

# TOWARDS THEORISING POSTMODERN ACTIVISM: A FOUCAULDIAN PERSPECTIVE \*

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## Abstract

The purpose of the paper is to alert to a specific danger confronted by the postmodern supposedly anti capitalist movements. Referring to the work of Michel Foucault I try to demonstrate that specific danger in terms of the double character of freedom. Freedom according to Foucault is not only a principle of diversity but also a tool of management. Ignoring the management aspect of freedom and merely considering it as a 'way out' leads to the incorporation of these movements within the same power constellations against which they are struggling. I make my case through first situating postmodern struggles within an overall schema derived from the work of Michel Foucault. The working of the double bind of freedom in capitalist societies is described through a brief look at how the subjectivisation regime works in capitalism. In this context it is suggested that postmodern movements supposedly are aimed at creating a new subjectivity - a subjectivity that can break out of the double bind of the capitalist subjectivisation regime. However these movements fail precisely on this account. They more than often turn into, what Foucault pejoratively called liberation movements.

## Research

*We do not lack communication, on the contrary we have too much of it. We lack creation. We lack resistance to the present.*

*Deleuze and Guattari (quoted in Negri and Hardt 2000: 393).*

*The final word on power is that resistance comes first.*

*Deleuze (Deleuze 1988: 89).*

The purpose of this paper is to try to understand postmodern activism in the context of a systematic theoretical framework. I begin my analysis through situating postmodern movements in the framework of a Foucauldian theorisation of struggles. Concentrating on the notion of subjectivity and subjectivisation, I intend to make clear a specific danger faced by these movements in their present constellation.

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## **I. Foucault's Theorisation of Struggles**

Foucault categorises struggles, in general, into three types:

- Struggles against domination
- Struggles against exploitation
- Struggles against subjection

Roughly speaking struggles against domination are struggles against the domination of one group over another on ethnic, social and religious bases. Struggles against exploitation are struggles against “the separate(ion) (of) individuals from what they produce” (SP: 212). And finally struggles against subjection are struggles against “that which ties the individual to himself and submits him to others in this (i.e. a particular) way (struggles against subjection, against forms of subjectivity and submission)” [ibid]. The defining element of subjection is self-subjection. No subjection exists without the possibility of self-subjection. This is the reason why freedom is so important for the functioning of any subjectivisation regime. It is the element of self-subjection that differentiates subjection from other forms of domination.

I shall elaborate the above point a little more by contrasting subjection with different forms of dominations mentioned by Foucault. The struggle against subjection is different from a struggle against slavery because it is not (primarily) a struggle against the “appropriation of bodies” (DP: 137). Similarly, the struggle against subjection is not a struggle against servitude. Servitude is a “constant, total, massive, non analytical,

unlimited relationship of domination established in the form of the individual will of the master, his 'caprice.'" (DP: 137). Thus, the struggle against subjection is not a struggle against the individual master or class of masters since the struggle against subjection is against the effects of anonymous power (SP: 211 and 213).

Furthermore struggles against subjection are not struggles against vassalage. Foucault defines the relationship of "vassalage" as "a lightly coded, but distant relation of submission, which (bears) less on the operation of the body than on the products of labour and marks of allegiance" (DP: 137). Finally, struggles against subjection are to be differentiated from the subjections of the monastic type. The purpose of the monastic type of subjection "was to obtain renunciation rather than increase utility." (DP: 137 cf. HS final chapter). The purpose of capitalist subjection on the other hand is precisely to increase utility.

Although, the above examples are not exhaustive in any sense they are sufficient to clarify what Foucault might mean when he differentiates between domination and subjection.

Similarly, we can see from these examples that subjection is a kind of domination. Subjection is by definition domination but not all types of domination are necessarily subjection. Foucault differentiates between domination and subjection to **specify** and emphasise the particular kind of domination that has been the hallmark of capitalism and to highlight its **uniqueness** among various historically existing forms of domination.

