Rethinking the dialectics of the Master and the Servant; the political consequences of the Foucaultian theory of bio-power

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The political consequences of the Foucaultian theory of bio-power

In the Phenomenology of Spirit Hegel described the mechanism through which consciousness becomes self-consciousness; Hegel believed that the self becomes self-conscious interchanging with the other. Hegel’s dialectic of Herrschaft und Knechtschaft is the formula that human interchange takes in history, a kind of inherent regulation of power in society. Hegel expressed this historical mechanism as “logic”.

In order to attain certainty, in order to exist in and for itself, self-consciousness must therefore exist in this way for another - must be recognised as self-consciousness by another self-consciousness. Hegel calls the process by which this takes place ‘the process of Recognition’. Arising in its original form at an early stage of history, it leads to a life-and-death struggle. The reason why the demand for recognition leads to such conflict becomes evident if we examine the process more closely. When two self-consciousness meet at this stage, they seek to reflect themselves in one another: the other provides the possibility of seeing oneself. However, this mirroring also means that one is objectified, is rendered an ‘otherness’ - an otherness that one wishes to supersede. Each self-consciousness goes through these motions, since human beings are fundamentally similar.

The Hegelian model of historical consciousness was adapted by Marx and Engels into a materialistic historical model with the concept of “class struggle” at the center. Later, the Marxian model was combined with the Hegelian model in the works of French existentialism:

A characteristic of Kojève’s and Hyppolite’s interpretations and one which made Hegel into a philosopher suitable to the times, was that they established a connection between the works of Hegel, Marx and phenomenological existentialism.

Following Kojève and Hyppolite, Simone de Beauvoir explained the relationships of power between women and men during history as an example of the model of the master-servant dialectics. Fighting the patriarchal heritage in modern society, women would develop the consciousness necessary to achieve freedom. Until the publication of Foucault’s theory of bio-power, the master-servant dialects was the dominant theoretical

2 Gothlin, Eva, Sex and existence: Simone de Beauvoir's The second sex, Athlone, London, 1996; p. 60.
3 Gothlin, Eva; p. 58.
model to explain the evolution of society as an historical whole. But with Foucault’s work, and later with the work of Donna Haraway and the post-humanists, the explanatory power of the master-servant dialects were seriously questioned. Foucault’s criticism of the master-servant dialectics was indirect; he chose to confront instead the notion of truth and power associated to it. According to the master-servant dialectics, truth is undermined by the power of the master; it is a power that is accomplished through ideology, which is a deceitful substitute of truth. Truth instead, is on the side of the repressed and can be achieved only by fighting the ideology of the master. Even if Foucault never made an explicit connection, is very clear for us that the relation between power and truth that he named the “repressive hypotheses,” is that of the dialectics of the master and de servant. Foucault argues that according to the repressive hypothesis the European history have changed to an ever–increasing repression that comprises particularly the sexual sphere of society. The highest moment of this process would be the rise of capitalism. According to this view, sex was repressed because it was incompatible with the ethics of work demanded by capitalism. Sexuality would then be only an appendage of the real story, the rise of class society which culminated with capitalism and sexual liberation would be a kind of resistance to capitalist repression. According to Foucault, psychoanalysis played an important part in the mise-en-scène of the repressive hypothesis. Working against repression, psychoanalysis became the self-appointed exorcists of “truth”.

Against this tradition, Foucault’s historical studies established a new interpretative paradigm of social power which would had been developed during the 18th century: it was that he entitled the “bio-power,” which emerged following two paths; 1) the manipulation of inheritance that made the quality of the human species a scientific matter, and 2) the manipulation of the human body in general, through punishment and reward. Foucault presented this new paradigm in Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison. In this new paradigm of power, the master and the servant moved to a secondary roll. We have instead the invisible power of society as a whole, developing social instruments of control as prisons, schools, universities and hospitals. The disciplining of the bodies was applied not only to the working classes but also to the class of the former “masters”, through the disciplining action of institutions as penitentiaries, hospitals, universities and schools. In this new paradigm, truth is produced through control and discipline; it is as if truth would be squeezed out from the bodies of people. This new society, which we could describe as “modern”, organized its resources independently of particular class interests, subordinating the point of view of individuals and groups to the whole survival of the social corpus. Of course, this thesis is very controversial, and anticipates a theory of society which Foucault never developed. In short, the Foucaultian social theory assumes that society acts as a bio-machine and that social corpus is a kind of supra-social entity of biological character. The Foucaultian approach is post-humanist in this sense, actualizing

