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## The Political Aim of Self-Cultivation in Foucault

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*The recent emergence of the care of the self as a topic of discussion in contemporary philosophy has raised a variety of issues, all related to the different aspects and fields involved in its development. One of the main issues is to investigate the political implications for self-cultivation. In order to pursue this research, I will specifically consider the work of Foucault and his turn towards the care of the self. There are two main reasons behind the choice of focusing on the French philosopher. First, Foucault's late interest in the care of the self and in the subject is apparently at odds to his preceding reflection, especially to the study of power. Second, Foucault's work has been enormously influential and has inspired a multiplicity of research projects, including many in political and social studies. According to this framework, in this paper I will try to demonstrate both how self-cultivation i) has a political dimension and ii) is coherently framed within his previous reflection. Furthermore, I will attempt to highlight what I believe to be some weak areas of Foucault's proposal.*

### Foreword

This article focuses on the analysis of how and why self-cultivation in Foucault could have political meaning and effectiveness. To support the political aim of the care of self, it will be necessary to prove the *continuist* hypothesis, which supposes coherence and continuity between Foucault's writings and lectures. According to this aim, the paper will be structured in three sections. The first concentrates on the category of power, by recalling its development in the lectures at Collège de France in the late 1970s. Regarding the study of power, particular attention will be paid to the comparison instituted by Foucault between his innovative conception of power and the currently accepted one. The second part will focus on the dimension of the care of self as it emerges from

Foucault's late works, the key point being the care of self in ancient philosophy. In this sense, the main interest, rather than being the analysis of specific cases and examples, will be the understanding of his new engagement with antiquity. Finally, whereas the first two sections briefly rebuild Foucault's research project, the last part of this essay will try to call certain aspects of this investigation into question. As a matter of fact, the final part will be the occasion for introducing some critical remarks about the limits of the political dimension of the care of self.

In line with this orientating purpose, attention will particularly be focused on a circumscribed period of time of Foucauldian reflection, from 1976 to 1984. Even though many of the involved concepts had been developed before, it is likely that from 1976 until his death Foucault wove them together in a coherent and structured project. In fact, all the separate studies undertaken in this period could be subsumed into the two general axes of power and of ethics<sup>1</sup>. These two macro categories then share the same interest about the way we organize our conducts and our behaviours, looked at from different perspectives. As it will be demonstrated, this concern has been developed in both the possible directions: on the one side the way a subject is shaped and conduced (power axis) and on the other the techniques of the self-constitution (ethics axis).<sup>2</sup> For this reason, the concept of *govern*, with all its different shades, could be marked as a distinctive sign of Foucault's thought and it will be the backdrop of all the essay.

Connected to the framework based on axes, another relevant characteristic emerges: the paradox of *continuity* through *discontinuity*. As stated by Revel<sup>3</sup>, it seems that Foucault has elaborated a *thought of discontinuity*, which embraces in his philosophical project ruptures, changes of perspectives and radical breaks. According to this hypothesis, to fully examine the political aim of self-cultivation in Foucault we should draw a representation of terms that are intrinsically and circularly connected, but linearly and, apparently, separately presented. In this sense, the initial analysis of power implies the problematisation of subjectivity, which leads to the discovery of ancient philosophy as a

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1 This division in axes is clarified in the first lecture (05.01.1983) given at the Collège de France in 1983, collected in *The Government of Self and of Others*, ed. by Arnold I. Davidson, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).

2 *Foucault au Collège de France : un itinéraire*, sous la direction de G. Le Blanc et J. Terrel (Bordeaux : Presses Universitaires de Bordeaux, 2003) , pp. 16-17.

3 J. Revel, *Foucault, une pensée du discontinu* (Paris : Mille et une nuits, 2010).

laboratory for experimenting with alternative ways of shaping the self.

However, the paradox of continuity and the question of how Foucault's reflection has been affected by ruptures allow another remark, which will lead to the first section of this essay. This observation is historical, so as to shed light on the *milieu*, the philosophical and political background, where Foucault lived. The key to the contextual interpretation is the dissatisfaction towards current political theories and the purpose of rethinking the political categories according to what has been defined *la deuxième gauche*, 'the second left', in 1977 at a Socialist congress in Nantes. From this point of view, two related dynamics take place. On the one hand the polemics with the orthodox Marxism. On the other hand the endorsement of the movements and of the spontaneous, heterogeneous *praxis* typical of the 1960s-1970s (such as, for example, the feminist movement, the anti-psychiatric movement, the LGBT movement...).<sup>4</sup>

### 1. Power as a Struggle of Forces

So, all these general observations lead us to the analysis of power and to the effort of developing a new interpretation, through the deconstruction of the classical model. As previously anticipated, this examination will follow a specific group of works, namely the research held at the *Collège de France* in the late 1970s and collected in three writings: *Society must be defended* (1976); *Security, Territory, Population* (1978) and *The birth of Biopolitics* (1979). Considering that in 1977 Foucault had a sabbatical year, this could be defined as the triangulation of writings where Foucault has promoted a new analysis of power, with a specific antagonist model in his mind.

