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Source: *Polity* , Summer, 1996, Vol. 28, No. 4 (Summer, 1996), pp. 445-466

Published by: The University of Chicago Press on behalf of the Northeastern Political Science Association

Stable URL: https://www.jstor.org/stable/3235341

Foucault and the Politics of Resistance*

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It is impossible to comprehend Michel Foucault's politics without fully understanding his concept of resistance. It was developed in three distinct stages, beginning with a focus on difference in the 1960s, passing through an emphasis on revolutionary agitation in the years 1970s, and finally developing into a broader notion of diffuse, localized resistance to power in his later work. Contrary to the claims of those who assert that Foucault's notion of a ubiquitous and insidious power paralyzes, his notion of resistance supports a wide range of political action. The problem with his politics is elsewhere: his refusal to define any limits to resistance means endorsing all forms of opposition without regard to their form or consequences.

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The power of Michel Foucault's work is undeniable. He unmasks previously hidden mechanisms of domination and discipline, and makes his trenchant critiques of the modern West seem at least plausible, if not compelling. *Discipline and Punish,* for example, conveys a strong sense that power is ubiquitous and all-encompassing. Yet some regard this strength of his work as a weakness, alleging that Foucault presents such a bleak view of disciplinary society that he ultimately paralyzes, rather than promotes, resistance.[1] More fundamentally, critics charge that without introducing some normative reasons why resistance is preferable to submission, Foucault cannot explain why anyone should resist.[2] Proper-

*The author would like to thank David Mapel, David van Mill, Horst Mewes, and especially Simone Chambers, for their helpful comments and suggestions on an earlier draft of this article.

1. See, for example, Duccio Trombadori's introduction to Michel Foucault, *Remarks on Marx* (New York: Semiotext(e), 1991).

2. Nancy Fraser, "Foucault on Modern Power: Empirical Insights and Normative Confusions," *Praxis International* 3 (1981): 272-87; Jürgen Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1987), ch. 10.

ly evaluating these charges requires developing a better understanding of Foucault's ideas on resistance. Despite a copious secondary literature on Foucault, there is a surprising lack of extended treatments of this topic. Most discussions of resistance are mere codicils to lengthy examinations of power.[3]

To develop an understanding of Foucaultian resistance, it is useful to trace the development of the theme of "agonism" in Foucault's thought. The chronological description I develop here better reveals how radical Foucault's position is, particularly in his continued concern with foundational issues and dichotomies in Western culture, and in his politicization of practices and institutions usually seen as apolitical. I will, therefore, trace the evolution of Foucault's agonism beginning in the early 1960s, then its subsequent development and alterations in the early 1970s, and finally the idea of resistance that Foucault presented in the last decade of his life. This chronology will emphasize certain features, such as the centrality of this theme throughout his work, especially since it appeared more than a decade before he ever formulated his account of power. Also, the continuities in his ideas on resistance, particularly on such points as the role it plays in critical thought and the possibility of contesting central ideas in the Western tradition, will be highlighted.

I divide Foucault's writings into three periods defined by Foucault's different understandings of resistance. I recognize that other divisions are reasonable and do not use my divisions to make a larger claim about the development of his thought as a whole. The first period begins in 1961, with the publication of *Madness and Civilization,* and continues through the late 1960s. This period will be dealt with more briefly, since these works have not been as influential within political philosophy and the conceptualization of resistance within this period is less reflective of his later thought. The second period, marked by a renewed sympathy for Marxism, probably caused by the events of 1968, is brief and only covers the years of 1971 and 1972. Yet the ideas on revolutionary action he spelled out in a series of essays and interviews over these two years are pivotal for the third period, which begins in 1975 with *Discipline and*

3. For example, see Mark Philp, "Foucault on Power," *Political Theory,* 11 (Feb. 1983): 29-52; Nancy Fraser, "Foucault on Modern Power"; Joseph Rouse, "Power/Knowledge," in *The Cambridge Companion to Foucault* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994); and Hubert L. Dreyfus and Paul Rabinow, *Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1983). Two exceptions are Leslie Paul Thiele, "The Agony of Politics: The Nietzschean Roots of Foucault's Thought"; and Todd May, *Between Genealogy and Epistemology: Psychology, Politics, and Knowledge in the Thought of Michel Foucault* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1993).

Punish. There are important continuities between these two periods, and an elaboration of Foucault's more explicit arguments and comments during the earlier period allows a better grasp of his sometimes obscure later statements on resistance.

I then turn to the question of whether Foucault can meet the criticism that his work leads to paralysis, rather than resistance, especially since he lacks a normative stance from which to support agonism. I argue that even though he was motivated by certain moral intuitions in his celebration and elaboration of resistance, Foucault does not rely upon those same intuitions to suggest any limits upon the types of activity resistance can take. Instead, Foucault rejects placing limits upon resistance, lest those who are engaged become trapped in the very system of power they are trying to overcome—since any limits will be derived from ideals supported by modern power. Thus Foucaultian resistance is ultimately caught between two unacceptable positions: either place restrictions upon resistance and remain trapped in modern power, or celebrate any form of resistance and thereby sanction the worst forms of engagement. By choosing the latter, Foucault shows a dubious lack of concern with what resistance is for, as long as it is enough against.

In developing my chronological account I have followed Foucault's own preferred terms, which changed as his thought evolved. In the 1960s, he employs "contestation" and "transgression" and uses them interchangeably. In the early 1970s, Foucault moved to "struggle" and "resistance," which again are synonymous. Foucault stayed with the same terminology throughout his most influential works of the 1970s and early 1980s, though he also used "agonism" on occasion. The key difference between the earlier terms, such as contestation, and the later ones turns on the issue of what resistance is resistance against. The change in terminology coincides with Foucault's move towards his conceptualization of power, rather than his previous strict concern with discourses or limits. I will use the terms "agonism" and "resistance" when referring to the general theme flowing throughout Foucault's work.

