

Agency in Foucault

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A. Overview of agency in Foucault

Foucault discusses several different types of agency in his writings, despite the impression that he primarily shows the ever-present character of the discursive regime in his writings:

- a. Agency of people at the margins of the modern: the homeless or those without a recognizable identity (Discipline 291), mid-nineteenth century anarchists (Discipline 292), participants in workers movements of 1830-50 (Discipline), characters in the nineteenth century literary fiction of the festival (Discipline 197), eighteenth century ?? sexual relations (History of Sexuality, v. 1), those who experienced attempts to limit the contagion of plagues (Discipline 195-99), the Fourierists of the early 19th century (Discipline 289-92), and others.
- b. Agency of those who diverge from the modern disciplinary regime, for example by participating in “distributions in groups...collective dispositions, confused, massive or transient pluralities...uncontrolled disappearance...desertion...diffuse circulation, their unusable and dangerous coagulation...dangerous mixtures, a meeting-place for forbidden circulations...the confusion of illegality and evil” (Discipline 143-44) or “bodies mingling together without respect, individuals...abandoning their statutory identity and the figure under which they had been recognized” (Discipline 197) or “compact groupings of individuals wandering about the country in unpredictable ways...agitations, revolts, spontaneous organizations, coalitions – anything that might establish horizontal conjunctions” (Discipline, 219) or “disentangle delinquency from the bourgeois legality and illegality that had colonized it...to re-establish or constitute the political unity of popular illegalities” (Discipline 292)
- c. Agency of those able to overthrow the micro-physics of the disciplinary regime that power exercises on the body through “localized episodes inscribed in history by the effects that it induces on the entire network in which it is caught up” not through “the law of all or nothing...not acquired one and for all by a new control of the apparatuses nor by a new functioning or a destruction of the institutions” (Discipline, 27); that the strategies of the micro-physics of power exercised on the body are attributed to dispositions, manoeuvres, tactics, techniques, functionings...in a network of relations, constantly in tension...a perpetual battle...exercised rather than possessed...[that] define innumerable

points of confrontation, focuses of instability, each of which has its own risks of conflict, of struggles, and of at least temporary inversion of the power relations” (Discipline, 26-7).

- d. Agency of those who recognize that the “real” subject is born mechanically from fictitious relations (Discipline, 202)
- e. Agency of any who are able to refuse to objectify power as an object and instead recognize that relations of power that look fixed or stable may become at each moment a changeable strategy of confrontation and “the free play of antagonism” by taking a fragmented and consolidated strategic situation within a long-term confrontation and deciphering it through different types of intelligibility as a general structure of power at the level of the social body that can be seen as free play (“subject and power” 348/795)
- f. Agency of “indiscipline” (of body, language, grammar, tone, and social relations of liberty) (Discipline 291-92) practiced by those who are able to see how “delinquency, controlled illegality, is an agent for the illegality of the dominant groups” (Discipline 279) “used to maintain the hostility of the poorer classes to delinquents” ((Discipline 285), i.e., “the illegality with which the very exercise of power surrounds itself” (Discipline 280), so that they might turn the reproach of delinquency and immorality back onto those who benefit from this reproach (Discipline 289-90), viz., those who participate in the illicit circuits of profit and power of the dominant class (Discipline 280); an agency of those who may render recognizable the “delinquency of wealth tolerated by the laws” (Discipline 288) and object to “the differentiation of illegalities, in the supervision, colonization, and use of certain of these illegalities by the illegality of the dominant class” (Discipline 282) and who continue to assert resistance to the coercions of the discourse of popular illegalities as “the affirmation of inalienable rights” (Discipline 290) and a particular type of “liberty” (Discipline 291-92).
- g. Agency of those who practice the “subjugated knowledges” (“Two Lectures”) or who otherwise give attention to the basic causes/nature of power (instead of describing the effects of power) and who refuse the metaphysics and ontology of power (“Subject and Power” 336-7/785-6) so that we may take up the “real political task...to criticize the workings of institutions which appear to be neutral and independent; to criticize them in such a manner that the political violence which has always exercised itself obscurely through them will be unmasked, so that one can fight them” (“Justice vs. Power”) to “ascertain the possibility of constituting a new politics of truth” and change the regime of the production of truth that detaches power from the forms of social, economic, and political hegemony in which it operates at the moment (“Power/Truth” 133).
- h. Agency of modern activists, including intellectuals, who speak from own specific practices (like Robert Oppenheimer on nuclear power or Dr. Edith Rose on prison

psychiatry) in a way that brings them into conflict with the demands of power; see “specific intellectual” discussion in “Truth and Power” and “Power and Strategies”; s.a. Macey biography of Foucault, esp. p. 257-69, 317-8, 400.