To begin our analysis with *Society must be defended* (1976), this first group of lectures is particularly interesting because it lays the basis of a new grid of intelligibility of power. This preliminary function is then performed in two related ways: i) by giving reasons of how and why Foucault refuses the traditional representation and ii) by showing the research of an alternative conceptualization, embodied in the notion of

4 M. Senellart in M. Foucault, *Sécurité, territoire, population*, édition établie sous la direction de François Ewald et Alessandro Fontana, par Michel Senellart (Paris : Gallimard, 2004), p. 383 e L. Bernini, *Le pecore e i pastore Critica, politica, etica nel pensiero di Michel Foucault* (Napoli : Liguori, 2008), chapter 1, *Apologia di Foucault*, p. 5 and ff.

biopower. Thus, if the dissatisfaction towards the classical political theories is specular and parallel to the formulation of the alternative ones, they also have to be analysed together. The first two lectures<sup>5</sup> elucidate this shift of paradigms, by underlining the contraposition between the ancient schema, identified by sovereignty, to the new one, called *Nietzsche's hypothesis*. Therefore, the difference between the two interpretations could be expressed in terms of a reification or hypostatization of power in the first theory and of a fluidification of it in the second one. On the one side, in the horizon of sovereignty, power is conceived as something that can be given, exchanged, conquered or possessed: power is an institutionalized substance, certified by a contract, whose model is the Leviathan. On the other side, in *Nietzsche's hypothesis*, power is considered as something that is exercised and that exists only in action: power is a relationship of forces that could be described by the war metaphor. For this reason, Foucault asserts that

If power is indeed the implementation and deployment of a relationship of forces, rather than analysing it in terms of surrender, contract, and alienation, or rather than analysing it in functional terms as the reproduction of the relations of production, shouldn't we be analysing it first and foremost in terms of conflict, confrontation, and war? That would give us an alternative to the first hypothesis – which is that the mechanism of power is basically or essentially repression – or a second hypothesis: Power is war, the continuation of war by other means. At this point, we can invert Clausewitz's proposition and say that politics is the continuation of war by other means.<sup>6</sup>

From this quote two relevant ruptures take place. First, in the sovereignty schema Foucault includes not only Contractualism (*in terms of surrender, contract, and alienation*), but also Marxism (*reproduction of the relations of production*). As a result, Marxism can be legitimately ascribed to the conception of power Foucault wants to overcome. Second, if power is a collision between force fields, it is impossible to acknowledge a specific centre of power. In fact, as long as power is a relationship of forces, it is everything and everywhere, it is capillary and omnipresent. Again, Foucault claims that

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5 M. Foucault, *Society Must Be Defended*, trans. by David Macey, (New York: Picador, 2003), lectures of 07.01.1977 and 14.01.1977.

6 *Ivi*, p. 37, lecture of 07.01.1977.

Power must, I think, be analysed as something that circulates, or rather as something that functions only when it is part of a chain. It is never localized here or there, it is never in the hands of some, and it is never appropriated in the way that wealth or a commodity can be appropriated. Power functions.<sup>7</sup>

Therefore, the change in the status of power implies also a modification in its deployment. But Foucault goes further. In fact, if the aim is to study power outside the model of the Leviathan, to abandon the field delineated by sovereignty,<sup>8</sup> it is compulsory to refuse also the juridical formulation of the subject. In fact, Foucault challenges the sovereignty schema also fundamentally undermining the correlative view of an *a priori* subject, as owner of natural and original rights that can be guaranteed and implemented through the acceptance of a social contract. Since power circulates, individuals are not an elementary nucleus, a target opposed to power. They are one of power's first effects and they can both submit and exercise power.<sup>9</sup> And as a result, thanks to the definition of subject as power-effect, also the idea of nature, of an essential and constitutive nature, is compromised.<sup>10</sup> The subject itself is not a substance, but a relationship. And neither is the power. So power and subject rather than establishing an opposition, exist only in their relationship; they exist only as temporary junction, an intersection of a game of forces.

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7 *Ivi*, p. 51, lecture of 14.01.1977.

