

Foucault's concept of the body and the limits of political theory

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ABSTRACT

This article deals with the links between the descriptions of the body in Foucault's genealogical writings and contemporary political criticism. It proposes that Foucault's descriptions provide a basis for a political criticism that reduces political domination to institutional power exerted upon the body, and political freedom to a struggle against the value-based meanings underpinning them. It also highlights the influence of Foucault's critical propositions upon a number of central theoreticians in contemporary political thought. These include Shusterman, in his creation of a new philosophical stance some esthetics examining the contingencies of the individual's bodily experience under verbal and institutional structures; McWhorter, in the creation of a value-based opposition to the array of institutional meanings by expanding the notion of the politics of enjoyment; and Butler, in releasing the body from the passive function given it in philosophy and modern sciences, and in creating political communities based on undermining gender-based identities.

Introduction

In the final step of his intellectual project, Foucault focuses on the ethical issue. He identifies, as one of the central problems that arise in the history of thought and legislation, comprehensive involvement in the nature and validity of values and rules of behavior, and disregard of the individual's relation to the framework of external laws and rules (Foucault, 1986). This problem is in line with pragmatic political criticism. In his view, political ideologies and revolutionary stances that espouse a change of the world order and the destruction of existing regimes lead to oppression and destruction (Foucault, 1989). Alternatively, he proposes building a model of activity that expands the existential experience of the individual through continuous subversion of norms and rules considered as absolute and final.

This proposal opens anew the boundaries of political thought. As Finlayson and Valentine (2002) suggest, political theory draws a borderline between the public and private existence of the individual. It differentiates between the political agent and the social and political structure, reducing political analysis to the structure of the relationship between the two.¹ Thus, the question of power, which stands at the base of political analysis, is reduced to the system of laws and rules which organize the social status of the individual as a subject of rights and obligations. As no few critics suggest, Foucault shifts the political question from the public to the private realm (Norris, 1998). He does not accept the distinction between the individual and social and political structures, but attempts the process of establishing the subject within them. The traditional distinction between the political power latent in laws and norms that become part of the public space and the existential dimension of a person is no longer valid, for the individual has become a product of those same structures. Thus, the goal of the political theorist is to expose the process of the individual's construction as a subject of subjugation and freedom.

The collapse of the boundaries between an individual's social and private dimensions exists more in the neo-conservative and early post-structuralist literature, primarily in the work of Althusser and Lacan. Here I seek to show that Foucault's descriptions of the body become a political theory that crosses the border between the private and social dimension of a person and shifts the field of analysis of political phenomena from the level of the state and its institutions to the sphere of civil society.² Two arguments stand at the base of this assumption. First, from Foucault's descriptions of the body, two bodily political structures can be assumed the social body and the private body which creates an opportunity for original political practice. Second, these structures serve as a cushion for political criticism that splits into two opposing outlooks; they create activities that preserve the balance between bodies through acceptance of modern norms and values. The texts of Shusterman and McWhorter might be used as an expression of this type of criticism. So, too, might radical political activity that relies on shaking the social and cultural values and subversion of the bodily equilibrium, as might be raised from the texts of Butler.

In his philosophical work, Foucault focuses on the relationship between state and societal institutions and the human body. These relations are historical and political.

1 On this point, both thinkers draw their arguments from liberal and Marxist thought, given the post-structuralist assumption that, in both cases, humans are considered a unified entity. I do not intend to insist in this framework on the validity of the assumption, but only to use a starting point that sees in them the basis for modern constitutions and the existence of their political structures or, in contrast, as a basis for the violation of the existing order.

2 Indeed, it is possible to arrive at the same position from the thought of Deleuze. However, the political components are not as significant as those raised by Foucault, as this paper shows.

