

Subjugation and subjectification according to Foucault: for a pedagogy of the body and spaces

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Abstract

Looking at the construction of the self through the eyes of Foucault means taking a path made of archaeology, history, seeking the roots of subjectification and its declinations linked to the context, in spite of every form of absolutism and metaphysics that wants to fix subjectification itself to a form of truth. To do that, we will start from reason and madness, going through the genealogic research conducted by Foucault in its work of 1961, “History of Madness in the Classical Age”.

Osservare la costruzione del sé attraverso gli occhi di Foucault significa intraprendere un percorso fatto di archeologia, storia, alla ricerca delle radici della soggettività e le sue declinazioni legate al contesto, nonostante le varie forme di assolutismo e metafisica che vogliono fissare la stessa soggettività ad una forma di verità. Per fare ciò, lo studio parte dai concetti di ragione e follia, muovendo attraverso la ricerca genealogica condotta da Foucault nel suo lavoro del 1961, “Storia della Follia nell’età Classica”.

Keywords: Foucault; identity; madness; construction; subjectification

Parole chiave: Foucault; identità; follia; costruzione; soggettività

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1. Analysis of the dialogue between reason and madness

“I used to work in a psychiatric hospital in the 1950s. After having studied philosophy, I wanted to see what madness was: I had been mad enough to study reason; I was reasonable enough to study madness” affirms Foucault (Martin, Gutman, & Hutton, 1988, p.11).

Foucault spoke these words in an interview conducted in 1982 by Rux Martin, who, sensing a strong emotional element pervading the author’s entire oeuvre, refers to resentment and sadness, detectable especially in *History of madness*. Foucault states: “Each of my works is a part of my own biography” (Martin, Gutman, & Hutton, 1988, p.11). He thus tells of his experience working in a psychiatric hospital, where, with no specific duties, he was able to indulge his acute spirit of observation among the patients and staff working in this sector, to the point that he ending up wondering whether the practices he was witness to were really necessary. This is what gave rise to *History of Madness*, written in response to the unease that he was beginning to feel. But why does a note of sorrow fill the pages of this work written in 1961? Was it perhaps the madness that drove the frustration that the author was feeling? Or was it his own life story?

Let us examine how Foucault was so quick to place madness together with its apparently natural antithesis: reason. What the French philosopher was seeking to understand, or perhaps explain, is that this dichotomy is far from being innate and absolute. On the contrary it is historically determined and, as such, analysable and debatable. This is what inspired *History of Madness* and this is why the investigation that emerges from it must be of an archaeological rather than a metaphysical or transcendental nature, exploring the birth of this dichotomy and the path it has taken, tracing its development until the point when it loses all meaning.

Then, and only then, will that domain be able to appear, where men of madness and men of reason, departing from each other [are] not yet separate [...]. There madness and non-madness, reason and unreason are confusedly implicated in each other, inseparable as they do not yet exist, and existing for each other, in relation to each other, in the exchange that separates them (Foucault, 2006a).

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But when was it that the dialogue between reason and madness broke down to the point of becoming total silence? The answer is the moment in which madness became a mental illness.

Indeed, in the 18th and 19th centuries, human reason began to be framed as an objective truth, a natural fact: decoupled from ethics, with which it had been associated until that time, human reason started to become a specific skill of a new branch of knowledge, that of psychology. The result was that the mad person came to be defined as one who did not ethically conform to the society in which they lived, who went beyond the boundaries imposed by the bourgeoisie, falling within – according to psychological theory – the domain of illness.

Madness therefore ceased to be a “phenomenon” and began to be an “object”: a trick, as Foucault himself defines it in the preface to the first edition; a conspiracy to be pinpointed «before it was definitely established in the reign of truth” (Foucault, 2006a). A sharp differentiation is thus created between the history of madness and the history of psychiatry, in which the latter is established as a monologue *by* reason *about* madness, thanks to a language that enables it to compare the diseases of the body with the diseases of the mind.