8 *Ivi*, p. 56: 'In short, we have to abandon the model of Leviathan, that model of an artificial man who is at once an automaton, a fabricated man, but also a unitary man who contains all real individual, whose body is made up of citizens but whose soul is sovereignty. We have to study power outside the model of Leviathan, outside the field delineated by juridical sovereignty and the institution of the State'.

9 'Power is exercised through networks, and individuals do not simply circulate in those networks: they are in a position to both submit to and exercise this power. They are never the inert or consenting targets of power; they are always its relays. In other words, power passes through individuals. It is not applied to them. It is therefore, I think, a mistake to think of individual as a sort of elementary nucleus (...) The individual is not, in other words, power's opposite number: the individual is one of power's first effects. The individual is in fact a power-effect, and at the same time, and to the extent that he is a power-effect, the individual is a relay: power passes through the individuals it has constituted' *Ivi*, pp. 51-52.

10 For this reason, J. Revel claims that the concept of nature has been undermined by Foucault's work, since the French philosopher has refused both the idea of an original fundament and of its political implications. About that, see *Identità, natura, vita: tre decostruzioni politiche*, in M. Galzigna (a cura di), *Foucault oggi*, (Milano: Feltrinelli, 2008), pp. 141-142.

From this point of view, two remarks could be made:

- i. Contrarily to the juridical and negative or repressive interpretation, power is a productive relationship of forces and subject is one of the first power-effects;
- ii. We should talk of a dyad (power and individual), not simply of power. Talking of power implies talking of individual, and vice-versa. What Foucault describes is a continuative struggle between power and subject, a dialectic without synthesis, always creating new forms, combinations and reactions.

As a consequence, still in an embryonic way, the focus of this essay has already been highlighted: the possible declinations of the creative and productive interaction between power and subject.

But, at the moment, the concept of power is still unclear. To enlarge the analysis, the problem of biopower, as results from the last lecture of *Society must be defended* (14.03.1976), has to be assessed.<sup>11</sup> Here biopower is defined as the *power's hold on life*.<sup>12</sup> To explain this notion, Foucault again opposes the model of sovereignty to biopower, and the ancient right to *take life or let live* to the new one: the right to *make live or let die*.<sup>13</sup> So, given that both are concerned by the problem of life, what changes is how to deal with it. According to Foucault's analysis, while sovereignty could be thought in terms of limitation and negation, biopower takes in charge the government of life in order to secure and produce it: from a negative to a positive conception.

Also in this case, Foucault does not restrict the analysis to the concept of power, but he enlarges it to the necessary correlative term, opening to the dialectic of the relationship of forces. In fact, this creative power upon life needs to be applied to a new historical subject, the man-as-living-being/man-as-species: population becomes the correlative term of biopolitics. As a consequence, power has to secure, govern and take

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11 *Society Must Be Defended* is not the only place where Foucault starts to develop the concept of biopower. As a matter of fact, in the same year (1976), Foucault opens to the problematic of the power upon life also in the *Will to Knowledge*.

12 *Society Must Be Defended*, p. 271, lecture of 14.03.1977.

13 *Ivi*, p. 275. While sovereignty exercised the right of sword: to take life or let live (pp. 274-275).

care of the life of this unique global mass,<sup>14</sup> in order to establish a homeostatic balance, that is to say an internal equilibrium of the entire population, and to optimize a state of life.<sup>15</sup>

At this point, Foucault has already set the basis for the new grid of intelligibility of power, composed of the network of govern-life-population: the government upon life addressed to a population. This framework is then broadened and specified in the two above-cited groups of lectures: *Security, Territory, Population* (1978) and *The birth of Biopolitics* (1979). The central concept here becomes the one of *governmentality*, since both these writings focus on the different means and evolutions the *power upon life* has had. Drawing a kind of conceptual and genealogical climax, Foucault first retraces its origins in the pastoral power (*Security, Territory, Population*), and then he opens to the analysis (that won't be concluded in 1979 lectures, *The Birth of Biopolitics*) of neoliberalism as the new technology of power upon life.

Let me now focus on pastoral power. Hence, the concept of *pastorate* is introduced in *Security, Territory, Population*, when Foucault is trying to rebuild the genealogy of biopower. As a matter of fact, Foucault wants to demonstrate that the pastoral concept does not belong to Greco-Roman world, where population was governed only indirectly.<sup>16</sup> Instead, the roots of *pastorate* should be sought in the East, where the shepherd exercised his beneficent power over the flock with the explicit purpose of assuring its salvation.<sup>17</sup> Nevertheless, the reference to the shepherd and to the shepherd-flock relationship is interesting not only in a genealogical perspective. Indeed, this reconstruction of government over people leads us to make some fundamental considerations.

