The Care of Life

Transdisciplinary Perspectives in Bioethics and Biopolitics

Edited by Miguel de Beistegui, Giuseppe Bianco and Marjorie Gracieuse

ROWMAN & LITTLEFIELD
London • New York
Contents

Acknowledgements vii

Introduction: Life: Who Cares? 1
Giuseppe Bianco, with Miguel de Beistegui

Part I: “Bioethics” and “Biopolitics” 23
1 A Brief History of Bioethics 25
Guillaume Le Blanc
2 Between (Bio)-Politics and (Bio)-Ethics: What Life? 33
Luca Paltrinieri
3 What Is Vital? 47
Frédéric Worms

Part II: Norms and Normality 61
4 The Return of Vitalism: Canguilhem, Bergson and the
Project of a Biophilosophy 63
Charles T. Wolfe and Andy Wong
5 Life and Objective Norms: Canguilhem in the Context of
Contemporary Meta-ethics 79
Sander Werkhoven
6 Critical and Political Stakes of a Philosophy of Norms: Part
I: Towards a Critical Philosophy of Norms 95
Julien Pieron
7 Critical and Political Stakes of a Philosophy of Norms: Part
II: Theory of Norms and Social Criticism 109
Florence Caeymaex
8 The Racial Politics of Life Itself: Goldstein, Uexküll,
Canguilhem, and Fanon 121
Robert Bernasconi
9 History and the Politics of “Life” 135
Claudia Stein and Roger Cooter
Contents

Part III: Pathology and Ageing 149
10 Life of Pain: Remarks about Negativity and Effort in Georges Canguilhem 151
   Giuseppe Bianco
11 Human Life and Subjectivity: Learning from Foucault 165
   Piergiorgio Donatelli
12 Ethics of Care and Face Transplant: After Levinas, Deleuze and Guattari 181
   Marjorie Gracieuse
13 Ageing and Longevity 199
   Paul-Antoine Miquel
14 Generational Change as a Vehicle for Radical Conceptual Change: The Case of Periodic Rejuvenation 211
   Steve Fuller

Part IV: Desire and Pleasure 225
15 Sexuality and Liberalism 227
   Patrick Singy
16 Desire Within and Beyond Biopolitics 241
   Miguel de Beistegui
17 The Pragmatics of Desire and Pleasure: Rethinking Somatic Powers with Foucault, Deleuze and Guattari 261
   Marjorie Gracieuse and Nicolae Morar
18 Revenge of the Tender Pervert: On a Troubling Concept That Refuses to Go Away 279
   Hector Kollias
19 Jouissance in Lacan’s Seminar XX: Prolegomena to a New Reading of Strange Enjoyment and Being an Angel 295
   Lorenzo Chiesa

About the Contributors 309
By privileging a critical problematization of ourselves over a set of ethical and political prescriptions, Foucault, Deleuze and Guattari have not only invited us to abandon our habitual conception of power but also made philosophy and psychoanalysis fall off their traditional pedestal, depriving them of their alleged epistemic superiority and presumptuousness “in speaking in the name of others”. This radical shift consists in purging what is commonly called “desire” and “pleasure” of their historical and moral determinations and, also, in revealing the contingent nature of our dominant schemes of intelligibility and social paradigms, while pointing us towards more creative, nuanced and self-aware forms of life. The goal of this chapter is not to provide a comparative study, but to move beyond Foucault and Deleuze and Guattari’s theoretical differences in order to explore the conditions under which desire and pleasure can be conceived as decisive powers of transformation and creation, and therefore be employed as powerful forces of resistance against the economy of servitude and affective misery that characterizes the cultural commodification and political economy of our present.

In order to do so, we would like to make three distinct but interrelated points. First, Foucault, Deleuze and Guattari emphasize the material conditions of power, where the source and the very object it exerts its effects on are located not primarily in abstract social formations, but in somatic relations. Second, Deleuze and Guattari’s account of power not only
highlights the ways in which power can produce effects of repression and generate reactive desires but also sheds light on the conditions under which the vital power of desire can become a force of empowerment and self-transformation. Third, Foucault is suspicious of the traditional notion of desire since its so-called scientific, religious and political character promotes a normalizing politics of sex, and ends up being co-opted in an entire series of biopolitical mechanism regulating our own (sexual) conduct.