I. Madness and Transgression

The central issue for any reading of Foucault's conception of resistance during the first period of his work is that he had not yet formulated power as a central problem. What, then, is resistance against? Foucault's answer is "limits." Foucault is concerned with the foundational issues of a culture. These are basic categories, which he sees as dichotomies, providing the context for social belief and action, such as good/evil and normal/pathological. The prime example from the work of this period is

the reason/unreason divide. The historical division of reason and unreason, the creation of a gulf between them over which no communication can take place is the most important instance of the creation of a limit.[4] Transgression (after Bataille) or contestation (after Blanchot) is an "excess" that crosses such a limit and thereby puts the division itself into question.[5]

So, for instance, the writings of Sade, Bataille, or even Nietzsche are able to capture and amplify the voices of classical unreason silenced by the historical creation of the reason/unreason limit and thereby restore their "shrieks and frenzy":

> Ruse and new triumph of madness: the world that thought to measure and justify madness through psychology must justify itself before madness, since in its struggles and agonies it measures itself by the excess of works like those of Nietzsche, of Van Gogh, of Artaud.[6]

Transgression forces the limit to recognize and acknowledge what it excludes, and hence "the world is forced to question itself" and "is made aware of its guilt."[7]

This is not the expression of desire for a world without limits, for Foucault already exudes pessimism about achieving such a world and explicitly distances himself from such a utopian reading of transgression.[8] Foucault gives two different, though related, answers about what this contestation is to achieve. The first is described in *Madness and Civilization.* Centuries ago, Foucault argues, madness and reason shared a common language and there was a debate between the two. The historical division of reason from unreason led to the death of this shared discourse. In the resulting silence the monologue of psychiatry is made possible. Madmen, who had previously led "an easy wandering existence," were now confined and made anonymous objects of rewards and punishments, and physical and moral constraints.[9] Through the retrieval

4. *Madness and Civilization* (New York: Random House, 1967), esp. Preface.

5. See "A Preface to Transgression" in *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1977).

6. *Madness and Civilization,* pp. 226, 231. Interestingly, the passage continues, "And nothing in itself, especially not what it can know of madness, assures the world that it is justified by such works of madness." This statement appears to echo Nietzsche's famous declaration in *The Birth of Tragedy* that the world is only justified as an aesthetic phenomenon. Cf. *The Birth of Tragedy* (New York: Vintage, 1967), p. 52.

7. *Madness and Civilization,* p. 231.

8. *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice,* p. 35.

9. *Madness and Civilization,* p. 18.

of the voices of unreason it becomes possible to criticize "that other form of madness, by which men, in an act of sovereign reason, confine their neighbors."[10] This desire to recognize the experiences and speech of excluded or marginal populations will prove to be an enduring one for Foucault, for those voices are sources of struggle against "that gigantic moral imprisonment" of which Foucault writes the history.[11]

There is another, larger goal for contestation in *Madness and Civilization,* and it is remarkably similar to a central theme in Nietzsche's first book, *The Birth of Tragedy.* It is a serious misreading of Foucault to see his early works on madness and reason as a celebration of the former to the exclusion of the latter.[12] Rather, he is lamenting the cessation of a debate, of an agonism in culture. Reason has silenced madness; madmen are no longer the bearers of secret powers. The Apollonian side of the world, to put it in Nietzschean terms, is victorious and our culture is correspondingly impoverished. By challenging this victory, however, it is possible to recover "tragic experience."[13] The echoes of Nietzsche's celebration of the antagonism between the Apollonian and Dionysian elements of ancient Greece, and their fusion in the highest form of Attic art—tragedy—is clear. Foucault argues that through Nietzsche's awareness and revival of Dionysian forces it is possible to attain "a hold on Western culture which makes possible all contestations, as well as *total* contestation."[14] An agonistic spirit is to be created as the centerpiece of our culture.

The ambition of *Madness and Civilization* was quickly attenuated. Foucault was criticized, by Derrida among others, for making madness itself into a metaphysics.[15] Foucault retreated from some of his bolder pronouncements on madness.[16] Yet in his 1963 essay, "A Preface to Transgression," Foucault maintained that transgression and contestation were still vital for the proper form of thinking, if not for culture.[17] The theme, however, is broadened. First, Foucault explicitly draws upon Bataille's writings about eroticism and argues that they too inform the

10. *Madness and Civilization,* p. ix.

11. *Madness and Civilization,* p. 223.

12. James Miller, *The Passion of Michel Foucault,* ch. 4, reads these works in this one-sided manner.

13. *Madness and Civilization,* p. 228.

14. *Madness and Civilization,* p. 226. Emphasis in the original.

15. See Jacques Derrida, "Cogito and the History of Madness," in *Writing and Difference* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978).

16. See *The Birth of the Clinic* (New York: Vintage Books, 1973), p. xvii, and *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1972), pp. 16, 47.