Pierangelo Barone describes psychiatry as a “camouflaged morality” that claims to possess scientific validity. In this regard he writes that

madness then will on the one hand be the name of mental illness, i.e. the discomfort of the sick individual to be treated in accordance with medical knowledge, and on the other hand it will be disorder, i.e. the target of social hygiene, extending this power to the entire body of the population (Barone, 2009, p.39).

What then is the distinctive feature of psychiatry? Its curative value, which bases itself on its previously established disciplinary value: the reason expounded by the doctor, validated by scientific knowledge and as such considered to be if not certain, then at least reliable, beats the unreason of those who do not embrace social conformity. It happens therefore that those who were once considered rebels, and were “treated” with repression, now become poor victims to be taken into care and “treated” by psychiatric science, a branch of medicine whose treatment has a decidedly moral flavour: the more

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essential to the new modern society behavioural conformity became, the more the human mind became subject to public investigation, with an attempt to circumscribe non-adherence to presumed normality to those few individuals, those troubled hearts, for whom psychiatry could now provide a diagnosis and thus remove them from “healthy” society, interning them in structures where power and subjugation began to be called “care”.

This is why for Foucault writing the History of Madness meant going back to the scientific roots of the term and, more importantly, concentrating on the birth of these new repressive institutions called asylums. The asylum thus represented no more or less than a further link in that chain of power that sought to make society submit to a single will, and it was thus by means of disciplinary control, with its propensity to distinguish between regulated and unregulated activities, that led to the birth of the modern concept of psyche. Thus, starting with Freud, an illness of the soul became an illness of the mind. Madness was medicalised, and internment, which started out as an excellent means of silencing unreason, as a way to purify “normal” society, was then even idealised as a form of scientific progress, able to provide succour to marginalised persons. The consequence is the establishment of an asymmetric relationship between doctor and patient, with the definitive loss of the ancient dialogue between reason and unreason. In this situation there is only one way in which madness can still communicate: by renouncing one’s convictions and experience and entrusting oneself completely to the light of reason. In other words, it is necessary to acknowledge one’s madness, declare oneself to be sick and seek the treatment that medical reason has found: rebellion against society becomes an interior illness, anger at one’s surroundings becomes the torment of one’s own being, and it all takes place via a progressive process of self-blame and a description of the person which – despite coming from the outside – becomes, to all intents and purposes, one’s self-awareness. So it is that the very same people who are subject to disciplinary control validate the system that represses them, interiorising what is in reality none other than a historically developed construct. And like a child who hears so often from their exasperated teachers that they are naughty will start to believe it and behave accordingly, the non-compliant person calls themselves mad and seeks comfort in the care – claimed to be objective – provided by the dominant ideology, whose sole purpose is to shut them up. However, Foucault argues that mental

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health is not a truth, but merely the product of this gradual and growing process of ensuring conformity.

This is why: “The task therefore is to grasp madness – and its dialogue with reason – *before* it is constituted as a mental illness; *before* – therefore – internment and its psychopathological legitimation” (Galzigna, 2018, p.24).

2. The historical development of subjectivity

We have said that according to Foucault, mental illness is a historical construct created by objectivation, i.e. the process by which a phenomenon such as the mind is transformed into an object, into a truth that is scientifically verifiable by means of an examination that can determine its health or otherwise. These determinations, and consequently the therapies that psychology and psychiatry derive from them, act on the body because it is precisely the body that forms the starting point of the journey to reach the soul of the subject. It is the body that is punished, trained and interned, because it is in the body that we find the justification for this treatment: this means that in the modern epoch, we speak increasingly of human beings as entities that can be measured, quantified, objectively evaluated, to the point of arriving at concepts such as psyche and consciousness, making the behaviours of the individual and their interactional aspects the object of various branches of knowledge, not just medical but also economic, legal, economic, etc., which deconstruct their subjective aspect. All this leads to forms of domination and subjugation, which Judith Revel calls “biopowers”. It is therefore in the body that power is manifested and the discipline is applied, aiming to provide the various bodies, and thus the various individuals, with specially created spaces, which are understood not only in the architectural and geometric sense, but also and above all in terms of their associated connotations, giving rise to icons, symbols, hierarchies and forms of self-representation. Any number of Foucauldian examples may be cited here, from prison to school, but focusing on madness, the obvious disciplinary power arises from confinement in asylums. These are quite literally *places*, spaces whose power, as observed by numerous scholars, is an oxymoron: they at once both confine and welcome, treat and subjugate, provide a space while relegating to a space.