THE POWERS OF BODIES AND THE MATERIAL IMMANENCE OF SOCIAL RELATIONS

Deleuze and Guattari’s concept of desire and Foucault’s notion of pleasure are essentially problematic notions. Whenever they appear in their writings, they signal a kind of blind spot or an empty space that cannot and, more importantly, should not be occupied by any ultimate signifier. In fact, desire and pleasure function as strategic and semiotic operators; they aim to create, within thought and through discourse, an interval or void making possible the critical assessment of what we are presently becoming. Indeed, Deleuze, Guattari and Foucault purposefully maintain the relative indeterminacy of these notions, which instead of legitimating what we already know, makes us feel and think differently about what we are and what we do.

It should thus come as no surprise when Foucault says in an interview that he does not know what pleasure is.¹ It is a “virgin territory” almost devoid of meaning since it signals an event “outside the subject, at the limit of the subject or between two subjects”.² Deleuze and Guattari use a similar argumentative technique, when they claim that desire has neither a fixed subject nor a preexisting object but it is rather a vital movement susceptible of different uses or regimes, and an informal energy with which we collectively produce the texture of our sociocultural reality and the sense and value of our various modus vivendi.

It is important to acknowledge the extent to which desire and pleasure are not merely concepts, but rather modes of our vitality, such as infra-discursive and material processes that are directly related to the vicissitudes of our somatic life. Certainly, Foucault’s notion of utopian body, “always elsewhere than in the world”, could stand as counter evidence. And yet, the body is “the principal actor of all utopias” that does not cease to turn its utopian power against itself, “allowing all the space of the religious and the sacred, all the space of the other world, all the space of the counter world, to enter into the space that is reserved for it. So the body, then, in its materiality . . . would be like the product of its own phantasms”.³
Deleuze, in turn, describes the body as a network of material forces in tension with one another, which themselves constitute the informal, unconscious and intensive life of thought. The power of thought lies indeed in its virtual reality, in its potential to construct the tools to overcome its organic and discursive delimitations through transformative experiences and artifices of writing. For this reason, in his joint work with Felix Guattari, Deleuze presents the body as a “desiring machine” or “body without organs”, whose spiritual vitality (hubris or desire) is eminently creative. It continuously generates new perspectives on life corresponding to unequal levels of perception and singular stylizations of existence.

In a world in which the traditional belief in a transcendent foundation and justification of power has more or less vanished, we are forced to abandon the old model of sovereignty and think of political power in a pluralist, materialist and decentred way. Thus, power is constituted by the mobile forces of our somatic and collective life. What is left, Deleuze asks, once we start thinking of bodies as “forces, and nothing but forces”? What is left, if force no longer refers to a centre or is simply meant to confront a set of obstacles? If force only confronts other forces, it refers to other forces only insofar it affects them or is affected by them, then a new conception of power emerges. “Power . . . is this power to affect and be affected, this relation between one force and others”.5

What Deleuze calls “power” or “desire” or “life” are the transcendental forces of matter itself: they constitute the “plane of nature” as plane of intersections of singular vectors of power. Following Lucretius’s materialistic vision of the world, Deleuze even asserts that “nature, to be precise, is power”6 (la puissance). From this perspective, each individual body is now conceived as intrinsically open to its “outside”, entering in relation of composition and disjunction, of attraction and repulsion, of love and hatred with other bodies, and continuously actualizing and affirming its power up to this or that degree.

Thus, in a philosophy of pure immanence, bodies, through their combinations and struggles, are the productive forces of reality. This is a reciprocal process of production. Bodies appear as purely relational entities continuously shaped, united and divided by power relations since bodies are both the agents and the vectors of power, and also that onto which power exerts and inscribes itself. They constitute human history as the history of desire or power, without ever reaching a permanent or final state that could constitute the end of history or could provide us with an ultimate essence of the human. This is also the sense in which nature and culture become indiscernible.

This conception of bodies as networks of forces or powers, inherited from Nietzsche, is common to Foucault, Deleuze and Guattari. It enables them to posit the problem of power in purely materialistic and ethopolitical terms, without appealing to traditional categories of ontology. Since power does not refer to an essence, it is not of the order of being,
but it amounts to what a body can do and to its variation of vitality. This is why Foucault claims that “power produces reality.” Since power only exists in action and “affects the body,” it gives rise to new thoughts, new capacities and new conducts. Similarly to Foucault, Deleuze defines power as an “affection of desire.” Sometimes, Deleuze needs to distinguish between power (le pouvoir) and power (la puissance) or potency of desire, the former being supposed to account for what Foucault calls “a state of domination” as “the terminal form of power” (the moment when power reaches its limit and ossifies into the monopoly of legitimate violence).

