Is the Autonomous Soul Possible? The Role of the State in Regulating the Self in the Thought of Michel Foucault from 1968-1984

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Abstract: This paper challenges the notion of 'sexual liberation' prevalent in the post-1968 period in the West, based on the philosophy of Michel Foucault. The idea of the autonomous self is put under a thorough interrogation, as Foucault showed that it has become a powerful tool used by the state to control and normalise the population. Despite the paradoxes in Foucault's thinking about the possibility of liberation, it is the ethnical value of freedom that eventually led him to see the need for resistance to power and self-cultivation, or rather self-cultivation through resistance in his later writings.

Keywords: autonomous soul, state, self, regulation.

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Michel Foucault was one of the key contributors to the intellectual treasury of the second half of the twentieth century.[2] His works were a response to '1968' - period from the mid-1950s to the late 1970s – that witnessed mass protests challenging 'bourgeois authoritarianism' of Western democratic states.[3] Often claiming sexual repressiveness to be a bulwark of a repressive state, sexual liberation and expression of subjectivity were perceived to be key to end alienation and achieve freedom in practically all spheres of life.[4] In contrast, Foucault contested 'the theme of a sovereign subject' and 'the theme of a subjectivity', shifting the focus to the relations of power, through which the subjectivity is constructed, and the technologies, through which the subject is then normalised.[5] By exploring the role of the state in regulating the self on the example of 'sexual revolution' of 1960-70s, this paper will argue that Foucault's concept of the state incorporates a complex system of power relations. In fact, he shows how the realm of the state expands into the private sphere, leading to the internalisation of discipline by the self. However, contrary to the idea of 'docile bodies', a more holistic analysis would be achieved by examining the possibility of resistance based on Foucault's later writings.

Foucault's perception of power as the driving force in all social relations stems from the influence by Marxist thinkers, one of which was his teacher, Louis Althusser.[6] However, Foucault soon departed from the Marxist tradition by debunking the idea that power is held by a single group of individuals or institutions, such as the state, and suggested to 'conceive of sex without the law, and power without the king'.[7] In other words, power is not simply relations between the oppressor and the oppressed, which Foucault called the 'repressive hypotheses'.[8] If the stronghold of power is not the state or particular individuals, the questions remain: 'Who exercises power? Who makes decision for me?'[9]

According to Foucault, power is a 'multiplicity of force relations immanent in the sphere in which they operate and which constitute their own organisation'.[10] It is dispersed and unstable, which makes it difficult for the state as a single apparatus to have it under its control. This assessment renders the perception of the state as the oppressor reductionist, and shows that the state 'does not have this unity, this individuality, this rigorous functionality' and is 'no more than a composite reality and a mythicised abstraction' with a minimal importance.[11] His lectures from the late 1970s, especially *The Birth of Biopolitics*, took the analysis of power

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[2] *J. Simons, Foucault and the Political, London, Routledge, 1995, p. 1*

[3] *U. Poiger, 'Generations: The Revolution of the 1960s', in H. Smith (ed.), The Oxford Handbook of Modern German History, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2011, p. 640*

[4] *Ibid., p. 655*

[5] *C. Williams, Contemporary French Philosophy: Modernity and the Persistence of the Subject, London, Athlone Press, 2001, p. 152*

[6] *S. Sawyer, 'Foucault and the State', The Tocqueville Review, vol. 36, no. 1, 2015, p. 140*

[7] *M. Foucault, The Will to Knowledge: The History of Sexuality, Volume I, London, Penguin Books, 1976, p. 91*

[8] *Ibid., p. 15*

[9] *M. Foucault, 'On Power', in L. Kritzman (ed.), Politics, Philosophy, Culture: Interviews and Other Writings, 1977-1984, London, Routledge, 1988, p. 103*