17. "A Preface to Transgression" in *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice.*

experience of transgression. So in addition to the voices of unreason, Foucault identifies a second site of excess and contestation: "at the root of sexuality . . . a singular experience is shaped: that of transgression."[18]

A second way in which the idea of agonism is broadened is that transgression is now conceived as an implicit affirmation of difference. Foucault takes pains to argue that although transgression is the (temporary) negation of a limit, it is not itself negative in character. It "affirms limited being."[19] Yet "this affirmation contains nothing positive; no content could bind it."[20] It is tempting to think that Foucault is purposefully trying to be elusive, elliptically praising transgression without binding himself to anything that could be criticized. A better answer, however, is that the beginnings of Foucault's more developed position is revealed here. The various rules, limits, and norms history has placed upon us, which are often seen as natural, are the sources of exclusion, marginalization, and the resulting solidification of identity for those who "confine their neighbors." Through transgression it is possible to undermine these limits, although new ones will always arise. This affirmation of difference is thus a permanent agonistic stance. Foucault explained the reason for this in his 1966 essay, "The Thought from Outside":

> Anyone who attempts to oppose the law in order to found a new order, to organize a second police force, to institute a new state, will only encounter the silent and infinitely accommodating welcome of the law.[21]

The purpose of contestation is not the construction of a new, better system based upon reason, truth, or humanity. Any such system will have similar effects of exclusion, which is why Foucault repudiates the desire to oppose the current law in the name of a new law. Such a desire is, in his view, self-defeating. Instead, transgression seeks to undermine

18. *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice,* p. 33.

19. *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice,* p. 35. Foucault also states that transgression "is the solar inversion of satanic denial" (p. 37). Foucault repeatedly links transgression to images of light, such as the sun or lightning, both in "A Preface to Transgression" and in *Madness and Civilization.* In contrast, the modern rule of reason is likened to a dense and black night. The relationship between struggle and that which it struggles against is posited, in this early work, as a mutual incitement. It is not seen as a law and law-breaking, but rather as a mutually revealing event, perhaps even a mutual dependence. The darkness of the night is only revealed by the flash of lightning, yet the clarity of the lightning is only gained against the dark backdrop. See *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice,* p. 35.

20. *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice,* p. 36.

21. "The Thought from Outside" in *Foucault/Blanchot* (New York: Zone Books, 1990), p. 38.

or at least weaken any given set of limits in order to attenuate their violence. Transgression then is nothing less than the affirmation of negation. This refusal to describe a new order, allied with an overarching desire for resistance, will prove to be a constant in the work of Michel Foucault.

II. Revolutionary Action

Many of Foucault's statements from the early 1970s belong to what Michael Walzer has aptly called infantile leftism.[22] For example, Foucault supported some of Jean Genet's more radical statements in defense of Palestinian terrorists, asserted that recent experiments with drugs, sex, and communes might supply the outlines of a future society, and was even to the political left of a bloody-minded Maoist with the *nom du guerre* Pierre Victor.[23] It would be easy to dismiss all of Foucault's work from this period because of this posturing. That would be a mistake, however, for within this work is an understanding of revolutionary action, substantial portions of which Foucault retained in his later treatments of resistance.

It is during this period that power emerged as a central concept in Foucault's thought. Although he has not yet broken from more traditional accounts, he is clearly wrestling with the concept and attempting to find a more adequate formulation. For instance, the idea that moral concepts are the constructs of power appeals to him:

> I will be a little bit Nietzschean about this . . . it seems to me that the idea of justice in itself is an idea which in effect has been invented and put to work in different types of societies as an instrument of a certain political and economic power or as a weapon against that power.[24]

Foucault also abandoned the focus on discourse to the exclusion of social practices which marked his "archaeological" period. Now he is concerned with institutional practices within prisons, factories, asylums, and schools, and with the ideological constructs that support these practices. Primary among these constructs is "humanism." What Foucault

22. "The Politics of Michel Foucault" in *Foucault: A Critical Reader* (Cambridge, MA: Basil Blackwell, 1986), p. 51.

23. See *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice,* pp. 227, 231; and "On Popular Justice," in *Power/Knowledge* (New York: Pantheon, 1980).

24. "Human Nature: Justice versus Power," in *Reflexive Water: The Basic Concerns of Mankind,* ed. Fons Elders (Ontario: Souvenir Press, 1974), pp. 184-85.

means by this term shifts somewhat throughout his work, but generally he is referring to various modern conceptions of what human beings are by nature. Instead of seeing human beings as having a true self, Foucault, following Nietzsche, sees all views of human nature as the expression of contingent histories and social practices. Any particular theory of what a person ought to be like by nature is false, and has effects of constraining human possibilities and marginalizing those who fall outside this "nature."

A prominent aspect of humanism, one which Foucault is particularly concerned with attacking, involves references to a "normal" individual based on the scientific discourses of psychiatry or criminology. By legitimating what is done in prisons and asylums, the categories of humanism "dispel the shock of daily occurrences."[25] Humanism is also the legitimating force behind liberal democracy. It tells people that although they do not have power, they are still the rulers:

> In short, humanism is everything in Western civilization that restricts *the desire for power*: it prohibits the desire for power and excludes the possibility of power being seized.[26]

Because of its effects, Foucault argues that it is necessary to undermine the categories and central concepts of humanism. One of the most effective ways of doing this, Foucault claims, is to learn from those who have been the direct targets of power and repression. Learn how they were "divided, distributed, selected, and excluded in the name of psychiatry and of the normal individual, that is, in the name of humanism."[27] Their memories, histories, and knowledges are concerned with power and struggles, not with the categories of humanism. This insurrection of subjugated knowledges unmasks previously hidden techniques of power. Since Foucault believes that power is only accepted to the degree that it is hidden, this insurrection of knowledge will lead to direct action against the central institutions of contemporary culture.