A spectrum view of power, which extends from hatred to love, faces the challenge of accounting for conditions under which power can constitute a force of empowerment or, on the contrary, can take the form of a coercive and disciplinary instance. It demands from us to think beyond the “Power principle”—that is, beyond (or, more precisely, beneath) this abstraction called Power (le pouvoir). Indeed, Foucault, Deleuze and Guattari think of this abstraction as a mystification thanks to which micro-relations of socio-economical domination and exploitation can maintain themselves (economical exploitation is based on cultural domination and not the reverse).

If bodily forces can be schematized and channelled, if the process of affecting certain forces by other forces can be implemented and reproduced, it is because power as domination functions only thanks to what Foucault terms power/knowledge “dispositifs” and Deleuze “social institutions” or “desiring assemblages”. Those are discursive and nondiscursive infrastructures that give power its local concreteness, material repeatability and efficiency. In that sense, power (le pouvoir) does not refer to a particular institution, such as the State, or the Church. Rather, it consists in a cultural dominant way of knowing and perceiving the world that generates the illusory impression of a fixed and stable arrangement of social reality. This particularly dominant schema or abstract diagram of action and perception nonetheless produces real effects upon bodies, not simply through discursive practices, but also through somatic disciplines. Power makes bodies act and speak, since it incites to specific conducts and utterances in a nonviolent way. Power also uses the perspective of violence and punishment to influence or prevent possible actions.

While bodies are the genetic and transformative forces of power apparatuses, the latter can become separated from the bodies, becoming and progressively solidified into laws of domination and oppression. For Deleuze, the process of separation of institutions from the social forces or singularities defines the alienation of bodies’ power to laws or policies. This alienation mechanism no longer uses the cultural power of institutions to facilitate rational actions but directly intervenes upon bodies through a system of prohibitions and sanctions. In this context, the political problem is that of disclosing the ways in which bodily actions and
practices produce a variety of models of sociality or institutions, which in turn react upon bodies and can hinder their power as much as enable them to think and act differently.

If institutions are, as Deleuze notes, means to satisfy instincts and tendencies and, as such, precious schemata of actions and intelligibility, they only do so by integrating tendencies into a system of anticipation. This regulation system imposes a predetermined set of rules of actions upon them. “Every institution imposes a series of models on our bodies, even in its involuntary structures, and offers our intelligence a sort of knowledge, a possibility of foresight as project. We come to the following conclusion: humans have no instincts, they build institutions. The human is an animal decimating its species”.  

If so, the human animal constantly remakes its human nature. By creating social institutions, we endlessly overcome our species through a culturally creative activity, whose ethical and political value can be measured according to the degree of freedom and plasticity that it allows in its institutions and in its subjects. “Such a theory will afford us the following political criteria: tyranny is a regime in which there are many laws and few institutions; democracy is a regime in which there are many institutions, and few laws. Oppression becomes apparent when laws bear directly on people, and not on the prior institutions that protect them”.  

However, Foucault and Deleuze and Guattari do not think of power simply as an institutional instance of domination and oppression. Rather, they highlight the way power is always dispersed in the social field and thus always multipolar and infrastructural. By insisting on the fact that one needs to elaborate a micro-physics of power (Foucault) or a micropolitical analysis of desire (Deleuze and Guattari), they show that the apparent “transcendence” of power is always an “effect of surface” or “product” of social immanence. This radical shift redefines the fundamental problem of political philosophy. The task does not consist anymore in defining the conditions for certain political institutions (i.e., state, church) but rather in showing how power can be incorporated into bodies to such an extent that it no longer merely educates our sensibility, but takes the form of a self-subjectivation process, which in turn generates a fascination for domination and a profound bitterness that makes apparatuses of domination prosper: “the strategic adversary is fascism . . . the fascism in us all, in our heads and in our everyday behaviour, the fascism that causes us to love power, to desire the very thing that dominates and exploits us”.  

In *Nietzsche and Philosophy,* Deleuze’s most full-fledged theory of power is presented. This view inspires his entire corpus and particularly his conception of desire, as an unconscious and vital activity, of which knowledge as “will to truth” and mastery is only the lowest degree. The theoretical challenge is not to oppose power and desire, but to analyse what Deleuze calls “the becoming-reactive of desire”, as a particularly weak mode of exercising one’s singular power. It consists in becoming incapable of opening and connecting oneself to other forces without negating or seeking to dominate them by enforcing new types of identity. If the immanent power of bodies can be subjected to training, maturation and self-overcoming and, as such, can constitute a critical force of self-liberation, it can also be subjugated by a variety of external and internalized constraints.