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the question of the relation between nature and culture. However, the Foucaultian approach is not an expression of social-Darwinism because the positivity and negativity of bio-power affects every individual without discriminations. The theory of the bio-power would be that of freeing not from class ideology but from the negative consequences of the master-servant ideology itself, which cultivate the ideology of the “offer”. This ideology searches the causes of every problem in the acts of both real masters and imaginary masters. Because of this particularity, the work of Foucault has been understood differently by different feminists. Some feminists that embrace the original Hegelian perspective of Simone de Beauvoir have criticized Foucault’s rejection of the repressive hypothesis. However these feminists fail to point out clearly the real conflict that they have with Foucault’s approach, avoiding discussing his hidden criticism to the master-servant dialectics.

Feminists warn against using Foucault in no uncertain terms. Toril Moi, for instance, says, “the price for giving into his [Foucault’s] powerful discourse is nothing less than the depoliticisation of feminism.” Likewise Nancy Hartsock says, “poststructuralist theories such as those put forward by Michel Foucault fail to provide a theory of power for women.” And Linda Alcoff cautions that “a wholesale appropriation of Foucault by feminist theorists is unwise.” Just what is so dangerous for feminists about appropriating Foucault’s theories, one might ask. In general, feminist critics of Foucault fear that his rejection of norms undermines the possibility for feminism as an emancipatory political movement. His rejection of norms, combined with his view that truth and knowledge are always produced within a network of power relations, leads many to accuse Foucault of relativism and nihilism.5

Some other feminists, notably Donna Haraway, see in the concept of bio-power an interesting contribution to the politics of the body. Cyborgs are symbiotic fusions of organic life and technological systems. These visions of human-machine coevolution that focused on technology, had been studying e.g. the new practices of fecundation and the ultramodern technics of nursery. These feminists understood the work of Foucault as a timid beginning of a new era. For example Donna J. Haraway, wrote: “Michael Foucault’s bio-politics is a flaccid premonition of cyborg politics, a very open field.”6 Cyborg technologies would be the consequence of new forms of embodiments, new developments of the body understood as human aids. In this new paradigm, power is associated to the technological knowledge and truth achieved by society as a whole independently of any specific “social struggle”, actualizing the old structural problem of Marxism, which did not managed to explain the place of language and science in relation to class struggle.7 As a consequence of this “cyborgizing process”, the differences


7 About this see: J.V. Stalin. “Marxism and Problems of Linguistics.” First Published:Published in the June 20, July 4, and August 2, 1950 issues of Pravda Source: Marxism and Problems of Linguistics, by J.V. Stalin, Foreign Languages
between social groups as well as the differences between men and women would tend to disappear.

**Society after the rise of the bio-power paradigm**

The question about power and its relation to truth or knowledge is central for any theory of history that can be a support to political action. Any theory then must open to the deconstruction of power, showing the path of action that allows such a deconstruction. The Marxian theory allowed such a deconstruction of power understood as the transference of power from a class to another mediated by the political action of the communist party. However, the Marxian deconstructive methodology of communism has been formed by the dialectics of the master and the servant, and it is indistinguishable from it. After the Soviet revolution in 1917, the power of the dominating class of the capitalist society and their political organs were transferred to the communist party and the class of workers and soldiers. However, immediately after, it shows to be a variant of class society, a new expression of the paradigm of the master and the servant. The historical case of the Soviet Union showed that the dialectics of the master and the servant cannot be used to the deconstruction of power even if it can be seen as a correct description of historical development. The confusion of Marxism started with the interpretation of the role of ties of blood in history. Marx and Engels believed that society was originally organized around the family (the women, men and children) that formed clans or tribes and finally constituted ethnic groups. With the development of the means of production, this archaic society converted into a class society where blood ties were replaced by political ties. Subsequently, the family, the clan and the ethnic group pass to play a secondary role in the development of history. Quite the contrary, social classes are actually an extension of the family, the clan and the ethnic group. For example, the slaveholding society emerges with the enslavement of the ethnic foreigner. This is very clearly documented for example in the Bible:

“Your male and female slaves are to come from the nations around you; from them you may buy slaves. You may also buy some of the temporary residents living among you and members of their clans born in your country, and they will become your property. You can bequeath them to your children as inherited property and can make them slaves for life, but you must not rule over your fellow Israelites ruthlessly. (Leviticus 25:44-46).

It is documented that the ethnic groups of slaves from Antiquity were the people that constitute the class of medieval serfs in Europe, and that later the same group was the source for the individuals that constituted the working class of capitalism. In short, the social classes that had arisen in different periods of history are kin to each other; they
have the same gene bank. The same can be said of the dominant groups of the masters. That is way we say that the exploiting and the exploited “classes” actually behave as “castes”. During the formation of the new caste of masters, some of the old members of the castes brake with their caste and take the role of leaders of the oppressed; then, they use the new political power to the development of a new caste of masters and servants. This conclusion tells us that the “class struggle” only renames the exploited and the exploiter keeping more or less unchanged the power relations between these macro-ethnic groups. If what we want is to put an end to the “exploitation of man by man”, it will be necessary to put an end to the “struggle of castes” avoiding promoting it, as it has been done until now.

Parallel to the “struggle of castes”, history shows the development of a civil society, which is the expression of the experience acquired by humanity. History shows that knowledge is irreversible; that which men and women once learned, will be a part of the experience of every new generation. This civil society has established and developed the powers that will put an end to the exploitation of man by man. That civil society is the expression of the bio-power that Foucault wrongly understood as a “period”. However, it is not the expression of a supra-biological entity, but of the development of a cultural dimension. The civil society is characterized by being “artificial” in the sense that is independent of the “castes” of society and therefore independent of the dialectics of the master and the servant. Its artificiality consists on ignoring the laws governing family, the clan and the ethnic group, elaborating social laws in which arguments based on reason prevails and tames the instinctive impulses of the archaic human.

How can this new theoretical paradigm be useful to political action? How can the power of society (in general) be deconstructed? The fundamental tasks are to reinforce the civil society, to strengthen all the aspects of social life in which the “human being” enforced the “ethnic being”. We must understand that each human group (e.g. political parties, the Trade Unions, academic groups, companies, etc.) tends to perpetuate itself by reinforcing their blood ties. This tendency has been described as “corruption”, “nepotism”, etc. This propensity must be combated by opening society to the defense of human rights in general, promoting the right to work, to health, to education but also and especially to the defense of the rights of the individual against the rights of the group. It must be promoted the equality between the sexes, the defense of the right to sexual freedom, to abortion, and to any form of family, including the family constituted by homosexuals. In general it is necessary to support all actions that remove the basic structures of the castes. This should be integrated into political agency understanding that the fight against the exploitation does not pass by changing the form of exploitation, but in changing a society based on exploitation with a society based on collaboration. We believe that this emerging human being will be a “cyborg”, understanding with this that the new man and woman will be a product of history and culture, and therefore less a simple animal. We affirm as Donna Haraway that the Foucaultian bio-power is a “flaccid premonition” of the cyborg society. It is also misleading, giving the impression that the
emerging society will be a kind of “ant colony”. The cyborg society is a society of post-humans that are as “human” as always but much more conscious about their biological limitations. Conclusively, biopower can be deconstructed but not removed; biopower will allow the expression of a civil society besides the unwished consequences of the dialectics of the master and the servant.

**Bibliography**