[10] *Ibid., p. 92*

[11] *M. Foucault, 'Governmentality', in G., Burchell, C., Gordon and P., Miller (eds), The Foucault Effect: Studies in Governmentality, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1991, p. 103*

farther away from the state, introducing the notion of 'governmentality'.[12] Governmentality is used to describe the modern political reason and social regulation that, contrary to direct state interference, focus on indirect management of population and disciplinary techniques of normalisation.[13] This development in the form of neoliberalism created a rule 'whereby everything would be controlled to the point of self-sustenance, without the need for intervention'.[14] This explains Foucault's refusal to construct a theory of the state as an institution, as it is rather as the embodiment of numerous conflicting agencies projecting power and control onto the self.[15] As such, liberation from the state as an institution, be it an oppressor of the working class or an embodiment of sexual repression, would lead neither to freedom, nor to the end of power relations, as it is simply 'a different type of codification of the same relations'.[16] Consequently, the anti-authority struggles of '1968' confronted only the immediate conditions of humans and failed to account for greater forces of power.

Nonetheless, Foucault's interest progressed from the analysis of power mechanisms to their relation to the individual self. His analysis began to highlight the increasing preoccupation with the self, brought by the advance of state bureaucracy. The idea is supported by historian Christopher Lasch, who produced a powerful critique of 'pseudo self-awareness'[17] and showed how humans have come to entrust the most intimate aspects of their life to the very bureaucracy of regulative expertise – doctors, psychologists and sexopathologists. In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault also discussed the production of the self through discipline and a whole system of human dressage by such factors as location, confinement and surveillance.[18] In *The History of Sexuality*, its knowledge was extracted through confession and put into s*cientia sexualis*, and then social sciences came to analyse the already individualised being.[19] Foucault examined the techniques of disciplinary power only to conclude that discipline had been internalised by the individual self. In other words, as the following paragraphs will show, he spoke of the discipline of the self by the self and individuals transforming into the state for themselves.

To compare, there is a difference between the disciplinary techniques imposed by the Soviet state to regulate societal behaviour, and the self-discipline of the 'liberated' generations of '1968', who have willingly measured, categorised and subjected themselves to all-encompassing examination and normalisation through new beauty standards, gender, nudity and sexual permissiveness. As Lois McNay explains, Foucault's notion of modern governance follows the principle of 'enterprise',[20] in which the self is self-sustainable and self-governing, ensuring its higher productivity in politics and economics for the minimal state intervention.

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[12] M. Foucault, The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the College de France, 1978-79, M. Senellart (ed.), Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2008

[13] L. McNay, 'Self as Enterprise: Dilemmas of Control and Resistance in Foucault's The Birth of Biopolitics', Theory, Culture & Society, vol. 26, no. 6, 2009, p. 57

[14] M. Foucault, 'Space, Knowledge and Power', in P. Rabinow (ed.), The Foucault Reader, London, Penguin Books, 1984, p. 241

[15] S. Mills, Michel Foucault, Abington, Routledge, 2003, p.49

[16] M. Foucault, Power/Knowledge, New York, Pantheon Books, 1980, p. 122

[17] C. Lasch, The Culture of Narcissism, London, Abacus Press, 1991, p. 71

[18] M. Foucault, Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison, London, Penguin Books, 1975, p. 105

[19] M. Foucault, 'Technologies of the Self', in H. Gutman, P. Hutton and L. Martin (eds), Technologies of the Self: A Seminar with Michel Foucault, Massachusetts, The University of Massachusetts Press, 1988, p. 17

[20] McNay, 'Self as Enterprise', p. 60

For instance, the force of surveillance has significantly increased with the rise of social media, the efficacy of which is not inferior to Jeremy Bentham's Panopticon: its prisoners are close, yet in isolation from each other, perfectly visible for the watchers, yet unable to see them. In short, the modern technologies of governing the soul operate through aligning their aims with individual desires and pleasures. As the latter have become tied to the achievement of freedom, the same notion of freedom turns out to be a method of control.[21]