By incorporating an external norm or belief, a body can indeed become the very agent of its own subjection. We can make sense of this process of self-subjection only insofar as we recognize the two ways in which human power comes into existence and affirms itself: either by borrowing the authority of established values and complying with preexisting norms (reactive mode of desire) or by actualizing its immanent and normative potential, and thus by introducing in the existing game of social forces a new way of living and thinking (active mode of desire). Thus, “active” or “reactive” forces do not designate the nature of bodily forces abstractly, but refer to concrete assemblages of forces, as institutions or ways of thinking and perceiving power, which can only be identified and evaluated once they have reached a dominant status and relative consistency.

When thought is deprived of the cultural and political conditions necessary to exercise its immanent power of invention and self-fashioning, it satisfies itself with ready-made opinions and representations. Instead of being able to learn how to combine itself with other forces and develop its faculties and capacities, thought remains governed by a passional regime of fear and superstition, which prevents the development of its creative and critical powers. Deleuze claims that the exercise of thought is, in this case, reduced to the regime of “organic representation”, which is a particularly reactive regime of thought that judges the real according to abstract categories and imposes upon its material becoming an ideal “plane of organization” as a measure of judgement, thanks to which one continuously judges oneself and other beings.

This stratification of the human’s thinking powers into a veritable “system of judgement” constitutes the operation through which the creative and critical forces of thought are captured by static forms of knowledge. Once captured, these critical forces end up contributing to the rein-
The Pragmatics of Desire and Pleasure

forcement of established states of domination. Even worse, this (semiotic) process of subjection enacts in each being, through social emulation, “a desire for recognition”, which, Deleuze claims, converts the liberating and transformative virtue of knowledge into a principle of social distinction and social reproduction. This reactive process polarizes the forces of desire and reduces it to its most reactionary and autarchic mode: “Our security, the great molar organization that sustains us, the arborescences we cling to, the binary machines that give us well-defined status, the resonances we enter into, the system of overcoding that dominate us—we desire all that”.13

Thus, the enslaving power of what Deleuze calls, in his early work, “representation”14 is not simply epistemological, but thoroughly political since it constitutes a dogmatic image of thought and a codified regime of discourse that “separate beings from what they can do and think”. Although we are encouraged to “represent” ourselves and speak in our name, the key political problem is that a large number of human beings are deprived of means of expression that would allow them to formulate their social problems in terms that do not merely reinforce the dominant use of language. A power dictum would encourage us to “be yourselves—being understood that this self must be that of others. As if we would not remain slaves so long as we do not control the problems themselves, so long as we do not possess a right to access and participate in problems”.15

For this reason, Deleuze argues that contradiction is “not the weapon of the proletariat but, rather, the manner in which the bourgeoisie defends and preserves itself, the shadow behind which it maintains its claims to decide what the problems are”.16 What can the “masses” do when they are culturally separated from their critical power to evaluate the very schema that make them think and act? Can they do anything else than turning their power against themselves or become reactive? With the becoming-reactive of the human’s active forces, the vital potency of desire becomes a contagious will to judge and a fascination for mastery and power. From a force of empowerment and self-transformation, desire progressively transforms itself merely into a will to gain or maintain power over others (le pouvoir as domination).

Power, along with its fascination effects leading to domination, is for Deleuze the lowest degree of desire and the symptom of its disempowerment. It signals an exhaustion of vital force, which can no longer act its organic reactions. It thus folds back onto itself, constituting a fictitious interiority that can only oppose itself to the other forces it encounters. This “reactive type” of desire is, strictly speaking, a will to dominate others that fails to dominate itself. Given its powerlessness, this reactive type often finds refuge in the cogs of established power and in the stratifications of a dominant way of speaking and acting. In each case, the human desire is sick of its own temporal, social, political and economical
codifications: the reactive man is a sad, dissatisfied man whose passive affects in turn reinforce its servitude to dominant and oppressive instances. These various stasis of desire constitute the Modern illness of desire, as a form of desire fostering the conservation of social status and static hierarchies and the thirst for power and security. This is why, ultimately, Deleuze and Guattari affirm that

there isn’t a desire for power; it is power itself that is desire. Not a desire-lack, but desire as plenitude, exercise, and functioning, even in the most subalterns workers. Being an assemblage, desire is precisely one with the gears and components of the machine. And the desire that someone has for power is only his fascination for these gears, his desire to make certain of these gears go into operation, to be himself one of these gears.\[17.25\]

CAPITALISM AND NIHILISM: “ACCELERATE THE PROCESS”\[17.26\]

This analytic of desire and genealogy of power would be of little importance if it did not allow us to make a parallel between Deleuze’s notions of nihilism (coming from Nietzsche) and capitalism (from his writings with Guattari). And when, Deleuze and Guattari encourage us to “go still further in the movement of the market . . . not to withdraw from the process”,\[17.27\] they actually invoke Nietzsche and his will to “accelerate the process” of nihilism in order for it to be ultimately vanquished by this very mechanisms. But how is that possible? And what forms can this self-dissolution of capitalist and nihilist subjectivity take?