- i. Agency of all who subject themselves to the modern power/knowledge regime, not just as subjected to power relations but also as “relays” in power relations (History of Sexuality, v. 1) in order to dissolve the “I” (“Nietzsche, Genealogy, History”) and “refuse who we are” and “imagine what we could be” by getting rid of the double bind of simultaneously being individualized and totalized (“Subject and Power” 335-6/783-4) so that we may promote new forms of subjectivity through refusals of the kind of individuality imposed onus for several centuries (“Subject and Power” 335-6/782-4);
- j. Agency of those who give voice to a subject (as in Foucault’s work with the GIP prison project or in publishing Herculine Barbin or Pierre Rivière) alien in origin and nature to the structures of power;
- k. Agency of those who practice critique through their writings (“Subject and Power”), following Kant (Introduction to Kant’s Anthropology), and Nietzsche (“Nietzsche, Genealogy, History”); s.a. Noujain below; where critique is avoiding being trapped in our own history, tied to the government of individualization and to our own identity in a constraining way, so that new forms of subjectivity may be enacted and whole fields of possible responses, relations, and results may emerge (“Subject and Power” 328-330/780, 785); freedom then is recalcitrance of will and a refusal to submit when facing the field of possibilities of different kinds of conduct that are possible (“Subject and Power” 342), a the obstinacy of freedom takes the form of constant provocation, mutual incitement, and insubordination (“Subject and Power” 342, 346/789-94)

B. Specific quotes from Foucault on agency/resistance:

One did not suggest what people ought to be, what they ought to do, what they ought to think and believe. It was a matter of showing how social mechanisms up to now have been able to work...and then, starting from there, one left to the people themselves, knowing all the above, the possibility of self-determination and the choice of their own existence.

Michel Foucault

“An Aesthetics of Existence”

Foucault Live: Interviews, 1966-84, p. 310, 312

qtd. Gayatri Spivak, “More on Power/Knowledge”, p. 40

“My role – and that is too emphatic a word – is to show people that they are much freer than they feel.... To change something in the minds of people – that is the role of the intellectual.”

“Truth, Power, Self: An Interview”

“How can you imagine that I think change is impossible, since what I have analyzed was always related to political action. All of Discipline and Punish is an attempt to answer this question and to show how a new way of thinking took place...In my books I have really tried to show all the factors that interacted and the reactions of people. I believe in the freedom of people. To the same situation, people react in very different ways.”

“Truth, Power, Self: An Interview” 14

“[The archeological method] bursts open the other, the outside...establishes that we are difference, that our reason is the difference of discourses, our history the difference of times, our selves the difference of masks. That difference, far from being the forgotten and recovered origin, is this dispersion that we are and make.” Archeology of Knowledge. 131

“Do not use thought to ground a political practice in Truth, nor political action to discredit, as mere speculation, a line of thought. Use political practice as an intensifier of thought, and analysis as a multiplier of the forms and domains for the intervention of political action....What is needed is to “de-individualize” by means of multiplication and displacement, diverse combinations. The group must not be the organic bond uniting hierarchized individuals, but a constant generator of de-individualization.”

“Preface,” Anti-Oedipus, Deleuze and Guattari, xiv.

C. **Further Readings in Foucault**'s writings on agency:

See readings referenced in the first section above (citations below):

“Two Lectures”; “Subject and Power”; Discipline and Punish; History of Sexuality, etc.

Technologies of the Self, ed. Luther Martin, Huck Gutman, and Patrick Hutton, Univ. of Massachusetts Press, 1988. Generally thought to be the clearest discussion of his late notion of agency.