Unsurprisingly, Foucault was sceptical about the notion of 'sexual liberation' of '1968', claiming that it leads to the false idea that there is an inner nature that, 'as a consequence of certain historical, economic and social processes has been concealed, alienated or imprisoned in and by mechanisms of repression'[22] and needs to come to expression through sexuality. More importantly, through the 'continuous incitement to discourse and to truth', sexuality has become 'an immense apparatus for producing truth', a matter of 'truth and falsehood'.[23] A confessing animal, the modern man has made, perhaps, the most personal part of his self available for mass surveillance. He related the beginning of this machinery of truth production to the emergence of bourgeois society in the nineteenth century that 'set out to formulate the uniform truth of sex'.[24] Thus, it is in the political and economic interests of the state to promote the idea that sex is the locus of the truest form of the self. As Foucault put it, this is 'a new mode of investment which presents itself no longer in the form of control by repression but that of control by stimulation'.[25] In turn, the 'stimulation' cannot do without sex being regulated and monitored in order to effectively manage the population. In sum, the example of sexuality shows how the realm of the modern state has expanded into private lives of its subjects, making its control stronger than ever, while being invisible for all.

Nevertheless, it is questionable whether the control exerted by the modern state necessarily has negative implications, differing from conventional forms of oppression and domination. It is indeed a hybrid power that does not oppose one's wishes, but in fact creates them.[26] The dilemma becomes stronger due to Foucault's stance of neutrality in relation to the new style of governance, rejecting the idea that the society can possibly exist without power relations.[27] However, his emphasis on the effects of normalisation on the individual - which 'attaches him to his own identity, imposes a law of truth on him which he must recognize and others must have to recognize in him'[28] – reveals his negative attitude to it. It seems that Foucault critiqued the new governance not because he intended to bring about some 'true' nature of the self, but because of the urge to go beyond the existing perceptions of the self, to 'liberate us from the state and from the type of individualisation which is linked to the state'.[29] Friedrich Nietzsche's

[21] N. Rose, Governing the Soul: The Shaping of the Private Self, London, Free Association Books, 1989, p. 261

[22] M. Foucault, 'Ethics of Concern for the Self as a Practice of Freedom', in S. Lotringer (ed.), Foucault Live (Interviews, 1961-1984), New York, Semiotext, 1989, p. 433

[23] Foucault, The Will to Knowledge, p. 56

[24] Ibid., p. 69

[25] M. Foucault, Power/Knowledge, p. 57

[26] C. Taylor, 'Foucault on Freedom and Truth', Political Theory, vol. 12, no. 2, 1984, p. 172

[27] Ibid., p. 156

[28] M. Foucault, 'The Subject and Power', in H. Dreyfus and P. Rabinow (ed.), Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics, Brighton, Harvester, 1983, p. 212

[29] Ibid., p. 216

concept of the 'will to power', that overwhelming 'instinct for freedom'[30] and 'attempt to overcome, to bring to oneself, to incorporate',[31] can well be a suitable description of it. It is this 'will to power' that would lead Foucault's subject to want to become a master in playing these games of power with the strongest possible protection against the abuse of power and Nietzsche's 'bad conscience', the latter being the result of the suppression of natural instincts that leads to animal-man turning his instincts inward upon himself.[32]

At this point, the powerful connection between freedom and ethics also unfolds itself. Foucault asked whether it makes any sense to maintain 'let's liberate our sexuality', for the problem of freedom is much more ethical than the rhetoric about desires and pleasures. Therefore, it is important, to once again, debunk the myth that sexual liberation is equal to freedom, for is liberation only about genitals and not about conscience, dignity and self-reflection? In an interview given in 1984, Foucault pronounced the nature of freedom as ethical in itself: 'Freedom is ontological condition of ethics'.[33] At the same time, freedom is impossible without self-reflection and the 'care of the self'.[34] This idea does not only challenge Christian discourse on renunciation of the self, but also shows that the issue of freedom is essentially ethical for Foucault. Hence, as 'taking care of oneself requires knowing oneself',[35] the ethical argument for freedom of the self from the imposed knowledge and normalisation becomes a major argument for resistance against the state power.