“Going further with the movement of the market” does not amount to an apology of economical liberalism. According to Deleuze and Guattari, we must realize that the living basis of capitalism is precisely the promotion of an indifferent liberation of all flows of desires in order for them to be immediately recuperated and channelled by the interests of the market. “Capitalism liberates the flows of desire but under the social conditions that define its limit and the possibility of its own dissolution, so that it is constantly opposing with all its exasperated strength the movement that drives it toward this limit”.\[17.28\] Our very affectivity becomes dependent on external causes as source of its arousal and this capitalist mechanism constitutes a regime of passionate servitude and recurrent dissatisfaction. The more we possess things, the more we are possessed by them.\[17.29\] This polarization of affectivity facilitates the emergence of “passive joys” as evanescent moments of satisfaction. Following Spinoza, Deleuze and Guattari show not only that we are not the direct cause of such events but also, and more importantly, that our desiring energy is captured and polarized in objects of consumption.

The promotion of a hedonistic way of life and the incessant encouragement of a form of liberation of all desires are the two ways in which
capitalism secretes, in the bourgeoisie and in the masses, an indefinite quest for an impossible object of enjoyment. Through this, it generates an imaginary lack that provokes a general feeling of frustration. We are always running after something we do not possess. And, because our desires are infinite in their variation since they can always latch onto a new object we lack, we live under the impression of an infinite debt towards the capitalist system itself. This process entails an infinite deferral of jouissance and, as such, produces an accumulation of goods and a constant reinvestment: “the bourgeois sets the example”, Deleuze and Guattari claim, since “he absorbs surplus value for ends that, taken as a whole, have nothing to do with his own enjoyment: more utterly enslaved than the lowest slaves, he is the first servant of the ravenous machine, the beast of the reproduction of the capital, internalization of the infinite debt. ‘I too am a slave-these are the new words spoken by the master’.”

However, Deleuze and Guattari do not believe that the capitalist form of subjectivity is a universal, invariant and necessary structure. Capitalism is a contingent, cultural organization, rather than the natural outcome of processes of fulfillment of our (alleged) human essence. In fact, the main thesis of *Anti-Oedipus* is that even if capitalism is the dominant formation of our present society, other formations and modes of desire are possible. And, such modes of desire are already developing within capitalism itself. The capitalist pursuit of happiness and intense stimulations is progressively turning the human body into a quasi-anesthetized body insofar it creates the demand for an ever-stronger stimulation in order to meet an ever-rising sensory threshold. The economical cult for enjoyment and pleasure is not meant to develop our sensibility but to saturate it. This is paradoxically the place where one can observe one of the limits of capitalism. The limit lies in the specific type of body it produces as a nervous and hypersensitive body-being constantly traversed by waves of precarious pains and pleasures. Such a body could be conceived either as a “remainder” or as a “symptom” of the economical process of production.

This body, developed at the core of the capitalist production, does not always recognize itself in the forms of identity and ready-made pleasures that submerge it, and it is in this inadequacy between the forces of the body and their modes of captures that Deleuze and Guattari locate the breach within the system itself: “At the very heart of this production . . . the body suffers from being organised in this way, from not having some other sort of organisation, or no organisation at all”. For Deleuze and Guattari, the “body-without-organs” is incapable of counter-cathexis, since it remains reduced to its mere materiality in a sterile and nonproductive stasis. It is incapable of reinvesting its mental or emotional energy into something other than an active repulsion of all these apparatuses of power and enjoyment that persecute it. This evanescent stage or state of the
body, which Deleuze and Guattari name “anti-production”, does not necessarily end up in the clinical figure of the schizophrenic. It equally constitutes a potential, present within each one of us, to become revolutionary. It characterizes a transcendental experience of the loss of the Ego and thus an active mode of desire, capable of struggling against its own habitual and memorial tendencies and of disinvesting itself from the various social machines that usually regulate its functioning.