At the heart of humanism, according to Foucault, is the theory of the subject. Foucault means two things by "the subject." The first is the subject of a hierarchical political order. This is the humanist notion of the "sovereign" individual who is subjected to the laws of society, nature, truth, and God. The subject, even though he exercises no power, is the sovereign. The humanistic theory of the individual rests, Foucault

25. *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice,* p. 220.
26. *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice,* pp. 221-22.
27. *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice,* p. 229.

contends, upon a subjected will to power. That is, the very desire for power is to be eradicated from the individual in the name of truth, nature, and society. In order to achieve the " 'desubjectification' of the will to power," that is, in order to liberate the desire to take power, it is necessary to engage in political struggle.[28] During the early 1970s, Foucault repeatedly emphasized that one does not struggle against power to achieve justice; rather one struggles to take power.[29] The notion of the individual as subject, as fixed within a series of hierarchies that limit and constrain, is overthrown through this war for power.

The second aspect of the theory of the subject is the reference to a "normal" subject. Modern definitions of normalcy are invariably constructed by the human sciences. This fiction of what a normal person is like has important effects, according to Foucault, in courtrooms, prisons, and various other institutions such as universities. The attack on the normal subject is achieved through breaking the various taboos placed upon the individual. Drug experimentation, communes, and ignoring gender lines are all possible examples of this.[30]

Another source of struggle against humanism, and the mechanisms of power it supports, is what Foucault envisions as a "new intellectual." In contrast to the traditional theorist, who formulated a totalizing theory apart from the masses and led them with it, the new intellectuals do not aspire to guide the masses. They do not impart knowledge to the masses. Indeed, the masses know better, which is why intellectuals must learn from those most exposed to power. The theories constructed from the memories and struggles of factory hands and inmates are local, not global. The new intellectual is not the bearer of truth; instead theory is merely one more tool in the struggle against power.[31] Furthermore, Foucault argued that it is dangerous to formulate a universalistic theory. Struggle must not be made in the name of a new utopia. "I think that to imagine another system is to extend our participation in the present system."[32] Foucault is adamant that the intellectual must not yield to the strong temptation to describe a certain human nature, to argue that this nature is repressed or distorted by society, and thereby give the outlines of a new, just order. He believes that the description of human nature

28. *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice,* p. 222.

29. For example, see "Human Nature," p. 182, and *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice,* p. 208.

30. *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice,* p. 222.

31. The new intellectual is discussed at length in "Intellectuals and Power," in *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice.*

32. *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice,* p. 230.

will itself be unwittingly drawn from the contemporary power system.[33] Thus one becomes entrapped in the very system one is trying to oppose:

> these notions of human nature, of justice, of the realisation of the essence of human beings, are all notions and concepts which have been formed within our civilisation, within our type of knowledge, and our form of philosophy . . . and one can't, however regrettable it may be, put forward these notions to describe or justify a right which should—and shall in principle—overthrow the very fundamentals of our society.[34]

Instead of opposing the ideal to the real, Foucault suggests that the new intellectual oppose the real to the real. Exposing the specific, concrete workings and events of the prison, asylum, and other institutions is enough to justify action. Once certain "intolerables" are revealed, such as the prevalence of suicide in French prisons, a struggle has been created.

A central task for the new intellectual is to attack those categories of humanism, such as the subject, which invalidate the knowledges or experiences of the marginalized. In the early 1970s, he identifies genealogy as the prime tool for this task. As described in his important piece, "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History," the genealogist, or "effective historian," shows that the sense of a coherent and stable identity is an illusion: "The purpose of history, guided by genealogy, is not to discover the roots of our identity but to commit itself to its dissipation."[35] The genealogist/new intellectual should use history to introduce "discontinuity into our very being" and thereby deprive us of the traditional grounds of "reassuring stability" and its concomitant blindness.[36] The primacy of the subject is thus disrupted, with the effect of "liberating divergence and marginal elements."[37]

Other important categories of humanism, such as truth and progress, can also be rendered problematic by effective history. For instance, the genealogist shows that what is traditionally seen as a story of the increasing humanity of laws and punishment is something quite different:

> On the contrary, the law is a calculated and relentless pleasure,

33. "Human Nature," pp. 173-74. Cf. *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice,* pp. 230-31.

34. "Human Nature," p. 187.

35. *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice,* p. 162.

36. *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice,* p. 154.

37. *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice,* p. 153.

> delight in the promised blood, which permits the perpetual instigation of new dominations and the staging of meticulously repeated scenes of violence. . . . Humanity does not gradually progress from combat to combat until it arrives at universal reciprocity, where the rule of law finally replaces warfare; humanity installs each of its violences in a system of rules and thus proceeds from domination to domination.[38]

The disruption of the metanarratives of progress, reason, and increasing humanity helps to make us aware of the constraints and exclusions built into our practices.[39] For instance, the apparent naturalness of incarceration can be undermined, thereby better revealing the violence within that social practice. It is possible through the critique of metanarratives to create uncertainty in previously unquestioned policies. Yet the corresponding danger of effective history merely creating new metanarratives is avoided since it affirms knowledge as perspective, and seeks to make its own perspective explicit. By putting forward its narratives as deeply contestable, effective history seeks to open new sites of contestation.

The ultimate goal of these various tactics and techniques, like genealogy or learning from those most affected by power, is the incitement of local struggles against the modern power system. These actions must be led by those most subject to their constraints. Students must fight a "revolutionary battle" against schools; prison inmates should revolt and thereby be integrated into the larger political struggles.[40] Only those directly involved in the battle can determine the method used.

Three institutions are most important to Foucault in this period. The revolt against these institutions must simultaneously involve concrete agitation and ideological critique. First, schools are important primarily because they transmit a conservative ideology masked as knowledge. Second, psychiatry is important precisely because it extends beyond the asylum into schools, prisons, and medicine; in short, "all the psychiatric components of everyday life which form something like a third order of repression and policing."[41] Finally, and probably most importantly to Foucault, is the judicial system, since it relies on the fundamental moral distinction of guilt/innocence. This allows "the most frenzied manifesta-

38. *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice,* p. 151.