First, power upon life is paradoxically totalitarian and individual-

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14 In fact, Foucault defines population as 'a global mass that is affected by overall processes characteristic of birth, death, production, illness and so on', *ivi*, pp. 242-243.

15 *Ivi*, p. 280: 'And most important of all, regulatory mechanism must be established to establish an equilibrium, maintain an average, establish a sort of homeostasis and compensate for variation within this general population and its aleatory field. In a word, security mechanism has to be installed around the random element inherent in a population of living beings so as to optimize a state of life'.

16 *Security, Territory, Population*, trans. by G. Burchell (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), lecture of 08.02.1978, p. 168.

17 *Ivi*, pp. 171-172.

ising. In other words, power is *omnes et singulatim*, simultaneously addressed to population and to individuals.<sup>18</sup> In fact, the shepherd gathers together, guides, and leads his flock, in order to ensure its salvation; but this salvation always implies an individual attention. So, at the same time the shepherd creates a community and shapes individuals. From this point of view, the relationship between the mechanism of discipline, that is to say addressed to man-as-body, and the mechanism of security, in other words addressed to man-as-species, should be rethought. Thus, their interconnection can be understood as an articulation in different levels, and not as a dichotomy. Since they do not exist at the same level, biopower (conceived as the series population-biological processes-regulatory mechanisms-state) includes in itself the disciplinary series (body-organism-discipline-institution)<sup>19</sup>.

Second, studying biopower and governmentality means studying the objectivation of the subject, that is governed, conducted, shaped, and formed through these relationships. But these relationships are not necessarily negative or oppressive (e.g. the paradigmatic positive case of the relationship between a teacher and a scholar). As a consequence, Foucault refutes a stigmatized conception of power in favour of a new one that is well synthesized by the sentence *power is not an evil, power is a game of strategies*.<sup>20</sup> Foucault goes even further, claiming that power relationships are neither negatively connoted, nor eternal. Therefore, if they are not hypostatized, they are always reversible, changeable and unstable: they can modify themselves. This constant reversibility and fluidity in power relationship finds its reasons in the role played by freedom. In fact, although power is this totalitarian and individualizing relationship, it is never absolute and it always requires freedom as its main condition. As Foucault states,

Power is exercised only over free subjects, and only insofar as

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18 *Ivi*, 'and it is here that we come to the famous paradox of the shepherd, which takes two forms. On the one hand the shepherd must keep his eye on all and on each, *Omnes and singulatim*' p. 173.

19 About this co-implication of levels, see *Society must be defended*, pp. 284-285, lecture of 7.04.1976, and *Omnes et Singulatim: Towards a Criticism of Political Reason*, In *The Tanner Lectures on Human Values*, ed. by Sterling McMurrin, pp. 225-254, Vol. II. (Salt Lake City: Univ. of Utah Press, 1981).

20 As Foucault affirms in *The Ethics of the Concern for self as a Practice of Freedom*, in *Ethics, Subjectivity and Truth, The essential works of Michel Foucault 1954-1984 Vol. 1*, ed. by P. Rabinow, transl. by R. Hurley and others, pp. 281-301 (London: Allen Lane and Penguin Press, 1997), p. 298.

they are free. (...) Where the determining factors saturate the whole, there is no relationship of power; slavery is not a power relationship when man is in chains<sup>21</sup>.

So, not only is freedom always implied in any game of forces, but it is also the ontological condition of power. In this way, by posing freedom as essential requirement of power, Foucault can leave room to the possibility of resisting it or changing the equilibrium in the game of forces. If where there is power, freedom is always present, so where there is power, resistance is always possible. Thus, Foucault changes a typical proposition: i) *you see power everywhere, hence there is no place for liberty* into ii) *since you see power everywhere, there is always place for liberty and resistance*. Consequently, instead of having a reciprocal exclusion between freedom and power, there is also a sort of agonism, mutual incitation and struggle, a permanent provocation. Thus, this conception of resistance, developed in parallel with the interpretation of power, entails two consequences. First, Foucault, as he did with power, calls an institutionalized idea of resistance into question. In this sense, it is impossible to identify a specific resistance field or topic. For this reason, we should think of a disseminated representation also for resistance. And this is my second observation: since points of resistance comprise the other side of the power relationship, they exist concomitantly with the network of power.