It comes as no surprise that the intensive and material force of the “body” without organs, which Deleuze and Guattari assimilates to an egg, also designates the swarming vitality of the brain as a volume traversed by unbound energies capable of creating new connections between ideas, and of redetermining its habitual associations of ideas. Hence, a universal schizophrenia: the brain constitutes the possibility of an internal self-distancing and self-differentiality, through which we can become able to evaluate and refuse what we are becoming. Among the many powers our brain grants us with (habit, memory, etc.), “the power of decision” is the highest for Deleuze. It is the power of thought to abstract itself from its habitual sociohistorical determinations and to redetermine the sense and value of its becoming.

While capitalism does not cease to push its limits further, implementing more policies and forms of control upon bodies and imposing a purely economical form of time on our lives, we see that the real political problem consists in reconquering an uneconomical and unproductive time of desire. This time is neither the time of leisure nor that of pleasure, but the necessary interval of time that thought needs in order to construct “a body-without-organs” for itself. This is what Deleuze calls “a plane of immanence” as a critical plane of thought and a starting-point for a becoming-revolutionary, or what Spinoza calls “Reason”, and makes possible a break free from the dictatorship of passions. This plane is precisely what we are lacking. We are lacking a common plane that would allow us to resist the present established values and the stereotypical behaviours that are imposed on our lives.

This plane needs to be constructed both individually and collectively as a plane of cultural analysis and experimentation since it offers us the necessary distance and the material means to analyse critically our institutions. In Foucault, this critical and political task takes the form of a new practice of History, while in Deleuze and Guattari, that of a hierarchical classification of desiring productions. All this forms a “war machine”, a series of direct actions upon the order of discourse, which for these thinkers constitutes our “cultural unconscious” or a semiotic power apparatus of which we must be aware if we are to turn it against itself. “If a struggle can be led against the capitalist system, it can only be done . . . through combining a struggle –with visible, external objectives—against the power of the bourgeoisie, against its institutions and systems of ex-
exploitation, with a thorough understanding of all the semiotic infiltrations on which capital is based”.

FOUCAULT’S CRITIQUE OF THE BIOPOLITICAL IMAGE OF DESIRE

While Deleuze and Guattari adopt a constructivist approach that consists in creating an entirely new metaphysical concept of power of desire, Foucault takes a different path towards a kind of historical nominalism. Foucault is not so much concerned with “desire” as a physical and relational process, but rather with its most common abstract representations, which, in one way or another, assimilate desire to an obscure psychological instance structured by an ontological lack. Foucault is interested in understanding the historical process by which this interpretation of desire became a cultural paradigm since it fostered and continues to foster a certain discourse about sexuality that enables a series of apparatus of control and normalization over bodily conducts and feelings. “Desire” is above all a word. It is a cultural production whose history we should reconstruct in order to understand how such an abstraction has nonetheless exerted real transformative effects on our world-views and conducts.

In The Will to Knowledge, Foucault highlights a historically constituted conception of desire as the main contributor to the development of system of normalization of human conduct. His trajectory consists in unearthing the historical constitution and development, and thus the contingency of this particularly moral concept of desire in order “to think of sex without the law and power without the king”. The stakes are high. Foucault targets the very dismantling of an enduring myth of Western thought. Since Plato, we continue to somehow believe the myth of a purity and neutrality of scientific and philosophical knowledge vis à vis religious and political powers.

Foucault’s critique of the bourgeois image of desire emphasizes the “unreality” of “sex,” conceiving it as an abstract instance or “imaginary point,” around which a particular system of power/knowledge revolves and thanks to which it functions. The “sex-desire” dispositif, as both a power apparatus and a historical discursive formation, demonstrates how “scientia sexualis” has come to constitute bodies as “subjects of desire” and to subject them to the fiction of sexual identity. The deployment of sexuality as a power dispositif is the expression of bourgeois hegemony, which has progressively imposed its “austere monarchy of sex” and its identitarian model of subjectivity to the rest of society. Sexuality has progressively become not simply an object of fascination but also an abstract value and a criterion of reference of socialization. This dispositif has enacted new forms of sexual identities and has generalized an obsession in talking about sex as a way to uncover some “truth” about sexuality.
Thus, the sex-desire dispositif cannot be assimilated to the repression or inhibition of our (natural) sexuality. Rather, it implies a multiplication of sexualities, an increase of their medical supervision and, ultimately, a proliferation of institutional, scientific but also individual discourses about sex. Far from repressing sexual practices, the operation of the dispositif of sexuality consists in naming, in classifying, and in rendering visible certain conducts which existed previously more or less silently. The multiplication of new truths or moral norms about sexuality coincides with the development of new pathological concerns of the social body. Mental alienation is intrinsically correlated to economical alienation.