They are historical because they are restricted to the conditions of time and place, and they are political because they are hierarchical and based on the individual's and society's manner of controlling the body. Both forms of political structure characterize the power/body relation. The first structure is social and becomes an expression of political control. It depends on the state's use of the body to implement its sovereign interests. Foucault describes the structure of control primarily in *Discipline and Punish* (1977), through the affinity between bodily punishment and the logic of power of social and governmental institutions, and in *The Will To Know* (1978–1988), through the process of modern science's creation of sexuality as the basis for knowledge of the self. The second structure is that of political freedom. It is based on the use individuals make of their bodies for the purpose of fashioning a unique lifestyle. Foucault addresses the question of freedom in his late writings (1986) through readings of ancient Greek and Roman texts. These two structures are intertwined as a comprehensive expression of the process of creating a self and establishing a structure of relations between individuals and their surroundings. The political question encompasses the entire domain of human life, because it analyzes possible aspects of the use of force on the body, whether through external dictates or the use of self-restraint, and it basically does not acknowledge the distinction between them, but rather sees them as a uniform whole.

Foucault draws the boundary between public and private domains as he shifts the political question to the body. As Deleuze (1988:70-94) suggests, Foucault writes a philosophy of multiplicity that replaces the philosophy of difference. Freedom and political control are no longer two opposites whose existence in public space must be arranged, whether through a system of agreements represented by rules and laws, or by realization of a person's social nature through the abolition of power. Instead, they become two sides of power that stand as the basis for establishing the person as a living organism.³ Political analysis, therefore, must examine the structure of social power under historical conditions and the range of possibilities available to the individual to form a unique lifestyle within the restrictions of power. In other words, the private and public dimensions are intertwined, while the structures of social power determine the conditions through which the individual might design selfhood as the possessor of a body.

Foucault acknowledges that, up to *Discipline and Punish*, he focused primarily on the question of control and not on that of freedom. In his article "Two lectures,"

3 In his article of 1963, "A preface to transgression," this claim arises in the thought of Foucault in the form of the term "transgression," which expresses a move from dialectics to a philosophy of multiplicity. However, at this stage, there is not yet reference to the body and, as Foucault later claims in his late writings, he is speaking of a transfiguration, so the use of the first term should be withdrawn.

Foucault first reopens the field of political criticism by identifying the two dominant sides of political control in the modern era:

... modern society, then, from the nineteenth century up to our own day, has been characterized, on the one hand, by a legislation, a discourse, an organization based on public right, whose principle of articulation is the social body and the delegate status of each citizen: and, on the other hand, by a closely linked grid of disciplinary coercions whose purpose is in fact to assure the cohesion of this same body ... hence these two limits, a right of sovereignty and a mechanism of discipline, which define, I believe, the arena in which power is exercised. But these two limits are so heterogeneous that they cannot possibly be reduced to each other (1980:106).

The formal laws of the modern state, its legislation, are based on stripping individuals of their worldly powers by translating private and general rights into a system of shared beliefs and values. They do not permeate into the individual's private life, but only organize his/her public existence as a legal subject of rights and responsibilities. In contrast, political control in modern society derives from a process of forming the needs and desires of the individual according to his/her function defined within the institutions of civil society, such as the family unit and the workplace. The two domains are not separate from one another. They are based on language's use of the body in order to control the citizen. However, while modern laws, at least of democratic societies, preserve the completeness of the body and its formal freedom through implementation of rights such as ownership, institutions of civil society actually treat the body as an object of systematic, continuous, invasive control that enables implementation of the interests of the sovereign authority.

The separation between the formal realms of modern regimes and the institutions of civil society leads to identification of the object of political opposition in the system of values and meanings created by language and to the field of political opposition in the institutions of civil society. These two components lay the foundation for a political theory having a pragmatic and radical dimension. It is pragmatic because it accepts the rules and laws of the democratic regime. Every political battle, as far as Foucault (1989) is concerned, can bring about only an exchange of existing power relations for another set of power relations. Because a democratic regime ensures formal rights and freedoms, subverting the existing order is likely only to generate worse regimes. Foucault sees in the Nazi regime and in the horrors of Stalinist rule expressions of the implementation of ideologies enclosing and altering the order of the world. The theory is radical because shifting the political struggle to the realm of civil society changes the status of the modern subject. It provides tools for the individual to govern his/her body and life, and thus to reverse the meanings and values that establish his/her world view, manner of observing the self and surroundings, and identity as a person.

