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## “Being in the time of the world”: subjectivity and politics in Foucault and the feminisms

“Estar na hora do mundo”: subjetividade e política em Foucault e nos feminismos

“Estar en la hora del mundo”: subjetividad y política en Foucault y en los feminismos

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In this text, I highlight the convergences of the feminist interpretations with Foucault's reflections regarding his criticism of the modes of subjection promoted in modernity and the search for other possibilities of existence. His analyzes of neoliberalism and his notion of counter-conduct are useful for thinking about the feminist politics of subjectivity, which fight against normalizing processes and affirm the desire for the truth about itself. These struggles demand the courage of truth, as evidenced by the forms of exclusion, torture and death used against them historically, from the bonfire and guillotine in the past to prisons in dictatorships and to other forms of daily violence. Although neoliberalism today appropriates various feminist agendas, valuing the competitive figure of the “self-entrepreneur”, feminisms denounce these sophisticated technologies of power in their struggle for an anti-capitalist, philosophical and libertarian world.

**Keywords:** Foucault. Feminisms. Neoliberalism. Subjectivity. Counter-conducts.



## Convergences

In his quest for a diagnosis of the present, Foucault emphasized the importance of producing other modes of subjectivation, able to escape the subjugating, egocentric and narcissistic forms that have asserted themselves, frighteningly, in this world, marked by racism and sexism and other forms of physical and psychic violence. In his class of February 17, 1982, in the College de France, discoursing on the several historical attempts of the stylization of existence and asking for its possibility, he asserts:

one may suspect the existence of a certain impossibility of constituting nowadays an ethics of the self, when this may be an urgent, fundamental and politically indispensable task if it is, after all, true that there is no other point, first and last, of resistance to political power, than our relationship with ourselves<sup>1</sup>. (p. 306).

Moving in a convergent direction the feminisms have questioned the models of femininity imposed on women and pointed to the need of creating new social spaces and other subjective conditions for themselves, so they could "free themselves of Woman", as Grosz<sup>2</sup> proposed, in refusing an identity defined by the sexist, class oriented knowledge-power. From their first demonstrations for the right to vote, in the XIX Century, or when claiming for wage equality for women, feminists have fought to change the normalizing conditions in the formation of young girls and women, inciting them to attempt to make themselves over autonomously, rejecting the daily subjection to the patriarchy, felt in their own flesh. Being critics of the biological definition of woman closely linked to the womb, to obligatory maternity and the mystification of the private sphere of the home, they waged an intense macro and micro political battle for the re-invention of the self and to make possible the construction of modes of being that would be more just, free and phyloginistic.

While the feminisms have registered a long historical experience built from harsh criticisms of the excluding and sexist forms of organizing social life, the theorizations of Foucault on power, freedom, the subject, sexuality and the body offer a sophisticated conceptual language with which to broach and name the themes involving the production of subjectivity, supplying the feminists with the tools to think politically questions that are unclear or not very visible, and to make visible many of their practices and experiments.

With his incisive criticism of the idea of the subject that informed the revolutionary theories of the past, with their bet in the appearance of "a new man", complete and newly found in his original essence, inserted into the ideal and paradisiacal society, Foucault renewed the question, bringing subjectivity to the front and articulating closely subjectivity and politics. According to him, the fundamental question of the present times is not only to free the individual from the State, but in "freeing ourselves both from the State and from the type of individuation connected to it", as he makes clear in "Subject and Power"<sup>3</sup> (p. 239). It is not about finding out who we are, reinforcing an identity imposed by the disciplinary forms, by biopolitics and the technologies of governmentality, but the "refusal of what we are" and freeing ourselves from both the individualization and the totalization proper to the structures of modern power. In his own words: "We must promote new types of subjectivity



through the refusal of this type of individuality that has been imposed on us for centuries"<sup>3</sup> (p. 239).

The foucaultian genealogy of the hermeneutics of the subject, that is, the idea that there is in the heart or soul of the individual an essence that would unfold along his life, available for discovery by self knowledge or confession, was fundamental. Besides which, his devastating critique of Christianity made it possible to understand how the concept of the subject was formed historically – the “subject of desire”, associated to the ideal of guilt and of sin, consequently leading to the demand of the renunciation of the self, as well as to the permanent obedience to another, as a form of purification and salvation<sup>4</sup>. What was a temporary movement of obedience to a spiritual leader, the master, aimed at self-mastery, becomes a permanent and unconditional submission to the superior and the radical mortification of the self in Christian morals. Foucault says: "Therefore, the *pathos* that must be exorcised through practices of obedience is not passion, but rather the will, a self oriented will, and the absence of passion, the *apatheia*, shall be the will that renounces itself and does not stop renouncing itself"<sup>5</sup>. (p. 236).

The need of the shepherd to lead the flock inside and outside of the church is not, in our reading, hard to understand. As the philosopher Thiago Calçado observes, in analyzing the foucaultian genealogy of the desiring subject and the manner in which Christianity modifies the relationship of the ancients with sexual practices, the aesthetics of existence of the ancient Greeks are replaced by the techniques of the examination of consciousness, of confession, of penance that make up Christian morals ruled by church power. He says:

The sexual pathos that the Greeks saw in an order of a disposition with the environment or with life itself aimed at the art of governing others is submerged in the interiority of the Christian being. He becomes a pathetic subject, marked definitively by concupiscence<sup>6</sup>. (p. 174,197).

Thus, Foucault, in giving an account of his course, asserts that more than power, his greater problem was the constitution of the subject in connection to power, to truth and to subjectivation, to which he devoted an enormous intellectual investment in order to understand how we came to be what we are. The possibility of being otherwise than what we are was positioned clearly in the core of the philosopher's concerns, of whom Deleuze and Guattari were important allies in his reflections on the “revolutionary becoming”, inciting “to be in the time of the world”<sup>(b)</sup>.