Power thus manages to intervene in the most personal aspects such as desires and beliefs, since, by means of its invisible hand, it brings the subject to the negation of itself.

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Indeed, it is the subject that allows morality, religion and political principles to guide its existence, to organise and order its thoughts. But why does the individual allow himself to be drawn into this dynamic? Why do they permit the institutions to provide them with a stereotypical subjectivity?

It seems that this subjugation may after all have an advantage: it is not always easy to find one's place in society and thereby become part of the disciplinary order that the majority of individuals follow. It therefore carries the benefit of enabling one to feel part of a whole, of avoiding marginalisation and ensuring a degree of social inclusion, the absence of which can seem unbearable. To be part of the game, it is the system that assigns the various roles, the identity that best suits the individual. In a sort of numbing fear of exclusion, a person does not seek the identity that they feel is most truly their own, but rather adopts the label that the biopower assigns. And so it is that one can without doubt acquire an Ego, with the certainty of existence. Furthermore, it is on this need, imperceptibly present but strongly felt, that power bases its game and sets itself up: a tacit pact between a subject that surrenders itself and a society that gives them somewhere to sit.

All this however does not happen by chance. Every mind that is born soon finds itself in a dense web of cultural convictions, which have developed over the course of history via a process that is creative and yet also manifests itself prescriptively. Studying the birth of institutions such as asylums, the French philosopher could not help but notice that it is the authorities that allow the mind to develop in one way or another. The psyche is thus really none other than a mirror that reflects the images that society allows us to assign ourselves in order to feel part of it (Martin, Gutman, & Hutton, 1988, p.139). We are thus a long way from the process of constructing the self that we might expect. Indeed, Patrick H. Hutton (1988) argues that, according to Foucault, there is no such thing as human nature in itself: "Our human nature is not a hidden reality to be discovered through self-analysis but the aggregate of the forms we have chosen to provide public definitions of who we are" (Martin, Gutman, & Hutton, 1988, p.127).

Does there exist therefore the possibility that we can avoid subjugation even when our self-analysis itself proves to be ineffective? The response, in our view and that of Foucault, is yes. But in order to achieve this it is necessary to forget the abstract metaphysical and absolutist conceptions that prompt us to think in terms of

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transcendental and universal subjectivity and turn once more to the archaeological method. Indeed, this what enables us to examine subjectivity in terms of its historical development: to recognise that it has historically taken various forms and been expressed in various ways. We have said that human beings are born into a pre-formed and pre-determined cultural context, “into a spider’s web of historic determinations” (Revel, 2008, p.146), but this should not be taken to imply that history has absolute control. History is in a constant process of transformation in response to such a wide variety of factors that it is not possible to speak of its development in terms of a simple cause-and-effect process. On the contrary, it is precisely by looking at historic evolution that we can trace all the various differences of interpretation and action that have succeeded each other, and these differences are precisely the key that the subject can and must employ if they seek to verify their own freedom. If subjectivity has had a number of meanings over the course of history, it goes without saying that there exists no absolute and universal truth, but only “historical precedent”, i.e. what delimits the field of possible experience. Such historical precedent determines both the way in which we view the objects contained in it and the conditions that enable a theoretical analysis and a dialogue that can be considered objective (Foucault, 1966a).

It is in this way that the individual becomes able to recognise themselves as an autonomous subject with the faculty of self-determination.