In his late writings, Foucault tries to walk in the critical path he paved himself, by dealing with the political practice of the homosexual community within the formal laws of the democratic state, by dealing with irregular bodily activity, such as drug use and sado-masochism, and in articulating the relation to authority and the attitude towards the self in ancient Greece. However, Foucault does not unite these proposals in any one theoretical platform, but raises to the critical field a new question requiring renewed consideration of political theory. What is the status of the normative values that he criticizes sharply in his genealogical writings and that also become the conceptual basis of democratic constitutions? What is the form of the self that operates under democratic laws yet also undermines the rules of the game in the Western culture of consumption? In other words, Foucault raises a new question for political theory, creates a new path of radical criticism and leaves it behind, hazy and blurry.

In past decades, several central philosophers and theoreticians have tried to unravel these issues in order to establish a new platform for political theory. At this point, I would like to adopt the essence of their approach and way of thinking, as a basis for the formation of a pragmatic political theory, as in Shusterman and McWhorter, and a radical theory, as in Butler, which draws its central assumptions from the use of the body by Foucault.

The embodiment subject: The question of the body and the modern state

The liberal theoretician, Richard Shusterman, saw the collapse of the separation between public and private space in Foucault's thought as a basis for a pragmatic political criticism that centralizes the body and provides an opening for an autonomous private existence within a democratic constitution. In Shusterman's view (1996, 2000), as the subject becomes a product of the power relations created by language, and as stripping the body's powers through democratic laws in modern society preserves the body's integrity and safety, these laws form not merely the basis for the existence of civil society, but also a necessary foundation for the completeness and stability of the world of consumption and desires of the body at the private level. In return, the body subordination in modern society is concealed behind the completeness given the language in civil society. The ability to form life forces at the private level is restricted to a minimum because they are tangled in the thicket of meanings given to them in language in philosophy, science, the family unit and the workplace.

Therefore, political criticism, which takes into account the bodily status of a person as a living organism, aspires to use the formal laws and fundamental values of democratic society to expand the space of possibilities for individuals in civil society to form their life powers beyond the narrow range of verbal meanings. Shusterman (2000:150-154) sees the media as the central agent of political opposition

because it becomes the primary mediating agent between individuals and their public environment in the modern consumer society. It is in the media's power to broaden the possibilities of individuals' use of their bodies to the extent that they augment their collection of bodily stimulus beyond a narrow framework of experience, accessible to the entire population, branching into varied forms (books, radio, television), and avoid the creation of ideal models of the body that reduce the concept of beauty to a normative system of images. In addition, Shusterman sees in the spiritual wares that arrive from the East, such as yoga and meditation, and in the expansion of Western culture to include the rhythms and sounds of the culture of the street, such as rap, new possibilities of using the body beyond the boundaries of language.

Shusterman interprets Foucault on the path to pragmatism. This is so, first and foremost, because Shusterman rejects any crossing of borders. Bodily powers are always confined to the boundaries of language and every critical analysis or practical political suggestion is restricted to its borders. Thus, the power of political criticism lies in its analysis of those components that determine the conditions of the use of the body, and the space of possibilities within existing boundaries. Shusterman rejects the post-structuralist tendency (which Foucault joins) to subvert the normative system of values that stands as a basis for modern laws and expand the conditions of bodily experience beyond boundaries of language, as this means the collapse of the organic wholeness of the body which becomes, of course, the result of structures of social power. Instead, Shusterman calls for opening the brokerage of public space to a new variety of images, so as to free the body from the absoluteness and finiteness of the rule of language. So, following Foucault, Shusterman undermines the separation of the public and private dimensions of political existence, creates new borders between them through language, and through dismantling and building establishes a critical system that discovers democratic values and laws as a condition and means for all political opposition.