This valorisation of the body on a level that is not simply moral but political and economical, has been one of the key features of the Occident. And it is curious that this political and economical valorisation of the body, this importance that was attached to the body, was accompanied by an increasing moral devaluation. . . . This led to a kind of dissociation, of disjunction, that has certainly been the origin of many individual psychological disturbances, maybe also of much larger collective and cultural disturbances: an economically overvalued and a morally undervalued body.29

Once the strategies of the dispositif of sexuality are made explicit, Foucault emphasizes that “the counterattack against the deployment of sexuality ought not to be sex-desire, but bodies and pleasures”.30 Foucault rejects desire to the extent that it functions as the very vehicle of control (scientia sexualis). And, he affirms bodies and pleasures (ars erotica) since the notion of pleasure, unlike the notion of desire, “avoids the entire psychological and medical armature that was built into the traditional notion of desire”.31

Moreover, Foucault claims that the multiplication of norms about sexuality coincides not only with the economical expansion of capitalism but also with the emergence of a new form of power: biopower. This concept is supposed to capture the ways in which power operates at the level of population, including a series of everyday life practices (biopolitics of the population) and through which, each one of us is persuaded to engage in processes of self-surveillance and self-discipline (anatomo-politics of the body). The emergence of social medicine is thus inseparable from the development of capitalism:

capitalism, which developed from the end of the eighteenth century to the beginning of the nineteenth century, started by socializing a first object, the body, as a factor of productive force, of labour power. Society’s control over individuals was accomplished not only through consciousness or ideology but also in the body and with the body. For capitalist society, it was biopolitics, the biological, the somatic, the corporeal that mattered more than anything else. The body is a biopolitical reality, medicine is a biopolitical strategy.32
However, the fact that biopower has become a "power over life" should not prevent us from reclaiming "a right to desire" in order to reappropriate the forces of our vital and productive body. If it is true, as Foucault notes, that the exercise of power creates a certain type of pleasure in the various effects of knowledge it produces, this pleasure of knowing pleasure and of in exerting power should not prevent us from thinking that we can experience pleasures and desires out of the dispositifs of power. To experiment with our bodies, with our pleasures and desires, does not entail a return to an alleged "pure experience". Rather, it requires resisting any self-enclosed form of subjectivity by a constant work of self-fashioning, which does not function without a meticulous work of self-alteration, as active refusal of one's own reactive and conservative tendencies.

This process of desubjectivation is per se an act of resistance against one's own fascination for power and will to judge (Deleuze). It implies a perpetual combat against oneself and against one's reactive becoming. It enables us to constitute liberating and empowering compounds of power and to develop our affective capacities, and the vitality of our desires and pleasures. Similarly, for Foucault, pleasures are not simply what we feel, but also what we can use to explore our capacities, transform our sensibility and open our subjectivity to change. The "care of self", central to Foucault’s later work, involves a series of transformative operations one can exert onto oneself in order to become a truly ethical subject—that is, a subject capable of using knowledge not as a power of social distinction, but rather as a tool for collective and self-transformation. In this context, ethical subjectivity does not preexist the practice of ethics. Rather, it is the product of a constant process of self-experimentation, which not only takes the form of a progressive self-mastery but also provides us with a kind of sobriety and joy of self-creation. Resisting established power relations means creating new uses of our power in order to transform the very elements (reactive desires and artificial needs) that disempower us.

To the techniques of domination (power as action over others’ actions), Foucault opposes the pragmatics of self, as active and deliberate cultivation of one's capacity to govern oneself (action upon one's power to act).

I tried to see how and through what concrete forms of the relation to self the individual was called upon to constitute him or herself as moral subject of his or her sexual conduct. In other words, once again this involved bringing about a shift from the question of the subject to the analysis of forms of subjectivation, and to the analysis of these forms of subjectivation through the techniques/technologies of the relation to self, or, if you like, through what could be called the pragmatics of self.