According to Foucault although all three types of struggles can be found coexisting in a society in a given era, normally one kind of struggle tends to dominate a particular society. Thus, for example, though in feudal societies struggles against exploitation may be found they are not the characteristic struggles of the feudal era. Foucault concludes that the struggles characteristic of the feudal era were struggles against domination. Struggles against exploitation were characteristic struggles of the nineteenth century. "And now - a - days", says Foucault, "struggle against the forms of subjection - against the submission of subjectivity - is becoming more and more important" (SP: 213). According to Foucault the characteristic struggles of late/advanced capitalism are struggles against subjection. However, Foucault adds, this is not the first time in Western history that struggles around subjectivity have become prominent, and the examples Foucault gives leave one wondering whether these kinds of struggles are tied to extraordinary times in the life of Western civilisation (SP: 213).

## II Capitalist Subjectivisation Regime

"Subjectivity" is defined by Foucault as a form of "organisation of self consciousness" (PPC: 253) implying that there may be forms of organisation of self-consciousness other than subjectivity/subject. I define manageable subjectivity as a subjectivity, which has two characteristics: First, it has some degree of freedom/diversity and second this diversity is amenable to organisation under a singularity. We cannot talk of a manageable subjectivity without the presence of these two elements. Management

techniques are not operationalisable with individuals who are not allowed freedom. One cannot talk of managing slaves in this sense.

In this context Foucault asserts that “power (read management!) is exercised over free subjects, and **only insofar as they are free**” (SP: 221, emphasis provided). Further more, this freedom/diversity should be such that it can be traced back to a singularity. Diversity that cannot be traced back to singularity leads to dangerous subjectivity, a subjectivity that is not manageable (PPC: 125-151).

Thus, for the production and reproduction of manageable subjectivity, one requires diversity but the limit of this diversity would be the ultimate ability to retract this diversity and lock it into a singularity. If diversity exceeds this **limit**, the subjectivity no longer remains manageable. It enters the threshold of a dangerous subjectivity. The apparent paradox of capitalism is that in order to increase the utility and productive capacity of individuals and populations needs to expand the ambit of freedom and diversity but in order to make individuals and populations docile and hence governable and manageable, it needs to constrain this diversity by setting limits so that it remains manageable. **It is on the maintenance of this delicate balance between diversity and singularity that the sustenance and continuity of the whole capitalist system depends.**

Capitalism resolves the dilemma through realising the double role freedom can play. Freedom is central for the functioning of a capitalist system not only as the precondition for enhancing utility and diversity, but for its double role as the precondition of enhancing diversity and imposing singularity on multiplicity (SP: 221). Historically, ‘freedom’ has played this role of imposing singularity over multiplicity through the process of subjectivisation i.e. through the creation of a subjectivity/subject. The genius of capitalism and liberalism was to realise that freedom was not only the principle of anarchy it can also be a great tool of management (see Rose, 1993, Rizvi, 2006).

Foucault’s claim is that in capitalism the governance of diversity is maintained through freedom itself and not (primarily) through repression. Capitalism’s interests are not fulfilled by curbing and limitations per se. Capitalism has evolved a system of government whose condition of operationalisation is freedom and immanence. Foucault defines “government’ as the structure (ing) of the possible field of action of others” (PPC: 221). The capitalist logic is based on a realisation that freedom is the essential element of ‘government’ (management) in the sense that capitalism recognises the ‘double’ character of freedom. To desire freedom is not only to expand the arena of choice (diversity) but it is also to make oneself governable (manageable). Hence the impossibility of governing/managing those who reject freedom (PPC: 221-222).

### **III Struggle against Capitalist Subjectivity**

Foucault sees postmodern struggles as struggles against what he calls “government of individualisation”, against a certain sort of subjectivisation, namely the way individuals are made subjects in modern capitalist societies (SP: 212). They are struggles against a certain self identification, against the notion of identity. Since the notion of identity is one of the tools used to impose singularity on diversity in the capitalist system, these are struggles that “assert the right to be different and they underlie everything which makes individuals truly individual” (SP: 211).