3. Recognising oneself as a determined but free subject

It is thus the deconstruction of formal structures that can lead to the discovery of our identity. It is futile to search mnemonically in our pasts for behaviours that might explain us. What really counts is the possibility of framing our experiences within that cultural network that influences their direction and assessment, in order to understand ourselves as historic individuals regardless of any possible transcendental subjectivity. In order to discover our identity, it can thus be argued, it is not necessary to go in search of any truth. Rather we must be able to construct a valid relationship with the truth itself. And the process which enables us to do this is genealogical:

To interrogate a culture about its limit-experiences is to question it at the confines of history about a tear that is something like the very birth of its history. There, in a

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tension that is constantly on the verge of resolution, we find the temporal continuity of a dialectical analysis confronted with the revelation, at the doors of time, of a tragic structure (Foucault, 2006a, p.XXIX).

Indeed: “History is only possible against the backdrop of the absence of history” (Foucault, 2006a, p.XXXI).

Foucault thus wishes to highlight the possibility of approaching history in a new way, recognising the tendency to domination, in order to see ourselves as subjects that are indeed determined, but at the same time free and therefore responsible. And it is precisely here that the highly pedagogical value of Foucault’s thought becomes clear.

Some scholars speak of the historical problematization of the present (Garland, 2014, p.378), because it is precisely in this deconstructive process, in subjecting culture to the investigation of its limit-experiences, in this search for the birth of history, that the most important aspect of Foucauldian thought lies. It is not sufficient to merely point out the power and cultural conditioning linked to institutions: we must go beyond this and ask ourselves how great this power can be and what its weak points might be, seeking that margin of autonomy into which human beings can insert themselves and act, as Galzigna affirms (Mariani, 1997, p.157). We need to find the space where freedom is possible.

We have already pointed out however that in order to arrive at the soul, power acts on bodies, distributing them in specially designated spaces. And if power starts with the body, then the body must also be the starting point of pedagogical endeavour, whose function is precisely to regulate the relationship with space and time. And given, as we have already stated, that for Foucault, life is not a simple concatenation of cause and effect, but a discontinuous movement characterised by leaps, twists and somersaults, it will be life itself that provides the spaces required for its own contradiction, i.e. educational spaces. By means of this educational effort and thanks to the utopian dimension of the body it will thus be possible to move to the spaces of counter-power: the heterotopias. But what does the utopian dimension of the body actually consist of?

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4. Heterotopia and processes of meaning

Maybe it should also be said that to make love is to feel one's body close in on oneself. It is to finally exist outside of any utopia, with all of one's density, between the hands of the other. Under the other's fingers running over you, all the invisible parts of your body begin to exist. Against the lips of the other, yours become more sensitive. In front of his half-closed eyes, your face acquires a certitude. There is a gaze, finally, to see your closed eyelids. Love also, like the mirror and like death – it appeases the utopia of your body, it hushes it, it calms it, it encloses it as if in a box, it shuts and seals it. This is why love is so closely related to the illusion of the mirror and the menace of death. And if, despite these two perilous figures that surround it, we love so much to make love, it is because, in love, the body is *here* (Foucault, 2006b, p.233).

Setting aside the undeniable beauty of this passage and returning to the issue of the meaning of the body in its utopian dimension, let us try to understand the deeper meaning of the words we have just read: why does love *appease the utopia of the body*?

If we reflect on our bodies we might initially consider them to be a millstone, an absolute place without which whatsoever movement is impossible: it is precisely in this way, from the desire to do without it, that the first utopia, the first search for a coveted and impossible escape, is born. And so it is that we identify with a soul trapped by this body so material and so limiting, and with it we travel through dreams and beyond. On closer consideration however, the body is much more: so material and perceptible, yet to ourselves it appears fragmentary and in some parts even unknown and perceptible only by the ruse of a mirror. And we can say of it that “it runs, it acts, it lives, it desires. It lets itself be traversed, with no resistance, by all my intentions” (Foucault, 2006b, p.231). It may initially seem that utopias are created for the purpose of erasing the body, but in truth, it is precisely from the body that all utopias are born and are enabled. In it, they are conceived and in it they find their best field of action.