To sum up briefly, Foucault first introduced a new study of power, directly opposed to the sovereignty paradigm, and then he specified its peculiarities through a genealogical analysis. In this new perspective, power is characterized by i) being a dynamic and magmatic game of forces; ii) being constantly in tension with the specular term, freedom, and iii) being always exposed to possibility of resistance. Moreover, as demonstrated, the analysis of power unavoidably introduces also the problem of subject, which needs to be directly approached now.

## **2. Reaction and Resistance in the Relationship of Forces**

So, the second part of this essay wants to study the dialectic between the analytics of power and the individual strategies to react and

<sup>21</sup> *The Subject and Power*, in *Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics*, ed. by H. Dreyfus and P. Rabinow, pp. 208-226. 2nd ed. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1983), p. 215.

subvert the passivity of being governed, subjected. In fact, thought the subject has always been present, Foucault's interest until now has been directed towards governmentality, conceived as the government over people. But once the role of freedom and of resistance has been delineated, Foucault directs his interest towards the study of how the subject can constitute and govern itself. So, even if there is a turn of perspective or, in other words, the introduction of discontinuity, the theme is always *governing*, in other words, how forces are displayed. According to this interpretation, we can already make one consideration: Foucault's concern for the subject is neither a contradiction nor an aporetic achievement in his philosophical itinerary. Instead, it is its consequential implementation.<sup>22</sup>

Nevertheless, to enlighten the passage from the axis of power to the one of subject, rather than advancing immediately towards his later discovery of ancient philosophy, it is useful to consider *The Will to Knowledge* and *The Use of Pleasure*, the first and the second volume of the *History of Sexuality*. In this sense, *The Will to Knowledge* is particularly interesting since it functions as junction between the introduced analytics of power<sup>23</sup> and the research of how a subject can constitute itself in the relationship with its own sexuality. Foucault himself, in the introduction to the Italian edition<sup>24</sup>, affirms that sexuality is only an example of a more general problem, that has been developed in the previous years and is at the base of the majority of his works. Indeed, in this work Foucault demonstrates both how sexuality is actually an outcome produced by the 'polymorphous techniques of power'<sup>25</sup> (against the repressive hypothesis<sup>26</sup> and resulting from the dual attitude, individualizing and totalitarian) and how the individual can research the govern-

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22 That is one of the fundamental ideas expressed in F. Gros, *Foucault* (Paris: Puf, 2010), p. 93 and in *Foucault au Collège de France : un itinéraire*, p. 24.

23 *The Will to Knowledge* was written in the same year of *Society Must Be Defended* and both provide a theory of power. To compare the study made in *The Will to Knowledge*, *The History of Sexuality, Volume 1: an Introduction*, trans. by R. Hurley, (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978), with the one made in *Society Must Be Defended*, see part four, *The Deployment of Sexuality*, and, particularly, second section, *Method*, p. 92, ff. and part five, *Right of Death and Power over Life*, p. 133, ff. In these pages Foucault also elucidates very clearly the relationship between power and resistance; about that see also pp. 95-96.

24 *La volontà di sapere. Storia della sessualità I* (Milano: Feltrinelli, 2011), pp. 7-8.

25 *The will to knowledge. Volume 1: an introduction*, p.11.

26 *The will to knowledge. Volume 1: an introduction*, part two, *The repressive hypothesis*, p. 15 and ff.

ment of itself through the same device. In fact, the body could be the field of passive objectivation and, at the same time, of an autonomous government, of a creative relationship with itself. Nonetheless, if the *Will to Knowledge* seems to be still imbalanced towards the analytics of power, the second volume of *History of sexuality, The use of pleasure*, not only reiterates the continuist claim, but it also opens to the technologies of the self. In fact, in the introduction it is immediately declared that what was 'planned, therefore, was a history of the experience of sexuality, where experience is understood as the correlation between fields of knowledge, types of normativity and forms of subjectivity in a particular culture'.<sup>27</sup> Consequently, Foucault announces that he had to

Undertake a third shift, in order to analyse what is termed 'the subject'. It seemed appropriate to look for the forms and modalities of the relation to self by which the individual constitutes and recognizes himself *qua* subject. (...) I felt obliged to study the games of truth in relationship of self with self and forming of oneself as a subject, taking as my domain of reference and field of investigation what might be called 'the history of desiring men'.<sup>28</sup>

In agreement with Foucault's statement, the history of desiring men and of sexuality could be defined as the vehicle for exploring the other possible pole contained in the category of power, that means the productive relationship of the self with the self. But this is possible only because sexuality itself, since it's a field of relationships, is nothing but a network. The type of network then depends on what kind of forces are displayed: it is a struggle where the subject can be objectivated, categorized and marked or where it opens spaces for a new and free relationship with itself. As a result, sexuality gives evidence of the two possibilities, always interweaved, contained in the concept of governing: on the one side, being governed and, on the other, governing yourself. So, from the passive subject to the politically active subject. Thus, the specific aim of this radical turn imposes a needed rupture and discontinuity, without breaking the rhythm of the previous investigation.