These are struggles which demand the legitimacy of and assert the right of, polymorphous experiences - infinite and numerous ways of being individual. To obstruct this is to obstruct the freedom of human beings, their right to be different. Essentially they are struggles against the notion of true scientific identity, true self etc; against the notion that there is a true self and that we ought to conform to that true self. This is the notion, which ties us to our own identity and forecloses our search to be different. Thus it imposes abstraction and generality on the individuals and obstructs the realisation of infinite possibilities of being individual, of being ourselves: “. . . all these struggles revolve around the question: Who are we? They are a refusal of these abstractions, of economic and ideological state violence which ignores who we are individually, and also a refusal of a scientific or administrative inquisition which determines who one is” (SP : 212).

They are a refusal to accept any identity that ties the individual to a particular truth of self in such a way so as to foreclose the possibility of diverse forms of identity and hence different forms of being individual. The struggles are a refusal to subjugate to this blackmail any more and to assert “that the problem is not to recover our ‘lost’ identity, to free our imprisoned nature, our deepest truth; but instead, the problem is to move towards something radically Other” (RM: 12, 121-122).

### **IV Post-modern Struggles and their Danger:**

Foucault had hopes of post-modern social movements (PPC and PK) but there was disappointment related to these movements that haunted him in the later phase of his life. He saw the great danger facing these movements in their turning into what he pejoratively termed ‘liberation movements’ (see Kritzman: 1988: 14). Liberation movements, according to Foucault, are movements that do not recognise the double character of freedom and the double role that freedom plays in sustaining capitalist subjectivity. These movements consider freedom simply as a ‘way’ out, as an ‘exit’, without realising the formidable management potential of freedom. Consequently they end up being incorporated into an existing subjectivisation regime without realising their potential as movements aimed at producing a new subjectivity that can transcend the double bind of freedom (Badiou, 2001:106).

To think of power as purely a limit set on freedom leads to the notion that freedom consists in merely lifting this prohibition: a 'way out'. But these notions are dangerous in the context of the workings of modern power, which does not work by 'starving' desire but thrives on creating, inducing and multiplying desire. "This type of discourse", according to Foucault, is a dangerous and "a formidable tool of control and power. As always, it uses what people say, feel and hope for. It exploits their temptation to believe that to be happy, it is enough to cross the threshold of discourse and remove a few prohibitions. But in fact it ends up dispersing movements of revolt and liberation" (PPC, 114 cf. HS, 3-35).

The danger of these movements consists in the fact that they are movements of freedom and liberation. This is dangerous precisely because these movements seem to be working with the false premise that capitalism essentially consists in the repression of freedom or as

more perceptive of these would claim, it does not produce 'real' freedoms. However both assumptions are wrong because:

**a)** It is not true that capitalism is essentially based on curtailment and repression. To think that capitalism is merely a negativity is to miss its innovative character and hence to underestimate its power over individuals and society. Foucault's rejection of the so called repressive hypothesis is in part derived from these considerations (HS: 3-37).

Foucault posits capitalism as a positive force (PPC: 262-263). The movements that do not realise this end up either being easily incorporated into the capitalist game or they become irrelevant, feeding on empty rhetoric, which does not harm capitalism. They are easily incorporated because capitalism is able to lift most of the repressions and prohibitions that these movements decry in the long run (PPC: 113-114).

**b)** The second strategy is more dangerous than the first because it combines the shortcomings of the first with its own. The claim that capitalism does not grant real freedoms is factually wrong because capitalist freedoms are real freedoms (even if they are structured within the space of subjection to capital). To think otherwise would be to think of capitalism as a negativity and hence would be to underestimate it.

Second, to think that capitalism does not grant real freedoms is to commit oneself to the struggle for freedom, i.e. to the struggle for 'real' freedom, for more and more freedom. However this strategy plays the capitalism's own game and is doomed to failure as it would either end up being incorporated into the game or would be rendered irrelevant and harmless.