My body, in fact, is always elsewhere. It is tied to all the elsewheres of the world. And to tell the truth, it is *elsewhere* than in the world, because it is around it that things are arranged. It is in relation to *it* [...] that there is a below, an above, a right, a left, a forward and a backward, a near and a far. The body is the zero point of the world. There, where paths and spaces come to meet, the body is nowhere. It is at the heart of

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the world, this small utopian kernel from which I dream, I speak, I proceed, I imagine, I perceive things in their place, and I negate them also by the indefinite power of the utopias I imagine. My body is like the city of the sun. It has no place, but it is from it that all possible places, real or utopian, emerge and radiate (Foucault, 2006b, p.233).

The body, thus we understand, is always elsewhere. Perhaps a mirror or a pain can fragmentarily remind us that it has weight and consistency, just as a dead body obliges us to notice that we are made of matter, but the truth is that we are never truly in a place, we are always oriented towards a utopia be it near or far. Only love allows us to live in the here and now, only love allows us this complete experience, giving us a consistency and a reality that have little to do with simple matter.

Each one of us then has a particular relationship with their body, which, as it allows us to make all these movements to unreal places, we may call utopian. But we are permitted more than just utopia: let us introduce then another Foucaultian concept: heterotopia. While utopia is the disappearance of the real place, heterotopias “pose a challenge to all other spaces” (Foucault, 1966b).

Heterotopia is a clearly defined space that contrasts with another just as clearly defined space, giving rise to discontinuities, a counter-space that neutralises or cancels out all the other spaces. As a rule, explains Foucault, heterotopia tends to “juxtapose in a real place a number of spaces that would normally – should normally – be incompatible” (Foucault, 1966b), just like the cinema, where on a single screen at one end of the room we observe *two*-dimensional projections of other *three*-dimensional places. How do heterotopias work? How do they succeed in creating this discontinuity? There are two ways, the first of which is “by creating an illusion that dismisses the rest of reality as an illusion” (Foucault, 1966b), and here as an example the author cites the case of brothels. The other entails “creating another real space that is as perfect, as meticulous, as well-ordered as our own is disorderly, badly organised and shambolic” (Foucault, 1966b), an approach that was adopted by the colonies, to which great educational significance was attributed.

These then are other spaces, different spaces, which, in accordance with the same mechanism of which we spoke with regard to internment, create new characters. By transferring an individual to another place and ensuring that they become accustomed

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to it, the individual is transformed into something else. Thus a child is transformed into an adult by the school, a peasant into a city dweller by the barracks and so on. This transformation involves the soul, but it is precisely at this point that our greatest strength comes into play: creativity, i.e. the unceasing ability to assign new meanings, to deconstruct and reconstruct human nature in accordance with creative processes of meaning that are always new and always different. We are speaking therefore about a continuous search for meaning, on which all our freedom – and with it our responsibility – depends: the greater our ability to exploit this prerogative of ours, the better our future will be.

It follows that heterotopia has a profound pedagogical value, since we exploit it in the formulation of educational spaces, in the construction of experiential functionality, which does not lead to the objectivation of identity but rather to its continuous questioning. This questioning unfolds – it is worth pointing out – through dialogue, in which the interpretative process concerns oneself as much as the other, in accordance with spaces of freedom and the shared construction of collective meaning. The latter stage is particularly important in an epoch such as the post-modern, whose well-documented fluidity often carries with it diffidence and fragmentation of the Ego, issues that are best tackled via spaces of learning established precisely from a heterotopic perspective. Indeed, such spaces could enable the creation of safe spaces, in which reflection and the acquisition of knowledge and convictions are not only free of risk and judgement, but also transferable to other contexts of life.

5. The plurality of the Ego and lifelong learning in the post-modern epoch

It is natural at this point to think of the fragmentation of the Ego, to which we referred above, as an element of negativity, a sad pessimistic consequence of an increasingly precarious subjectivity. But there is still hope, and that hope ignites when we look at that fragmentation through Foucault's eyes and thus see it as a mere historical contrivance.