Fearless Speech, Semiotext(e), 2001; late lectures useful for understanding his ethics and theory of agency; emphasizes that schematics are unpredictable in their effects and not deterministic.

Herculine Barbin, Pantheon, 1980.

Pierre Rivière, Pantheon, 1975.

“Afterword,” in Power/Knowledge, M. Foucault, ed. Colin Gordon, 229-60 (esp. 245-60)

D. **Commentators on Foucault**/others who use Foucault to think through agency:

Bronwyn Davies centers on anti-essentialist notions of the subject as constituted through specific, highly localized discursive practices that refuse modernist presumptions of freedom and the unified individual.(42-3, 49-51)

Judith Butler (Gender Trouble; Bodies that Matter) on subject as “neither fatally determined nor fully artificial and arbitrary”;

Shane Phelan (Getting Specific: Postmodern Lesbian Politics) on subject as “neither fatally determined nor fully artificial and arbitrary”;

Nikki Sullivan (Critical Introduction to Queer Theory).

Biddy Martin, "Lesbian Identity and Autobiographical Difference[S] " in *Life/Lines: Theorizing Women's Autobiography*, ed. Bella Brodzki and Celeste Schenck (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988) (tchg notes)

Lee Quinby, Freedom, Foucault, and the Subject of America, Northwestern Univ. Pr., 1991. Den BJ352.Q56. 1991.

Silvestra Mariniello and Paul Bové, ed., Gendered Agents: Women and Institutional Change.

Judith Kegan Gardiner, Provoking Agents: Gender and Agency in Theory and Practice, Univ. Illinois Pr., 1995; HQ 1190. P76. 1995.

Thomas Dumm, Michel Foucault and the Politics of Freedom, Rowman and Littlefield, 2002 (1996).

Todd May, The Political Philosophy of Poststructuralist Anarchism, Penn State UP, 1994.

Davies, Bronwyn, “The Concept of Agency: A Feminist Poststructuralist Analysis,” Social Analysis, v. 30 (1991): 42-53.

Diamond, Irene and Lee Quinby. “Introduction.” Feminism and Foucault: Reflections on Resistance. Ed. Diamond and Quinby. Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1988. ix-xx.

David Macey, Foucault. (biography); s.a. other biographies of Foucault.

Deborah Cook, The Subject Finds a Voice: Foucault's Turn towards Subjectivity, Peter Lang, 1993. Argues that Foucault opens space for resistance of those not yet defined within traditional political spectrum, such as women, queers, mental patients, imprisoned, postcolonial subjects, etc. through identifying areas in society vulnerable to criticism.

Thomas Flynn, "Truth and Subjectivation in the Later Foucault," The Journal of Philosophy, 82.10 (Oct. 1985): 531-40.

E. **Useful Foucault references** for agency:

“An Aesthetics of Existence,” in John Johnston, Foucault Live: Interviews, 1966-1984, Semiotext(e), 1989.

“Human Nature: Justice vs. Power,”

Introduction to Kant’s Anthropology, Semiotext(e), 2008.

“Method,” The History of Sexuality: An Introduction, v. 1, Vintage, 1990 (1976), p. 92-102.

“Nietzsche, Genealogy, History,” Aesthetics, Method, and Epistemology, ed. James Faubion, Essential Works of Foucault, 1954-84, vol. 2, The New Press, 1997 (1994), p. 369-91.

“Of Other Spaces,” diacritics, 16.1(spr. 1986): 22-27.

“Power and Strategies: An Interview with Michel Foucault conducted by the Révoltes Logiques Collective,” in Michel Foucault: Power, Truth, Strategy, ed. Paul Patton, Meaghan Morris, Feral Publications, 1979.

“Preface,” for Deleuze and Guattari, Anti-Oedipus.

“The Subject and Power,” Critical Inquiry, 8 (Summer, 1982): 777-95.

Technologies of the Self, ed. Luther Martin, Huck Gutman, and Patrick Hutton, Univ. of Massachusetts Press, 1988. Generally thought to be the clearest discussion of his late notion of agency.