Ultimately, the fact that Foucault exposed the effects of the modern system of power on the subject, but offered little room for the possibility of true liberation, has left many in deadlock, while sparking outrage from others.[36] The idea of the autonomous self is indeed problematized, as far from being a menace for the state, it turns out to be its main component, hinting that it might never be possible to gain a full autonomy from it. This revelation has been one of the most controversial moments of Foucault's philosophy, as it unsettles the conventional understanding of freedom, liberation and resistance as opposite to power mechanisms. At this juncture, Sara Mills' statement that Foucault 'focuses on individuals as active subjects, as agents rather than as passive dupes'[37] is rightly questioned by McNay, who shows that such description is just partially fair and reflects only Foucault's later writings.[38] Likewise, Foucault's society does seem to consist of individualised 'objects' targeted by different forms of knowledge and forms of subjugation.[39] Therefore, Charles Taylor is right to critique

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[30] F. Nietzsche, 'On the Genealogy of Morality', in D. Wootton (ed.), *Modern Political Thought: Readings from Machiavelli to Nietzsche*, Cambridge, Hackett, 2008, p. 899

[31] F. Nietzsche, *Kritische Studienausgabe*, Munich, Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag, 1999, p.174

[32] Nietzsche, 'On the Genealogy of Morality', p. 897

[33] Foucault, 'Ethics of Concern for the Self as a Practice of Freedom', p. 435

[34] Ibid.

[35] Ibid.

[36] Taylor, 'Foucault on Freedom and Truth', p. 152

[37] Mills, *Michel Foucault*, p. 35

[38] L. McNay, *Foucault and Feminism: Power, Gender and the Self*, Cambridge, Polity Press, 1992, p. 12

[39] D. Cook, *The Subject Finds a Voice: Foucault's Turn Toward Subjectivity*, New York, Peter Lang Publishing, 1993, p. 88

Foucault's position for its relativism and monolithic analysis of power, arguing that Foucault makes 'the impossible attempt to stand nowhere'.[40]

It was not until last two volumes of *The History of Sexuality - The Use of Pleasure* and *The Care of the Self* - that Foucault produced a self-critique of his thought from the 1960-70s, counterbalancing his analysis of how power is exerted by the state on people to how they interpret their experiences and conceive of themselves as 'living, speaking [and] labouring'[41] beings. He attempted to show that the individual is capable of actively fashioning oneself as the creator of beauty of one's own life. The influence of the state and its powers still come to play a significant role in limiting subjectivity, yet what is not determined is the way in which individuals relate themselves to them. This shows that the relationship between the individual and the state is mutually determining. Paradoxically, thus, as their selves are essentially the outcomes of power, humans face the challenge of resisting themselves.[42] As a result, the individual is constituted through both the practices of subjection and liberation.

In conclusion, Michel Foucault was a philosopher and a historian that never took the reality at face value, making his point of interest the issues that were left out from politics and philosophy. Through examining the mechanisms of regulating the self, he countered the prevailing belief that the state as an institution has the monopoly of power and control. Thus, the concept of state needs to incorporate power relations and disciplinary techniques that go beyond institutions. The focus then fell on sexuality as an example of how the self has come to be a means of control and normalisation and evidence of the state absorbing the private sphere. Nonetheless, while one may still question the necessity of resistance, Foucault instinctively chose freedom, not only because of the urge to remove the imposed truths, but also of the ethical value of freedom. The bigger question is whether resistance is possible, and, here, Foucault led his readers into the labyrinth of philosophical paradoxes. On the one hand, he denied the possibility of the autonomous self; on the other hand, he proposed the ways in which individuals can participate in shaping their own subjectivity using the enormous force of creativity and art. Yet, it is these paradoxes that humans have to face on the path of the never-ending process of self-cultivation. In a sense, to conclude with Foucault's words: '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?'[43]

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[40] *Taylor, 'Foucault on Freedom and Truth', p. 181*

[41] *M. Foucault, The Use of Pleasure: The History of Sexuality, Volume II, London, Penguin Books, 1984, p. 7*

[42] *Simons, Foucault and the Political, p. 72*

[43] *G. Danaher, T. Schirato and J. Webb, Understanding Foucault, London, SAGE Publications, 2000, p. 150*

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