Like Shusterman, MacArthur accepts the universality of the subjugation of the body by the institutions of the state and society. Unlike him, MacArthur rejects the separation of the public and private spheres, and sees in the social existence of the body a stable basis for political opposition. For her part, the formation of the body by external powers is universal and necessary. However, it is not reduced solely to social subordination, but contains within itself the power to create a social and ethical alternative of bodily existence. This power, as far as MacArthur is concerned, stems from the transition from a politics of pain to "a politics of the creation of pleasures" (McWhorter, 1999:181); pain becomes the source of political subjugation because it translates bodily sensations into fixed signs and reduces them to a limited range of experiences and emotions. Modern philosophy and science identify the damages that might be inflicted on the body through pain (Bentham), and they create antibodies that minimize the pain, thereby improving the productive activity of the body (Marcuse). These antibodies also classify the human race into different categories of a primarily

sexual nature which transform a person into a subject with a fixed experiential and emotional threshold that determines how they view themselves and their surroundings. As Levy (1998) suggests, human oppression in modern Western society derives from the way in which individuals adopt responsibility for their fate and their independence as beings possessing free will. They act according to a fixed, precise purpose and reduce their existential experience to set behavioral structures.

The significant agent of political opposition, for McWhorter, is the queer (1999: 1-11), who becomes the negative side of the equation of pain in symbolizing the defective structures of sexual and social opposition. As such, it is in the queer's power to form an ethical opposition to the conformist subjugation imposed on the body through the active political union that strives to change the social and cultural system of values. This is done, first and foremost, by demanding formal rights in the mechanisms of representation in democratic society, and, then, through the penetration of bodily pleasure into the discourse that deviates from the purposeful directives regarding the creation of pain. These are pleasures that do not amount to a final purpose, but which open the physical emotions to a new structure of social connections. McWhorter (1999:106) cites line dancing as an example. In dancing, the individual acts through a series of systematic instructions that are applied to the body. The dance is an activity acquired as part of the social structure of the disciplined body; however, it is not directed towards a purposeful goal and does not differentiate between people. It is pure pleasure, which does not lead to complete satisfaction, but leaves the body exposed to additional stimulation, and it has the power to remove all distinctions of cultural difference and to insert a dimension of intimacy into social relations. The queer is the agent of bodily pleasure without purpose, at the workplace, in the family unit, in civil institutions, and he has the power to release the shared social body from subjugation, or at least to minimize it through the assimilation of new bodily pleasures.

In one of his late articles, Foucault (1994:159) raises the claim that, in the modern era, social relations lack connections of warmth and closeness because the body is considered an altar for the exploration of truth. As we have seen previously, in his writings, Foucault describes the body's subjugation by external forces. McWhorter provides tools for a political theory that copes with the problem that Foucault raises in allowing one of the central conflicts in his thought: as no few critics claim, Foucault describes the system of oppression through discipline in modern society, yet he does not develop an actual political alternative (Fraser, 1994). McWhorter releases discipline from its oppressive basis by identifying pain as a mechanism of subjugation of modern society and raises the possibility of the creation of pure bodily pleasures through the universal instrument of the disciplined body. Thus, she redeems Foucault from the nihilism present at least until his late writings, and she inserts new tools for political practice, which, on the one hand, depend on the mechanisms of producing the modern body and, on the other hand, allow for a radical change in the system of social and cultural values.

