

Freedom From Domination

A Foucauldian Account of Power, Subject Formation, and the Need for Recognition

The project of social criticism should both diagnose the central dangers of the present and help us to navigate a course toward progressive social change. In order to accomplish these aims, we need an account of power in all its complexity as well as a concept of freedom that can serve as our normative guide. While there can be little doubt that Foucault's accounts of power and subject formation contribute to the former goal of social criticism, whether he contributes to the latter has been a source of much debate in the Foucault literature. The principal aim of this dissertation has been to demonstrate the strengths of Foucault's accounts of power and subject formation in terms of both of these goals of social criticism by examining what he means by 'power' and defining a concept of freedom that is compatible with his warnings about subjection.

However, it is sometimes believed that Foucault's account of power is incompatible with concepts of freedom that would help us to overcome the dangers revealed by the diagnosis of the present in terms of power. The belief in this tension between power and freedom creates a perceived division between thinkers such as Foucault and Butler on one side and Habermas and Honneth on the other. In my opinion, there are no winners in the debate between Foucault and critical theory as typically characterized. On the one hand, so the story goes, Foucault and Butler assert that freedom is impossible because our subjectivity is an inescapable source of domination. On the other hand, Habermas and Honneth are thought to rely on naïve and utopian ideas of the purity of autonomy and the impossibility of subordinating forms of recognition. My project contributes to the dissolution of this debate by demonstrating that no such simplistic description of Foucault's work does him justice. To this end, I argue that Foucault maintains an implicit commitment to much of the work of recognition theory in terms of the ontological explanation of our constitution as subjects through relations of power. We can therefore redescribe the concept of social freedom as found in recognition theory in terms compatible with Foucault's analyses of subject formation.

The first step of my project, then, is to clarify Foucault's account of power so that domination becomes only a subset of power relations more generally. Much of the criticism of Foucault's account of power stems from the conflation of the concepts of power and domination, resulting in the idea that if "power is everywhere" then there is no escaping domination.¹ However, in Chapter 1, I argue that 'power' is the more general term for the guiding of behaviors in social interactions, and it is only states of domination, a subset of power relations, that are negatively characterized as asymmetrical relations that have become difficult to reverse or render reciprocal.

With this distinction in hand, I examine Foucault's account of subject formation in the hope of carefully navigating a path between the reality of our subjection and the possibility of our freedom. While Foucault's analysis of subjection serves as an important caution against the dominating tendencies of our modes of identification, it should not be read as a wholesale rejection of the concept of subjectivity as inherently dominating. I argue that Foucault's genealogical period with its diagnosis of subjection is wholly compatible with, and indeed inseparable from, his ethical period with its emphasis on self-transformation. Read as two sides of a coin, these periods of Foucault's work establish the terms in which we must understand the ethico-political struggle in which we constantly find ourselves as subjects of self-transformation embedded in identity-constituting relations of power.

¹ Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: Vol. 1*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage Books, 1990), 93.

I then turn, in Chapter 3, to Foucault's criticism of the Kantian concept of autonomy as taking insufficient account of the ways in which our subjective capacities are formed within processes of socialization. This chapter investigates more deeply Foucault's analysis of subjection in order to uncover the means by which we are dominated by our current relations to ourselves as subjects. This investigation involves a comparison between the Enlightenment concept of autonomy and the ancient Greek concept of freedom as self-management. This comparison is offered in order to demonstrate the historical contingency of the Enlightenment concept of autonomy and to provoke the freedom of our imagination with respect to how we understand ourselves as subjects. Through this comparison, Foucault reveals that new forms of domination have been allowed to flourish thanks to our adoption of a (roughly) Kantian concept of the subject and its autonomy. In revealing the dangers of a Kantian concept of autonomy, he gestures toward attractive features of the ancient Greek ethics of the care of the self that we may wish to reclaim through a transformation appropriate to our own historical context.

One such feature is the recognition – in the sense of affirmation – of the particularity of the individual. In Chapter 4, I argue that the concept of recognition plays both an explanatory role in Foucault's account of subject formation and a normative role in his criticism of the present age. The explanatory role of recognition can be found in Foucault's descriptions of the operation of power, which implicitly commit him to a concept of recognition as the social feedback by which our practical identities are formed. Acknowledging the need for recognition in subject formation can help Foucault to explain how it is that power is able to attach us to our identities. The ethical role of recognition is found in Foucault's descriptions of contemporary power struggles in terms that resonate with Axel Honneth's descriptions of struggles for recognition. I argue that Foucault's emphasis on the imagining of new or different ways of life should be read as demands for new forms of recognition. It is Foucault's statements about ethics as a way of life that lead me to consider the concept of social freedom found in recognition theory as a viable concept to supplement Foucault's account of power.

I argue that a roughly Hegelian concept of social freedom can make sense of Foucault's statements that freedom is a condition of the possibility for ethics and that ethics is a practice of freedom.² This is because the concept of social freedom takes seriously the idea that the autonomy of the individual is both created and expressed within social institutions. Such a concept of socially embedded autonomy considers both the constitutive role that social institutions play in the formation of the subject's capacities for autonomy and freedom of imagination as well as the social conditions necessary for the expression of those capacities through the realization of individual ways of life. Because Foucault emphasizes the freedom of imagination to reconceive of ourselves as subjects, we must add to the Hegelian picture of social freedom an element of adaptability on the part of our social institutions. I argue that Foucault must adopt something like a historically contextualized version of the Hegelian concept of social freedom in combination with a metaethico-political openness principle that would call for the constant testing of the limits of recognition through acts of resistance. These concepts of resistance and freedom need not amount to an "anything goes" kind of ethics or politics, but instead serve to combat social stagnation and promote change in the direction of increasing the recognition of groups at risk for marginalization.

² Michel Foucault, "The Ethics of the Concern for the Self as a Practice of Freedom," in *Foucault Live*, trans. Phillis Aranov and Dan McGrawth, ed. Sylvère Lotringer (New York: Semiotext(e), 1989), 434.