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<sup>27</sup> *The Use of Pleasure. Volume 2 of History of Sexuality*, trans. by R. Hurley, (New York: Vintage Books, 1990), *Introduction*, p. 4. In these and in the following lines Foucault connects together the three axes of his reflection: knowledge, power and subjectivity.

<sup>28</sup> *Ivi*, p. 6.

Therefore, the research of the technologies of the self addresses Foucault's reflection to the unexpected historical turn we can finally examine. The function of gateway to ancient philosophy is displayed again by *The Use of Pleasure*. As a matter of fact, in this second book Foucault decides to direct his attention to antiquity and to a particular aspect of it, the aesthetics of existence. What the philosopher was looking for in Greek and Greco-Roman culture was a mapping of all those 'intentional and voluntary actions by which men not only set themselves rules of conduct, but also seek to transform themselves, to change themselves in their singular being, and to make their life an oeuvre that carries certain aesthetic values and meets certain stylistic criteria'.<sup>29</sup>

So, after having briefly rebuilt the exchange between the axes of power and the subject, we are already allowed to affirm that sexuality and the reference to ancient philosophy are part of a wider project, about the 'techniques of the self',<sup>30</sup> and both should be reallocated as a subset of this major domain. Moreover, the problem of the technologies of the self and of subjectivity finds its own meaning only if thought in relation to the question of power. According to these considerations, two questions should lead the forthcoming analysis:

- i. How is this project about the techniques of the self developed? And in which terms?;
- ii. Is this a satisfactory and reliable answer, according to its aims? In other words, does the ethics of the care of self correspond to the political demand?

The answers to these questions will occupy the last part of this paper. First, I will present Foucault's interpretation of antiquity; second, I will present some problematising aspects of this work.

Hence, as we said above, the theme of the relationship of the self with the self engages the last part of Foucault's reflection, approached from a completely new perspective: the problem of the care of self (*epimeleia heautou*) in ancient philosophy. The key to the interpretation of Foucault's operation is *The hermeneutics of the subject*, a group of

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<sup>29</sup> *Ivi*, pp. 10-11.

<sup>30</sup> In any case, it seemed to me that the study of the problematization of sexual behavior in antiquity could be regarded as a chapter - one of the first chapter - of that general history of the *techniques of the self* *Ivi*, p. 11.

lectures held at the Collège de France in 1981–82. Here Foucault explains the general framework of his exploration of the subject formation in ancient philosophy. In this sense, the first lecture is essential, since it is a declaration of Foucault's intention: the purpose of the lectures is to study the forms of the relationship between the subject and the truth. This historical research finds its coordinates in the relationship between two principles, the *epimeleia heautou*, identified by the care of the self, and the *gnothi seauton*, represented by the Delphic precept of knowing yourself. In particular, Foucault wants to prove that in the Greco-Roman culture these two principles were always connected. Their union, Foucault suggests, has lasted till the Cartesian moment,<sup>31</sup> which 'was led to put all the emphasis on the *gnothi seauton*, and so to forget, to leave in the dark, and to marginalize somewhat, this question of the care of the self'.<sup>32</sup> But the *dynamic entanglement*<sup>33</sup> between *epimeleia heautou* and *gnothi seauton* has a concrete implication, that is to say the access to truth requires some practices that have to transform the self and these experiences can be called the 'techniques of the self'. For this reason, the French philosopher affirms that 'an act of knowledge could never give access to the truth unless it was prepared, accompanied, doubled and completed by a certain transformation of the subject; not of the individual, but of the subject himself in being as a subject'.<sup>34</sup> As a consequence, the question of truth requires a transformation of the subject and this auto-formation engages nothing but the constitutive process of himself as subject.

Therefore, Foucault's analysis of ancient forms of subjectivation in *The Hermeneutics of the subject* permits a couple of specifications, about the meaning of governing and the boundaries of the subject. Regarding 'governing', what results from Foucault's study of the care of the self is that the fundamental individual assignment is a process of *ethos-poiesis*<sup>35</sup>

31 The only rupture in this coherent horizon is Aristotle, that Foucault defines as the exception in ancient philosophy, in the first lecture of *The Hermeneutics of the subject*, trans. by G. Burchell (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 06.01.1982, and in the lecture of the 03.02.1982, when Foucault returns on the Cartesian moment and on its precursor, Aristotle indeed.