This is so because capitalism rules through freedom, it rules through granting rights and freedoms and fulfilling people's desires. It rules in the name of freedom, in the name of the enhancement and preservation of life. In sum it rules in the name of promoting our well being. It even kills in the name of freedom and life in the sense that in order to justify mass murders and wars it has to convince its subject that these are necessary to preserve life and freedom in the long run. The struggles waged in the name of freedom and life, are already playing on the turf of capitalism and are doomed to failure (HS: 137-138).

One of the main ingredients of the capitalist strategy of governing positively through enhancement and not through repression is the production of discourse about the truth of the individual, society and state. Capitalist strategy of governance consists in producing, reproducing and multiplying discourses and not curtailing and inhibiting or repressing discourses (see Rizvi, 2006). There are various functions of this constant multiplication of truth:

- a) One of the main functions of capitalist governance is to normalise ideas i.e. to neutralise them, take the sting out of them etc. through placing them within the discourse and then constantly multiplying the discourse rather than repressing them. Repression is not a chosen strategy because it is not effective in the long run among other things.
- b) In order to be normalised through discourse it is important that one speaks, expresses and produces a discourse. Capitalism cannot manage some one who refuses to speak, refuses to produce a discourse and refuses to 'come out.' Silence is what terrorises capitalism and not discourse. The horror that haunts capitalism is the horror of the unknown, that which cannot be situated in and explained within its discourse. Capitalism is the only 'civilisation' we know of that is compelled to produce and reproduce and multiply discourses about its real and imaginary enemies on such a large scale. It is important in order to normalise, 'explain away' and trivialise that the 'other' is brought in to discourse.

Thus, in a capitalist system one is instigated to speak. Foucault talks about the obligation to speak in this context. Foucault also emphasises the importance of silence and speaks of the need to develop the culture and ethos of silence: "Silence...a specific form of experiencing relationships with others...I'm in favour of developing silence as a cultural ethos." (PPC: 4).

Foucault also speaks of "lightning-flashes" that "open a void, a moment of silence, a question without an answer, provoke a breach without reconciliation where the world is forced to question itself." (MC: 287). It is interesting to note that Habermas on the contrary characterises silence as a sign of fascism (see Milchman, 1994). In this

context it is also worth remembering Heidegger's silence and how it, to this day, scandalises for the bearers of normal discourse (see Lang, 1996).

Foucault's attitude towards the gay movement and his calls for his 'coming out' and confession and his ambivalent attitude towards gay discourse is based on the reasons we have been discussing here (Kritzman, 1988).

c) Multiplication of discourse is also a technique to trivialise issues. Things are talked about and discourse is produced about issues in such abundance and from so many angles and with such constant repetition that it in the end loses any gravity. Abu Ghraib is a good recent good example of this. The multiple discourses that were produced in the aftermath of the events in the media, at the end, switched the focus from the issue and discourse becomes an endless exercise having very little connection with the reality of the event which fades away and is absorbed away in the complexity of the discourses (Zizek, 2004).

The movements, which consider capitalism as negativity, do not comprehend this game and end up being swallowed within the whirl of capitalist discourse.

Capitalism thrives on creating desires and multiplying them. Without the constant production and multiplication of new desires the capitalist system would dry up. It is important for the continuous production and reproduction of the system that each and every element of the system must keep 'desiring' more and more. The movements that turn into movements of safeguarding people's rights and base their struggles on the charters of demands really enhance the functioning of the capitalist system (unless the demand is unconditional dissolution and overthrow of capitalism itself - the impossible demand). This is because they work on the false premises that capitalism suppresses desires. Foucault's turn, in his later work, to the aesthetics of existence that would be based on voluntary asceticism and disciplining desires, was in part a response to this realisation (Foucault, 1988a).

### **Conclusion:**

There are grounds for mobilising the excluded and the disempowered (the *mustadafeen*) in movements of resistance but such movements – unlike post-modernism – will have to reject not just capitalism but all struggle for freedom. They will have to delegitimise freedom as the organising principle of human life at both the levels of society and the state. It needs a new legitimating principle but what that principle would be I would not talk about here. That is another story.

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