39. Michel Foucault, "Politics and the Study of Discourse," in *The Foucault Effect: Studies in Governmentality,* ed. Graham Burchell, Colin Gordon, and Peter Miller (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1991), p. 65. This essay was originally published in 1968.

40. "Politics," pp. 223, 229; and "On Attica."

41. *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice,* p. 229.

tion of power imaginable" to masquerade as "the serene domination of Good over Evil, of order over disorder."[42] The judiciary actually blocks direct action through the construction of an allegedly neutral structure, which stops real struggle in the here-and-now and instead arbitrates in the realm of the ideal. Moreover, the judicial system performs a number of functions that prevent revolution, such as controlling the most volatile people who might spearhead a revolt and introducing internal divisions within the masses so that one group will see the other as "dangerous" or "trash." For these reasons it is vital that the judiciary be attacked. Foucault gives examples of the "thousands of possibilities" for "anti-judicial guerilla operations," including escaping from the police and heckling in the courts.[43] Ultimately, Foucault calls for "the radical elimination of the judicial apparatus."[44]

Yet agitation cannot be limited to prisons, schools, and asylums; it must extend into factories and the streets. This raises an essential point. Totalizing theory is rejected, but Foucault does support total revolution. If theory is to be local and discontinuous, how is revolutionary action to gain its larger coherence? "The generality of the struggle specifically derives from the system of power itself, from all the forms in which power is exercised and applied."[45] The diffuse yet unitary nature of power allows for these various agitations across society to finally achieve coherence, thereby eliminating the need for imagining a new system.

Although Foucault criticizes those who still feel this need for a global theory and its utopia, he occasionally gives suggestions about what a better system would look like. Most prominent here is a desire for a lack of hierarchy, including class divisions. For instance, when speaking about the events of May, 1968, Foucault said, "it is of the utmost importance that thousands of people exercised a power which did not assume the form of a hierarchical organization."[46] A second feature of a better society appears to be a radical pluralism bordering on anarchy. Foucault strongly disagrees with those who invoke "the whole of society" when formulating plans for revolutionary action.[47] Such an ideal, he contends, itself arises from a utopian dream. It also has the detrimental effect of limiting possible avenues of struggle. If prisoners feel that they must take

42. *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice,* p. 210.

43. *Power/Knowledge,* pp. 36, 34. Cf. *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice,* pp. 227-28.

44. *Power/Knowledge,* p. 16.

45. *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice,* p. 217. Cf. p. 230.

46. *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice,* p. 232. Cf. "Human Nature," p. 170.

47. *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice,* pp. 232-33.

over their prison, they are not to be dissuaded from this because of what is thought to be best for the whole of society. Only those directly involved at each site of action can determine the methods used and the goals sought:

> "The whole of society" is precisely that which should not be considered except as something to be destroyed. And then, we can only hope that it will never exist again.[48]

At this point a number of continuities between the first two periods should be evident. In both, Foucault sees a need to listen to the voices of the excluded and marginalized, particularly because this is a spur to struggle. Furthermore, these voices, the events described by them, and the struggle they engender are all vital for critical reflection about our contemporary situation. Foucault also attacks foundational distinctions of the Western tradition, such as reason/madness and guilt/innocence. The very identity of a culture is to be part of the struggle. Finally, there is great continuity in Foucault's simultaneous refusal to describe a better society paired with occasional references to an egalitarian world where no one is excluded or diminished.[49]

III. The Politics of Resistance

In 1973 Foucault gave a lecture in which he spoke of the need to "free ourselves" from several analyses of power.[50] Through a critical review of liberal and Marxist conceptions of power, Foucault enunciated many of the key ideas of his own emerging view, a view which found forceful expression in his most famous works of the 1970s. The introduction of "power" as a distinct and central idea obviously affects the account of resistance. Hence, while the continuities outlined above are crucial, attention must be given to the discontinuity introduced by this transition in Foucault's thought.

Foucault's account of modern power as ubiquitous, diffuse, and circulating, emphasizes the difficulty of resistance. It also leads Foucault away from the great emphasis he previously placed upon a few institu-

48. *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice,* p. 233.

49. For textual evidence of Foucault's sometimes oblique statements in defense of egalitarianism, see "Human Nature: Justice versus Power," pp. 170, 184-85 (where he clearly aspires to a society which is not "hierarchically ordered in classes"); "Michel Foucault on Attica: An Interview," pp. 159, 161.

50. "Power and Norm: Notes" in *Power, Truth, Strategy,* ed. Meaghan Morris and Paul Patton (Sydney: Feral Publications, 1979), p. 59.

tions. Since power is spread throughout society and not localized in any particular place, the struggle against power must also be diffuse. Moreover, modern power works under the injunction to maximize the productive forces of the subjects it works upon, while simultaneously decreasing their political or resistive forces. The view of power as productive and creative alters Foucault's previous focus upon those who were marginalized or excluded. At its strongest, power does not work through such negative mechanisms. Instead it creates gestures, impulses, and even individuals. Consequently, the strategic knowledge of power necessary for effective resistance must be more concerned with this productive function of power than with the less important negative techniques.