Political resistance and the nomadic body

Butler (2002), like McWhorter and Shusterman, identifies language as the central medium of social power and the body as the object of the linguistic statement, yet unlike them, she identifies the central weakness in Foucault's thought as the immobility that he grants the body. According to her, Foucault may have removed the subject from historical space, yet he leaves the body as a transcendental subject engraved with social relations of power. Thus, he does not succeed in describing the body's processes of changing as material always found in the process of design and creation. McWhorter and Shusterman are caught in Foucault's trap; they accept the modern subject in the West as a result of historical power relations, and thus they do not provide tools for actually changing his/her nature and character. For them, the body is a deterministic result of social power relations; they do not succeed in describing the processes of its creation and design in order to save the self from the normative and ethical trap in which it is caught. To provide the tools for an actual radical criticism, Butler needs first to release the manner of registering the linguistic statement and its formation of the body, and then to outline the power of self-longing as the basis for original and groundbreaking social relations.

At the social level, the body becomes the product of the reflection of power relations through language, linguistic statements organized according to social interest (Butler, 1990:137-145). The power reflected in language generates within it ethical and hidden criteria that divide, in a hierarchical manner, modes of existence that are thought of as desirable, while rejecting others. In modern society the most salient expression of this is gender: to be a man or a woman means to adopt masculine or feminine behavioral patterns through a set of boundaries which is created by language and produces the illusion of sexual identity prior to social existence. However, the body is not a deterministic product of social and historical relations. It is endowed with the power of yearning, which indeed may be defined in relation to its location within the discourse, yet possesses the ability to subvert it, to change and redesign it (Butler, 1997:25-33). Private autonomy, according to Butler, is not derived from an individual's sovereignty over his/her life and body. This is precisely the source of political subjugation. Rather, political opposition depends on a minimal determination of social categories and a continuous subversion that prevents forms of power from obtaining the status of necessities.

The use the drag queen makes of his body becomes, for Butler, the most salient example of the subversion of gender conventions (1993:223-242). His extroverted behavior and style of dress publicly criticize the forms of behavior considered as feminine or masculine. A challenge of this sort changes the normative status of physical longing and so undermines its defined place within the values of the language. Butler cites melancholia as an example of the queer's use of his body as a vehicle of political opposition (1993:40-43). Following Freud, she defines melancholy as a result of the

child's attraction to his/her parent of the same sex which is repressed by heterosexual directives and is not translated into mourning because of social prohibition. The melancholy response preserves the homosexual kernel in the sexual orientation of the adult. Through the parodic imitation of feminine forms of behavior, the drag queen acquires a system of denied identification and affinity that attains expression for that which cannot attain sexual realization. He becomes the dominant agent of political opposition when he exposes the process of construction of the body by the social powers, brings it to a giggle, and exposes the status of bodily desire within its limits.

However, because the differentiation between the social and private existence of the body is artificial, actual political opposition is not limited to subverting sexual identity at the private level, but also to the externalization of the drag queen in the public domain. Butler suggests a practical line of political action based on theatrical externalization of queer behavior of the drag queen through public balls, large parties and loud and massive marches:

To oppose the theatrical to the political within contemporary queer politics is, I would argue, an impossibility: the hyperbolic "performance" of death in the practice of "die-ins" and the theoretical "outness" by which queer activism has disrupted the closeting distinction between public and private space have proliferated sites of politicization and aids of awareness throughout the public realm. Indeed, an important set of histories might be told in which the increasing politicization of theatricality for queers is at stake. Such a history might include traditions of cross-dressing, drag balls, street walking, butch femme spectacles, the sliding between the march and the parade (San Francisco) (1993:233).