In conclusion, the cultural politics of counter-conducts and resistance as promoted by Foucault, Deleuze and Guattari does not consist in an
indifferent liberation of desires. Rather, it requires a careful and constant analytical work on our desires, pleasures, and institutions, in order to raise a kind of collective form of intelligence and empowerment, capable of competing with the culture of ignorance and servitude through which a dominant class maintains its economical hegemony and cultural monopoly. As Felix Guattari justly notes:

it would be absurd to oppose desire and power. Desire is power; power is desire. What is at issue is what type of politics is pursued with regard to different linguistic arrangement that exist ... capitalist and socialist bureaucratic power infiltrate and intervene in all modes of individual semiotization today, they proceed more through semiotic subjugation than through direct subjugation by the police or by explicit use of physical pressure.35

BIBLIOGRAPHY


The Pragmatics of Desire and Pleasure


NOTES


2. Michel Foucault, “The Gay Science: An Interview with Foucault”, trans. Nicolae Morar and Daniel W. Smith, Critical Inquiry 37 (2011): 389. See also “The Minimalist Self”, in Michel Foucault: Politics Philosophy, Culture (London: Routledge, 1988), where Foucault confesses, “I think I have real difficulty in experiencing pleasure. I think that pleasure is a very difficult behaviour. It is not as simple as that (Laughter) to enjoy oneself. And I must say that’s my dream. I would like and I hope I’ll die of an overdose (Laughter) of pleasure of any kind . . . because I think it’s really difficult and I always have the feeling that I do not feel the pleasure, the complete total pleasure and, for me, it is related to death”.


4. “The body without organs is flesh and nerves; a wave flows through it and traces levels upon it; a sensation is produced when the wave encounters the forces acting on the body . . . it elevates mechanical forces to sensible intuitions, it works through violent movements. . . . It also attests for a high spirituality, since what leads it to seek the elementary forces beyond the organic is a spiritual will. But this spirituality is a spirituality of the body: the body is the spirit itself, the body without organs”. Gilles Deleuze, Francis Bacon: The Logic of Sensation, trans. Dan W. Smith (London: Continuum, 2003) 47.


14. “The slave only conceives of power as the object of a recognition, the concept of a representation, the stake in a competition, and therefore makes it depend, at the end of a fight, on a simple attribution of established values.” See Gilles Deleuze, Nietzsche and Philosophy, 10. On page 81 of the same source, Deleuze goes on to say that “the notion of representation poisons philosophy: it is the direct product of the slave and of the relations between slaves, it constitutes the worst, most mediocre and most base interpretation of power”.


18. Deleuze and Guattari, Anti-Oedipus, 240.

19. Deleuze and Guattari, Anti-Oedipus, 140.


22. Deleuze and Guattari, Anti-Oedipus, 8.

23. “This is nothing to do with going back to ‘the subject’, that is, to something invested with duties, power, and knowledge. One might equally well speak of new kinds of event, rather than processes of subjectification: events that can’t be explained by the situations that give rise to them, or into which they lead. They appear for a moment, and it’s that moment that matters, it’s the chance we must seize. Or we can simply talk about the brain: the brain’s precisely this boundary of a continuous two-way movement between an Inside and Outside, this membrane between them. New cerebral pathways, new ways of thinking, aren’t explicable in terms of microsurgery; it’s for science, rather, to try and discover what might have happened in the brain for one to start thinking this way or that. I think subjectification, events, and brains are more or less the same thing”, “Gilles Deleuze in conversation with Antonio Negri”, an interview published in Gilles Deleuze, Negotiations, trans. Martin Joughin (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997).

24. See Deleuze, Difference and Repetition, 268: “the most important task, that of determining problems and realising in them our power of creation and decision”.

25. “Those who lack is real have no possible plane of consistence which would allow them to desire. There are prevented from doing this in a thousand ways. And as soon as they construct one, they lack nothing on this plane, and from this starting-point they set off victoriously towards that which they lack outside. Lack refers to a positivity of desire and not the desire to a negativity of lack”. Gilles Deleuze and Claire Parnet, Dialogues, trans. Barbara Habberjam, Eliot Ross Albert and Hugh Tomlinson (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), 91. See also Deleuze and Guattari, What Is Philosophy?, trans. Janis Tomlinson and Graham Burchell (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), 101 (“We lack a genuine plane, misled as we are by Christian transcendence”) and 108 (“we do not lack communication. On the contrary, we have too much of it. We lack creation. We lack resistance to the present”).

The Pragmatics of Desire and Pleasure

27. We further explore this difference in our essay “The Desire-Pleasure Problem”, in *Between Deleuze and Foucault*, eds. Nicolae Morar, Thomas Nail and Dan Smith (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, forthcoming). There, we defend an argument against the *incompatibility thesis* as developed by Wendy Grace (2009).


33. Deleuze and Parnet, *Dialogues*, 147.