A central issue in Foucault's work from this period is the relationship between power and resistance. Is resistance simply that which frustrates power; is it "the antimatter of power"?[51] Is it recalcitrance, refusal, and unruliness?[52] There is textual evidence for these views. Foucault sees resistance as the odd element within power relations. Resistance is what eludes power, and power targets resistance as its adversary.[53] Resistance is what threatens power, hence it stands against power as an adversary. Although resistance is also a potential resource for power, the elements or materials that power works upon are never rendered fully docile. Something always eludes the diffusion of power and expresses itself as indocility and resistance. This is due, William Connolly has suggested, to the fact that human beings do not naturally take one form or another; we do not have a *telos* or *essence*.[54] Thus power may form disciplined individuals, who are rational, responsible, productive subjects, yet that is in no way an expression of a human nature. Furthermore, there is always at least some resistance to the imposition of any particular form of subjectivity, and thus resistance is concomitant with the process of subjectification.

Power also can produce the very thing which comes to resist it. Foucault describes power as that which organizes multiplicities. This happens on an individual level, such as organizing an aimless flux of impulses, sensations, and desires into a skilled worker. It also happens

51. Thiele, "The Agony of Politics," p. 907.

52. Alessandro Pizzorno, "Foucault and the Liberal View of the Individual" in *Michel Foucault: Philosopher* (New York: Routledge, 1992).

53. *The Will to Know, Volume One of the History of Sexuality* (New York: Vintage Books, 1980), p. 95.

54. "Taylor, Foucault, and Otherness," *Political Theory,* 13 (August 1985): 371. See also Peter Digeser, "The Fourth Face of Power," *The Journal of Politics,* 54 (November 1992): 985.

on a larger level, for instance by integrating that worker into a divided, hierarchical factory space. The creation of such an organized multiplicity serves to increase force, yet power must be further concerned with the docility of the very force it has produced and maximized. Foucault held onto his idea, formulated during his second period, that power is only accepted to the extent that it is hidden. Therefore, unless it is a relatively invisible power it will provoke resistance by what it has produced. Indeed, resistance can be made effective, in a sense, by the very power which has opposed it; for instance, by forging a group of skilled workers and bringing them together, disciplinary techniques create the possibility of large strikes.[55]

Power, if it is to minimize dangerous resistances, must seek to individualize and divide the forces of the institutions it creates. The unpredictable or spontaneous mixture of individuals or groups must be stopped, and so it is necessary "that [the disciplines] oppose to the intrinsic, adverse force of multiplicity the technique of the continuous, individualizing pyramid."[56] Power, by its very nature, must be hierarchical and inegalitarian. In contrast, Foucault repeatedly links resistance with "horizontal conjunctions" and equality.[57] For Foucault, inequality is an essential element of power and therefore resistance, with its absence of hierarchy, is what Foucault calls "counter-power."[58]

Just as Foucault continually cautioned against seeing power as simply negative in scope, similarly it is important to point out that resistance is not simply an "antimatter" or a negation of power. It can also be productive, affirmative, and even use the techniques of power. A good example of this is Foucault's own writings. They use the techniques of formal discourse, such as arguments, footnotes, and historical data, to undermine the previous narratives within that discourse. Yet Foucault, even while engaged in this project of demolition, also seeks to build a "strategic knowledge" with his writings, thereby opening more possible sites for resistance.[59]

Part of this strategic knowledge, and this connects directly with Foucault's ideas on revolutionary action, is the construction of an account of

55. *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979), pp. 218-20.

56. *Discipline and Punish,* p. 220.

57. *Discipline and Punish,* p. 219. On power as inequality, see *The Will to Know,* p. 93: "it is the moving substrate of force relations which, *by virtue of their inequality,* constantly engender states of power. . ." (emphasis added), and further discussion on p. 94.

58. *Discipline and Punish,* p. 219.

59. *Power/Knowledge,* pp. 80-83, 145.

the body and its history. While power/knowledge, especially in the form of universal theories, frequently subjugates this history, Foucault contends it is possible to recapture it through genealogy. For example, in *Discipline and Punish* Foucault gives a history of how the body has been placed under increasingly meticulous controls over the past three centuries. The point of such a narrative is to reveal these controls and so open the possibility of resistance done in the name of the body and its history. These shared experiences of subjugation then can find expression in collective action. It is one way of acting in solidarity, not in the name of an ideology or theory, but rather as a revolt against shared "intolerables." Given Foucault's suspicions of universalist theories, the possibility of retrieving histories of struggles about the body plays an important role in Foucaultian politics. These histories can act both as a spur to resistance and as a means of identifying weak points in the fine web of power. Therefore, even after the death of Marxist and other universalist theories, it is still possible to construct a basis for collective actions.

Foucault also contends that these struggles find expression at the level of the body. For example, the various prison revolts that took place in the late 1960s and early 1970s, in which Foucault himself was engaged, "have been about the body."[60] The body itself is the object of power, and prisons, even model ones, are focused upon the body and its functions. This is expressed in tranquilizers, forced isolation, and other penal practices. Revolt against such practices takes place at the same level.

This is why "bodies and pleasures" should be "the rallying point for the counterattack" against, among other things, the deployment of sexuality by the modern power regime.[61] Ideological critique is insufficient, if not counterproductive, for this counterattack. Criticizing a state or an institution for not living up to its own stated principles is an implicit acceptance of those principles. Thus objecting to disciplinary power in the name of rights is counterproductive because the discourse of rights is itself an integral part of disciplinary power.[62] Yet the critique of power cannot, at least in a coherent manner, be done in the name of other principles, for this would merely be the creation of a new totalizing theory. In the lacuna created by an inability to turn to either immanent critique or new foundations, Foucault turns instead to the body and its history to inform, through the construction of a strategic knowledge, both theory and practice.

60. *Discipline and Punish,* p. 30.
61. *The Will to Know,* p. 157.
62. *Power/Knowledge,* pp. 107-08.