While in the past the bonds of the community were strong and unavoidable, in the modern era, since the abandonment of tradition under the influence of the

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enlightenment, individualism has grown ever more influential. The confidence of the individual in his or her own abilities thus compensates for the disintegration of the community. In the post-modern era however, this confidence can no longer be counted on, and the individual, deprived of valid points of reference, takes refuge in reflecting on the construction of the self (Giannandrea, 2012).

As we have now demonstrated, subjectivity is constituted precisely by means of history, but it is important to note that the individual themselves is also a producer of history: the subject is rooted in its own context and even helps to produce it, and in doing so, also constitutes itself. But what does this reflection lead to? It prompts us to consider human beings in terms of two aspects: on one hand as subjects that are subjugated to the web of history in which they find themselves, and on the other hand as transcendental elements of knowledge. Indeed, Foucault himself describes human beings as an *empirical-transcendental allotrope* precisely in order to stress this dual nature, at the same time both free and necessary. It is precisely their discontinuity that allows individuals to go beyond themselves, their finite nature that ensures their transcendental properties, and their fragmentation that enables the rationality of human beings.

Fragmentation can thus also be seen on another plane, this time with a decidedly positive aspect: not as disintegration but as plurality. Let us try now to understand why the plurality of the Ego is a post-modern phenomenon that can be interpreted as positive and even functional.

In a context in continuous transformation, in which certainties come and go and return again like the hands of a clock, subjects are obliged to continuously play new roles, in a process of incessant adaptation. Consequently, the subject's needs are also dealt with on a case by case basis, as are projects and convictions. The plurality of the Ego thus acquires a value – indeed, it makes continuous transformation (and much more besides) possible for the subject, because, far from being chaotic, this transformation is performed by an individual who is able to bring together all those different selves that have been generated in the course of the individual's experience and education.

What needs to be stressed however is that this acquisition of value by the plurality of the Ego is not always a spontaneous process, but must be pedagogically assisted, and it is here that we return to the pedagogical value of the concept of heterotopia, with reference to what is now called lifelong learning.

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Creating places that are real but serve to communicate with elsewhere means, in the final analysis, creating comfort spaces, safe zones, in which it is possible for subjects to construct, deconstruct and reconstruct themselves. This means a space in which the subject is prompted to carry out a personal assessment of himself/herself and the context, with the opportunity to explore new spaces and new habits in order to continuously acquire new skills. This can only be achieved in accordance with a principle of freedom that makes self-determination possible for the individual and helps them to acquire an ever greater confidence in their potential and their ability to tackle and resolve problematic situations. We are dealing here with places that lead to other places, in order to facilitate the transfer of skills, in accordance with the by-now indispensable principle of continuous training, whose objective is no longer to provide knowledge but to ensure that people know how to learn. Everything that is learnt, in a given space and a given time, can be transposed to other contexts, because what the subject has really learnt is the problematisation of the context and of the self, in a framework of continuous reconstruction. This is why lifelong learning is so important: not just formally educational contexts, but every life experience contributes to the development of the person – a person who is not dominated by history, but one who performs and produces it, and is therefore able to choose their own course: a person who does not purchase their social inclusion with the negation of the self and the acceptance of a pre-established role, but is able to maintain, by themselves and despite the fragmentation and thus the plurality of the Ego, a unified image of themselves. The Ego is able to manage this confidence thanks to the development of interactional abilities, which enable it to integrate the image that it feels most authentically belongs to it with the reflection (which it can read) that comes to it from the gaze of the other.

The subject thus formed is able to accept itself, and to look at its own deviance without either denying it or amplifying it, but simply bringing it within the normality of a process in continuous evolution. The self is constructed within its context, and thus collectively, in accordance with a process of growth, framed within a single educational environment. It is therefore in search of a universal and shared ethics (Giannandrea, 2012).

This pedagogical project, inspired by the ideas and words of Foucault, in the construction of the self, becomes the very structure of experience and as such cannot be

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dissipated among the conceptions of a prescriptive ethics; rather it becomes a project for individual and social life.

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