32 *The Hermeneutics of the Subject*, p. 68.

33 *Ivi*, p. 69, 'there is a dynamic entanglement, reciprocal call for the *gnothi seauton* and for the *epimeleia heautou* (knowledge of the self and care of the self)'.

34 *Ivi*, p. 16.

35 The clarification of what Foucault intends with the expression of *ethospoiesis* is in the lecture of the 10.02.1982, where the philosopher quotes Plutarch and his use of the semantic areas of *ethos* and *poiein*. About that, see p. 237.

of the subject based on freedom. As a result, the active connotation of governing entail that the individual has to constitute himself as a 'subject', a category that discovers its historicity and contingency. Thereafter, the emphasis on this task supports the challenge, promoted also in the analysis of power, to a substantial interpretation of the subject, by denying that it is possible to achieve an essential nature.

In this sense, the turn to subjectivity inaugurated with *The Hermeneutics of the Subject* appears as a radicalisation of problematics already present in an embryonic way. Ancient philosophy is a laboratory where Foucault investigates all the possible declinations of the technologies of the self, by also contemplating some consistent differences between them.<sup>36</sup> Nevertheless, in order to give a stronger support to this continuist theory, we have to recall some later interviews and conferences (*The Subject and Power* and *The Ethic of the Concern for the Self as a Practice of Freedom*). Several years later, Foucault returns to these themes and specifies the continuity between the research of new forms of individuality, the cultivation of self, the analysis of power, and the role of freedom. From this point of view, what is particularly interesting in these lectures is that Foucault was trying to reorder his itinerary by making clear how and why certain concepts are connected. Some fundamental points emerge and they can be summarized in this way:

- i. Paradoxically, the permanent goal has always been the subject.<sup>37</sup> This general theme has then solicited the analysis of power since the subject is always involved in power relationships, which are nothing but a way in which certain actions modify others;
- ii. This goal also includes the task of promoting, thinking of new

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36 In fact, even though *The Hermeneutics of the Subject* has got a common heuristic vector, which is the research of the dynamics implemented to transform the self, it does not flatten all these practices together and it does not assume that they respond to the same demands. It is emblematic, for example, the difference between Marcus Aurelius and Seneca (analyzed in the lecture of 24.02.1982).

37 'I would like to say, first of all, what has been the goal of my work during the last twenty years. It has not been to analyze the phenomena of power, nor to elaborate the foundations of such an analysis. My objective, instead, has been to create a history of the different modes by which, in our culture, human beings are made subjects. My work has dealt with three modes of objectification which transform human beings into subject (...) Thus, it is not power but the subject which is the general theme of my research. It is true that I became quite involved with the question of power' *The subject and the power*, p. 208.

forms of subjectivity. This aim is possible because of the agonism existing between power and freedom. If *where there is power, there is resistance*,<sup>38</sup> when we are modified by certain actions we can at the same time intervene and become active agents of modification;

- iii. The study of the care of self has been a change of perspective, not of a theme.<sup>39</sup> What Foucault was looking for was how a subject could constitute itself in an active, creative, and aesthetic way. But this research is completely historical, since these practices themselves belong to cultural and historical patterns. For this reason, Foucault asserts that,

If I am now interested in how the subject constitutes itself in an active fashion through practices of the self, these practices are nevertheless not something invented by the individual himself. They are models that he finds in his culture and are proposed, suggested, imposed upon him by his culture, his society, and his social group.<sup>40</sup>

In this sense, Foucault is well aware of the contingency of the care of self: if it aims at being effective, it has to be actualized. This implies that we should understand how self-cultivation could be a form of resistance in a specific games of forces, neoliberalism, as it is described in *The Birth of Biopolitics*. As a consequence, Foucault's analysis of ancient philosophy is addressed to a contemporary urgency: the aim is always the present and the study of ancient philosophy is the occasion of opening again, rethinking of the space of possibilities, that are always existing in power relationships. So, as both Lorenzini<sup>41</sup> and Chignola<sup>42</sup> emphasise, the political dimension of a new critical philosophy lays in the research of conditions and possibilities for the transformation of the subject, in the refusal of a given and fixed power relationship. Not simply of the power relationship itself, but of its absolutisation.

But the acknowledgement of the political dimension of self-cultiva-

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38 *The will to knowledge*, p.95.

39 About that, see especially *The Ethics of the Concern for self as a Practice of Freedom*.

40 *Ivi*, p. 291.