It is not only that Butler, following Foucault, shifts the political question from the level of the state and its institutions to the realm of civil society, but she also makes the former irrelevant. In contrast to Shusterman and McWhorter, she does not see in normative values and formal laws of the democratic state the constitutive foundations of political opposition, but rather removes them from political criticism. Shusterman sees in social values the basis for the stability and endurance of the body and thus he distinguishes between private existence and social norms. McWhorter extracts from the social existence of the body a positive dimension that establishes private existence. Thus, she sees in democratic laws and values a necessary basis for political opposition. They both accept the subject as a completed fact of historical and social conditions and demand only the expansion of its modes of experience. Thus, it clearly is possible to see in their theoretical stance a sort of liberal interpretation that serves as successor to Foucault. Butler, on the other hand, as Neilson (1996) claims, adopts a middle position concerning the body, between Derrida and Foucault himself: from Foucault, she draws the structural assumption that every part of a system is subject to the whole, yet not in a causal relationship, but as part of its unique status within the whole. Thus, the meaning of political opposition is social practice that reveals the processes of constructing social values and provides the body's yearning with the

power of reversal and the oppositional response. Additionally, the disassembly of the subject calls in doubt the universal status given to the formal rules and laws of the modern state by subverting the system of values at its base. Unlike Marxism, this is not a method whose purpose is to cancel the existing order, but because it considers the legislative and state spheres irrelevant, it does not provide antibodies against anarchy and upheaval of systems.

Conclusions

Foucault opens a small aperture for a political theory of “boundedness,” the ontological status of the body, which arises from his empirical descriptions as a product of social relations (on the one hand) and as the raw material of private existence (on the other), converts the two fields into one and cancels the lines separating them. In political theory, Foucault nullifies the metaphysical dimension while undermining the starting point of political space as a system of signs that implements the collective wisdom of people beyond their worldly desires and needs, and reduces political criticism to the process of establishing the body within the historical borders of its social affinities.

Inclusion of the social and private structures of the body shifts the objects and concepts of political criticism from a critical consideration of the nature of regimes and the ethical norms supporting them to an acceptance of democratic rules and laws, and to a new examination of the meanings that establish the body and are reflected in language; and from arbitrary delineation of public and private dimensions, while restricting consideration of politics to the first of these, to the processes of establishing the subject as part of the social and cultural structures. The political question is no longer: What are the desirable social arrangements that implement the collective dimensions of individuals as part of a recognized peer group? Rather, it becomes: What are the values that establish the body of the subject and to what extent is it possible to undermine its construction as possessing an identity and as an object of relations of power? And if so, how?

These questions open a new route for political criticism and alter its starting point beyond recognition. It bifurcates to pragmatic and radical sides that derive from the same change in direction. The pragmatic theoreticians, the most prominent of whom are, as we have seen, Shusterman and McWhorter, formulate the processes of the construction of the body through social forces and articulate the possibilities of bodily expression within the fetters of the establishment. This position does not take into account (or does so insufficiently) the oppressive aspect of social construction, because it accepts the established subject as a completed fact and attempts to expand the paths of bodily experience within its borders and no further. Thus, on the one hand, the pragmatic view analyzes the oppressive structures that establish a world of bodily desires and needs, but, on the other hand, it sees in them the basis for political

opposition. How, therefore, is it possible to use the basis of oppression for ethical activity? It seems that, in this case, the collapse of boundaries between the two leads to both ontological and normative confusion.

Instead, Butler produces a radical position that removes the subject from the world of ethical meanings by exposing the processes of constructing one's body. She thus misses the social dimension of the processes of construction while removing only the same processes of destruction, and so does not succeed in using them as a lever for the creation of the self. The lack of affinity between Western democratic laws and the processes of bodily construction become a conspicuous proof of this lack. In other words, Butler also encounters an ontological contradiction when she indicates the process of establishing the body as an object of power and language, yet does not use the foundation of this structure as a basis for political action.

In the *Will to Know*, Foucault (1978-1988:255) announces that he is starting to write the material history of bodies. This is a history that leads to the collapse of boundary lines in political theory and to the gathering within descriptive lines behind which is hidden a gap. Lines made from the raw material of history reject any distinction between the public and private, and are reduced to the processes of establishing the body as an object of social power relations. This is political theory replete with internal contradictions stemming from the point of contact between the social and the private, from the tension informing them, and opening a new field of investigation for the contemporary political theorist.

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