It is important to note that the idea of resistance connects two disparate forms of this knowledge within Foucault's work. On the one hand there are erudite and meticulous historical researches which exhume subjugated knowledges and thereby disrupt and unmask the workings of systematizing thought. On the other there is the whole set of knowledges which have been discredited by those global theories, such as those of the psychiatric inmate or the parricide. These are "popular" knowledges, yet they are local, discontinuous, and not erudite (they may not even be written down). They are incapable of unanimity.[63] How can such dissimilar forms of knowledge be linked? As Foucault argues in "Two Lectures," it is because they are both concerned with "a *historical knowledge of struggles.*"[64] Struggle is at the very heart of theoretical reflection, including genealogy, for Foucault. Finally, all of this is clearly vital for practice too. A strategic knowledge of the functioning of power is to be constructed with the goal of fostering and rendering more effective the practice of resistance.

Any reasonable interpretation of Foucaultian resistance will necessarily have a large amount of indeterminacy. While it is non-hierarchical, concerned with memory and the body, and the negation of power while still potentially affirmative of something else, these various elements of resistance are compatible with a range of practical political engagements, such as broadly liberal or even anarchist positions. This is because Foucault *cannot* lay down how or why one should struggle. Such a globalistic theory would become one more agent of power; for Foucault a totalizing theory is itself "totalitarian."[65] Still, it is possible to draw a broad political orientation out of Foucault's celebration of struggle.[66] If resistance is worthwhile, as Foucault clearly believes it is, then the conditions which make struggle possible should be fostered. This is why Foucault believes there is a daily "ethico-political" choice to be made.[67] We need to decide what constitutes the greatest danger and struggle against it.

From this vantage point it is possible to see why the charges that Foucault promotes pessimism or hopelessness are misguided. He is accused of presenting power as something so ubiquitous and overwhelming that all resistance becomes pointless. On the contrary, the fact that everything is dangerous means that there are multiple opportunities for resistance. And far from being pointless, Foucault maintains that engagement pre-

63. *Power/Knowledge,* p. 82.
64. *Power/Knowledge,* p. 83.
65. *Power/Knowledge,* pp. 80-83.
66. Thiele, "The Agony of Politics."
67. *The Foucault Reader,* p. 343.

sents several possibilities. Resistance gives us the possibility of changing practices he labels "intolerables." Once the asylum inmate or the factory worker is enabled to speak, and his memory of struggles and subjugated knowledge is allowed its insurrection, those who are subjected to power can force change.

Another possibility opened by resistance is explored in Foucault's later work. Here the idea of resistance is connected to the Nietzschean ideal of aesthetic self-creation.[68] Through practical engagement it is possible to work upon the self, and to create more "space" for self-creation apart from the political world. Two interrelated aspects of this self-creation are worthy of note. First, Foucault argued for disconnecting ethics from the state or the juridical realm, and instead leaving it up to the individual subject. Second, Foucault saw the possibility for new forms of subjectivity, forms which could be created through experimentation with relationships, bodily practices, and drugs.[69] The practice of an aesthetics of the self is nothing other than resistance to the ways in which one is constituted as a subject by modern power. For example, the notion that one's life is to be created as an artform, rather than to be lived in accordance to one's nature—an illusory and entrapping idea to Foucault—potentially loosens the grip of power.

There is a much stronger argument against the criticism that Foucault undermines the desire for struggle. Even in his early work it is possible to see Foucault's desire and hope for a foundational change in modern Western society. Previously this had taken the form of a radical questioning of the reason/unreason divide, and in the hope for a largely class-based revolution which will topple the fundamental dichotomies of Western culture. This hope is not abandoned by Foucault after the early 1970s; rather it is slightly transformed. Again, the centerpiece is a desire to see the power structure overthrown through local (not class) struggles gaining a larger coherence: "the swarm of points of resistance traverses social stratifications and individual unities. And it is doubtless the strategic codification of these points of resistance that makes a revolution possible."[70] Foucault retains the idea that the nature of the power

68. See "The Subject and Power" and "On the Genealogy of Ethics: An Overview of Work in Progress" in Dreyfus and Rabinow, *Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics*; and "Sex, Power and the Politics of Identity," *The Advocate* (August 7, 1984).

69. Foucault, "Sex, Power and the Politics of Identity."

70. *The Will to Know,* p. 96. See also Foucault's Preface to Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari's *Anti-Oedipus* (New York: Viking Press, 1977), p. xiii, where Foucault implicitly refers to himself (among others) as a "revolutionary militant," and *Power/Knowledge,*

system itself, this domination with a "unitary strategic form," potentially supplies coherence to local and discontinuous struggles even in the absence of a global theory.[71] It is this possibility which gives Foucault hope that the "analysis, criticism, destruction, and overthrow of the power mechanism" can be accomplished.[72] The lack of a description of a new order should not, therefore, be taken as a lack of hope for change, including total revolution.

IV. Conclusion

Does Foucault meet the objection that his thought actually blocks resistance, rather than promoting it? Do his own antimetaphysical presuppositions allow him to be consistent in calling for engagement against power? Foucault clearly thought so, but others, such as Nancy Fraser, doubt this.[73] The basic thrust of the critics' argument is that Foucault's desire for resistance is value-laden, yet Foucault's own deeper philosophical foundations assert that values themselves are the products of power. Furthermore, the sorts of values which are clearly contained in Foucault's support for resistance are roughly liberal, such as notions of autonomy and equality, yet Foucault also argued that liberal norms are themselves normalizing and instruments of domination. In the critics' view, Foucault needs to give some normative reasons for why we should fight, but his own position seems to preclude giving such reasons.