41 In the *Introduction to L'origine de l'herméneutique de soi, Conférences prononcées à Dartmouth College*, 1980 (Paris : Vrin, 2013), p. 25.

42 In *Foucault oltre Foucault. Una politica della filosofia* (Roma: Labirinti, 2014).

tion leads us now to the conclusion of the essay, that will try to answer to the second question I posed above. Here the attempt will be to throw light on some possible weak spots of Foucauldian proposal.

### 3. Political Limits of Self-Cultivation

Before approaching these controversial points, I would like to summarize what we have already achieved. First, I exposed the pervasive and dynamic conception of power, as strategic games of forces. In parallel, I unraveled the correlative view of the subject, of both an objectivated conduct and a creative and autonomous governing involved in these relationships. These two interweaving lines have then conduced to the recognition of the political dimension of the care of self, conceived as the *praxis* of a self-cultivation that shapes the subject.

But this apparently coherent horizon leaves room for some problematical voices and I would like to recollect two of them. The first significant objection has been advanced by J. Butler in the essay *can one lead a good life in a bad life?* with the problem of vulnerability.<sup>43</sup> In this lecture Butler reformulates the problem, posed by Adorno, of pursuing a good life if we live in a context structured by inequality. In particular, she calls attention to the problem of leading a good life in an explicit perspective of biopower,<sup>44</sup> when we cannot take for granted that our life is 'worthy' to be protected, economically and socially supported, not worthy of being recognized and valued. At the extent that my life is dispensable, exposed to precarity, excluded from political support and abandoned, how can I pursue the care of self? Does it make sense to talk about care of self when life is not assured, given that the task of biopower it to assure life, take the problem of life in charge? This topic then could be dichotomized: either self-cultivation is a reliable political answer in case of extreme situations (for instance civil conflicts or the recent migration flows) or it is practicable only for those who are already in the position of pursuing it.

The second significant objection is what Bernini has called the

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43 J. Butler, *Can one lead a good life in a bad life?*, in *Radical Philosophy*. Adorno Prize Lecture, September 11, 2012.

44 *Ivi*, 'by Biopolitics, I mean those powers that organize life, even the powers that differentially dispose lives to precarity as a part of a broader management of populations through governmental and non-governmental means, and that establish a set of measure for the differential valuation of life itself', p. 10.

*irremediable solitude*<sup>45</sup> of the subject. Once the care of self is conceived as the personal, specific, and always particular *praxis* of a beautiful life-style, based on freedom and autonomy, is there any space for intersubjectivity or does this 'exceptionality' exclude any major engagement?<sup>46</sup> Is an isolated individuality the inescapable condition and price for the reliability, the effectiveness of the care of self? As a matter of fact, even though the care of self requires always the others, for instance, in the relationship with a master, a guide, a friend, or in the dimension of school, does this *ethos-poiesis* involve also a collective-*ethospoiesis*? Giving the analysis of biopower in general and neoliberalism in particular, we could say that a specific life-style has been imposed. This general and totalitarian framework is then composed of *praxis*, involving, for instance, urbanization, health-care, educational system but also desires (*where there is desire, the power relationship is already present*<sup>47</sup>). What is at stake is understanding if self-cultivation aims to modify this framework (and provides the instruments for doing it) or wants to be always a specific and particular reaction, concerning myself as individual.

To conclude, to face these issues, we should bear in mind Foucault's evasive answer given in 1984 (the year of his death) to a very specific question about the care of self

Q.: Could the problematic of the care of the self be at the heart of a new way of thinking about politics, of a form of politics different from what we know today?

A.: I admit that I have not got very far in this direction, and I would very much like to come back to more contemporary questions to try to see what can be made of all this in the context of the current political problematic (...) On the other hand, it seems to me that contemporary political thought allows very little room for the question of the ethical subject. I don't like to reply to questions I haven't studied.<sup>48</sup>

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45 *Le pecore e i pastore Critica, politica, etica nel pensiero di Michel Foucault*, Chapter Conclusioni, *Un politeismo a tre valori*, p. 257 and ff.

46 *Ivi*, Chapter *Critica e Illuminismo*, part *Una freccia nel cuore del presente Foucault e Habermas*, p. 223 and ff.

47 *The will to knowledge*, p. 81.

48 *The Ethics of the Concern for self as a Practice of Freedom*, p. 294.

As a result, the question of the political dimension of self-cultivation in a Foucauldian perspective could be considered to be an open question, still an open field of research: we have the bases, the grid of intelligibility, built on the dialectic without synthesis between power and subject, but we also have some highly controversial points.