips 1990, 177) Our resistance must be directed against the biopolitical governmentality in the context of postmodernity;

"the target of resistance is thus biopolitical production itself, i.e. the production of *power over life* that maximizes the capacities of man as an object of government

and simultaneously diminishes the freedom of man in the sense of the *power of life* that precedes the deployment of biopolitics.” (Prozorov 2007, 111)

Therefore, Freedom is an active practice of resistance rather than a retreat into the governmentally sanctioned private space. In Foucault’s fortunate formulation, freedom is an ‘art of not being governed quite so much’, rather than a state of being. (Chambers 2001, 116) If positive resistance permitted in any system, we may conclude that freedom is still alive there. As Pizzorno states:

“One will know that freedom is alive not when the interests emerging in a society are allowed to express themselves, be represented and be pursued, not even when dissent and heresy are allowed to manifest themselves, but when contestation, unruliness, intractability are not yet abolished, when recalcitrant is not transformed into dutiful”. (Pizzorno 1992, 207)

In Foucault’s view the target of concrete freedom nowadays is not to discover what we are but to refuse what we are. In so far as subjective interiority is always an effect of governmental practices of subjectification, freedom must consist in the resistance to “the administrative inquisition which determines who one is.” (Bernauer 1994, 258)

Freedom as an Art of Self

Foucault announces ‘the immanence of the death of man’, (Foucault 1994, 342) which is intended as the starting point for a radical politics of ourselves, the challenge to our current’s power to determine our self-identity and lay down a program for our liberation. The care for the self is a way of such positive resistance, and the ethics of the care for the self is a practice of freedom. Care for the self is a way of limiting and controlling the power operative on us. Foucault argued that the non-negative means of relating to oneself, that is to say, the caring for oneself as a positive fashioning of a subjectivity, have been with us since the ancient time of Greeks. He asks, “Couldn’t everyone’s life become a work of art? Why should the camp of the house be an art object but not our life?” (Foucault 1984, 350) From the Greek ethics itself, Foucault picks up the idea of the life as a material for an aesthetic piece of art. It is also important to realize that the Greek ethics at that time had a strong structure of existence, without any relation with the strong disciplinary structure. Foucault appeals to us that we should deny the identity which the modernity has governed us at the same time we should create ourselves and our life should become the work of art. The idea that one is to create oneself is, in fact, closer to Sartrean existentialism, but even there Sartre searches the true being or the true self which Foucault finds as the problem. But from the existentialist idea that the self is not given to us Foucault takes a step forward and says that it is precisely because the self is

not given to us, we have to create ourselves as a work of art. At the same time, taking care of herself and crafting one's life as a work of art are having the strong relation between freedom and power. In line with the ancient Greek practice he thinks that the aesthetics of existence is more about the act of giving a form than to the beauty of the form. The subject is not a ground to start from, but it is a task to be continuously done. However, this task is not an end to be finally met, but a process to be eternally carried on. The self is a work in progress, which is never completed. The aesthetic of existence itself is the practice of freedom in postmodernity.

Thus, freedom is constituted as positive resistance, in which subject becomes autonomous within a structured set of institutions and practices through immanent critique. (Inna 2006, 74) Here again the questions of Charles Taylor may be analyzed that are among the most fundamental in the works of Foucault. He asks, "Can we really step outside the identity we have developed in the Western civilization to such a degree that we can repudiate all that comes to us from the Christian understanding of the will?" (Taylor 1984, 181) Further, "Granted that we really can set this aside, is the resulting 'aesthetic of existence' all that admirable?" (Taylor 1984, 181) Taylor here misinterprets Foucault and puts the overthrowing of identity and self making in chronological order. Foucault, in his formulation, doesn't presuppose such a "vacuum" occurring due to overthrowing of one's identity before self-making is possible. The care for the self is the practice of freedom itself and does not need preliminary liberation of a person from himself as an objectified subject.

Conclusion

Our freedom would, therefore, lie in our capacity to find alternatives to the particular forms of discourses that define us. Freedom is the contrary of neither power nor domination but it is merely an effect of our capacity to challenge the effect of both; it is not 'the end of domination; but a revolt within practices.' (Rajchman 1985, 115) Freedom is always a part of regime of truth in a society. It is denaturalized, deconstructed and there is no freedom as an objective reality beyond power relations. Power is everywhere but so is resistance. There is no outside of power but resistance is possible within power relations. Foucault's freedom is not outside the power relations rather it is within it. Freedom is rooted in our unwillingness to comply rather than in an essential autonomy. For Foucault, as we have seen, there is no state of liberation beyond power relation, but liberty is exercised in constant, active resistance to whichever power relations subjectify individuals. The refusal of what we are and art of the self, he seems to propose largely as a way to break free from the individualizing and totalizing power of these new power structures permeating the postmodern social body. The imperative today, therefore becomes: we have to promote new forms of subjectivity through the refusal of the kind of

individuality which has been imposed on us for centuries. For Foucault freedom is possible only as a practice and not just an abstract ideal. In order for freedom to exist it has to be lived. Freedom is not to step outside of power relations but to participate in the making and production of one's own subjectivity.

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