At one level, such criticism is beside the point. Though Foucault sees himself as politically engaged, he does not see himself as a new moral legislator. If he did, Foucault would be guilty of the errors of the old, totalizing intellectual. Instead, he would rather open up spaces in which people can make their own decisions, form their own movements, and reach their own objectives. It is on this level that Foucault sees things actually getting accomplished. Therefore, in response to a somewhat different charge that his work paralyzes, that "Foucault, far from providing a new stimulus to demands for liberation, limits himself to describing

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p. 91, where Foucault cryptically refers to the possibility of a "final battle" which would "put an end, once and for all, to the exercise of power as continual war." This final battle would be decided through a "recourse to arms."

71. *Power/Knowledge,* p. 142.

72. Michel Foucault, *Foucault Live* (New York: Semiotext(e), 1989), p. 130.

73. Fraser, "Foucault on Modern Power"; Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity,* ch. 9 and 10; Charles Taylor, "Foucault on Freedom and Truth," in *Philosophy and the Human Sciences* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1985), pp. 152-84.

a mechanism of pure imprisonment," it is clear that he did not see his picture of modern power as a form of "pure imprisonment."[74] Foucault is willing to state that certain contemporary social movements, such as the women's and gay rights movements, have had beneficial effects.[75] They have questioned, for instance, scientific discourses which have privileged some over others. A good example of this would be gay activists' attacks upon psychiatry for its labelling of homosexuality as a pathology. These new social movements are capable of changing people's mentalities, and particularly how they view the other, even among individuals outside the groups from which the social movement develops.[76]

Clearly Foucault believes that resistance can accomplish things "on the ground." Giving agonism a greater emphasis within a society, according to Foucault, opens possibilities for changes within institutions, for altering how scientific discourses circulate, function, and have effects of power. Foucault even seems to suggest that legitimate social practices will arise after revolutionary struggles and experimentation.[77] Beyond this, Foucault sees the possibility of resistance leading to new forms of subjectivity. Agonism is a vital part of the self-creation that Foucault calls for, particularly in his later writings such as "The Subject and Power." "Maybe the target nowadays is not to discover what we are, but to refuse what we are."[78] This is a central part of Foucault's work, and it ties in with an important question: is it wise to place limits upon the forms resistance may take, especially given the various opportunities which Foucault argues resistance opens up?

The practice of resistance is directly linked to the practice of self-creation. Refusing what we are is an important element of group action of the sort Foucault applauds. Since the individual is the product of power, "What is needed is to 'de-individualize' by means of . . . diverse combinations."[79] "It's a question rather of the destruction of what we are, of the creation of something entirely different, of a *total innovation*."[80]

These remarks are consistent with Foucault's other statements on what forms resistance should take. During the period I have labelled "revolutionary action," Foucault made blunt statements in support of struggle

74. *Remarks on Marx,* p. 20.
75. "Sex, Power and the Politics of Identity," p. 58.
76. "Sex, Power," p. 58.
77. *Remarks on Marx,* pp. 159-63.
78. "The Subject and Power," p. 216.
79. "Preface" to Deleuze and Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus,* p. xiv.
80. *Remarks on Marx,* pp. 121-22 (emphasis added).

in the form of class retribution.[81] In *The Will to Know,* Foucault wrote of resistances which are "savage . . . or violent."[82] If we are the products of modern power, then all of our behaviors, gestures, and thoughts, including our normative intuitions, are expressive of that power. If we draw upon our norms and moral codes to place limits upon what forms resistance and self-creation can take, we will actually be entrapping ourselves in the very system we are trying to escape because it will be rebellion in the name of ideals drawn from modern power.

Hence even the minimal political stance that can be drawn out of Foucaultian resistance—that conditions which foster resistance should be developed—is put into question because it relies on suspect intuitions. Though Foucault shared normative intuitions supporting egalitarianism,[83] he challenged all attempts to establish scientific discourses in the social sciences on grounds they would promote tyranny.[84] To be consistent with his conclusion that anyone making a totalizing discourse or statement is acting tyrannically, Foucault must avoid making any pronouncements on how to read his books and use the ideas they contain in political practice. Yet if we do not draw upon our morals to guide this activity, there are no limits placed upon what we can do, and Foucault's position thereby sanctions the worst forms of engagement, such as the Baader-Meinhof gang. We either remain trapped in modern power, or we celebrate a resistance without limits.

This double-bind is not the only difficulty within this aspect of Foucault's work. In his very support for resistance, and in his elaboration of how resistance functions as a counter-power, Foucault draws upon an implicit normative framework. Yet when it comes to limiting resistance or the aesthetics of the self, Foucault repudiates that framework and refuses to place limits. Why does he engage in these contradictory moves? This difficulty of using a normative stance while also rejecting it is symptomatic of the double-bind described above. Foucault wants to be engaged; he wants to further human equality through attacking hierarchical power relations. At the same time, he wants to maintain a philo-

81. For instance: "When the proletariat takes power, it may be quite possible that the proletarian will exert towards the classes over which it has just triumphed, a violent, dictatorial and even bloody power. I can't see what objection one could make of this." "Human Nature: Justice versus Power," p. 182.

82. *Will to Know,* p. 96.

83. Foucault refers to "the tyranny of globalizing discourses with their *hierarchy,*" *Power/Knowledge,* p. 83 (emphasis added).

84. Thus Foucault defines genealogy as an attempt to "emancipate historical knowledge" from scientific discourses in *Power/Knowledge,* p. 85.

sophical position which holds that every social norm is normalizing and every set of morals is constructed by power. These two desires are at odds, and Foucault's deeper philosophical commitments make his political stance troubling.