## Meetings

The meeting of Foucault with the feminisms, till then largely mediated by Marxism, was not a peaceful one, generating a number of misunderstandings, though it may be asserted that it had also a rather productive dimension. Its questionings and tools were at first appropriated to denounce the power relationships that constitute gender relations and to make the forms of male dominance visible, as well as to perceive that the interpretations that are part of the social and cultural imaginary are penetrated by power relationships. A great many research papers, both in Brazil and abroad, have

<sup>(b)</sup> “Being in the time of the world. There's the connection between imperceptible, un-discernible, impersonal, the three virtues. (...) Then one is like the grass: one made of the world, of the whole world, a coming to be, because a world that is necessarily communicating was made, because it suppressed in itself everything that prevented the gliding among things, the bursting in the middle of things”<sup>7</sup> (p. 74).

shown how the social representations of the female body were built, colonizing it from the departure points of medical, juridical and religious discourses, to arrive at the deconstruction and historicization of the female identity<sup>8-11</sup>.

At a second stage, the foucaultian questionings on the subject, on freedom and ethics made possible the analyses of the strategies and practices developed by the feminisms as production of knowledge and social movement, aimed at the autonomy of women, the social recognition of feminine culture and the culture of feminism and the creation of proposals for the transformation of the self and new worlds, starting from a "becoming woman", to use the known phrase of Deleuze and Guattari<sup>(c)</sup>.

If the feminisms struggle for the conquest of the rights of women, for their recognition as citizens; if they are responsible for numberless public policies and for a greater sensitiveness of the State to feminine demands, they have also had a formidable impact on the change of sensibility and the cultural imaginary and on the way people relate to themselves, the way they perceive and interpret themselves. Hence, if on one hand the critique of the medicalization of the female body was incisive, on the other hand the feminist practices of freedom must be emphasized, that is, the activation of the "politics of ourselves", or the politics of subjectivity, through which has been questioned what women are and what they want to be in escaping the net of power. "To free women of the Woman" has meant to open a space for many other figures of femininity to emerge, as we have seen, at least since the 1970's.

There is no doubt that the feminist movement has accomplished significant progresses in multiple dimensions of the life of women and of the collectivity in showing that "the personal is political", in dissolving the boundaries of the public and the private, in enlarging the concept of politics and citizenship, in subverting the notions of the body and of sexuality produced by the relationships of knowledge-power and in creating an epistemology of its own. However, the reflections on the production of subjectivity in this field are still relatively limited, even taking into account the enormous experience of critique of the traditionally valued female identity.

In this direction, to name the experiences that act as escape lines from biopower, from biopolitics and from neoliberal governmentality, that is, from the government of women's conducts and making visible the new forms of subjective experimentation generated relationally in and out of the feminist practices is an urgent task in a world that comes easily unlinked from the positive tradition bequeathed us, reinforcing the violence and lack of tolerance among people, groups, social classes, ethnic groups, genders and generations.

The discussion on subjectivity, freedom and ethics is thus posed also for the feminisms as one of the great challenges of our days, principally when we notice the failure of the traditional discourses of the left, the growth of conservative and reactionary forces in the worldwide entrepreneurial capitalism that aim at inhibiting the power of life at all levels, the increasing strength of the fundamentalisms, of the intolerance and prejudices that obstruct the possible meetings and connections. It is fundamental to produce new and creative ways of life, more humanized contexts of sociability and the formation of ethical subjectivities if the wish is to construct a less misogynous, less violent and unequal world. With this objective, most relevant are the discussions on the 'politics of the common', by several authors such as Toni Negri,

<sup>(c)</sup> According to Deleuze and Guattari: "It is perhaps the particular situation of the woman in relation to the man-pattern that makes all becomings, being minorities, to go through a becoming -woman. It is however necessary not to mistake "minority" as a becoming or process and "minority" as a set or condition. (...) Even women will have to become -women" (p. 88).

Pierre Dardot, Christian Laval and Silvia Federici, among others, opposed to the devastating neoliberal expansion.

### Neoliberal governmentality and women

Speaking of neoliberalism, it is worth noting that Foucault<sup>12</sup> presented, in the courses taught at the end of the 1970's, gathered in "Birth of Biopolitics", analyses that were rather different from those produced in the Marxist camp, going beyond a reading that defined it as an economic policy affecting the welfare state, restricting social and individual rights with the objective of reducing the State, executing privatizations and the privilege of the market.

This was much more than that for Foucault; for him neoliberalism should be thought as a form of governmental rationality, extending the economic practices and values to all aspects and dimensions of human life, with the inclusion of non-economic domains, such as the sphere of intimacy, of the family and of love. According to Wendy Brown<sup>13</sup>, following Foucault, an "economization of social life" is produced, resulting in the destruction of democratic life and in the weakening of the *homo politicus*, capable of resistance and fighting against these same normative processes. According to her; "neoliberal rationality disseminates the method of the market into all domains and activities – even those that are not about money – and configures human beings exhaustively as market agents, (...) as *homo economicus*"<sup>13</sup>. (p. 31).

Neoliberal governmentality implies a form of governing conducts that aims at producing subjectivities, that aims at the formation of the subject as "human capital", being he too thought of as an enterprise. According to Laval and Dardot<sup>14</sup>, neoliberalism is, from this viewpoint, understood as a normative logic, of which the two distinctive dimensions are the rule of competition and the model of the enterprise. Thus neoliberal governmentality is about a particular mode of subjection: the constitution of the self as an enterprise, or of *homo economicus*. Individuals are "free" in the market, under the condition of assuming the entrepreneurial risk of managing their own capital, for which they are solely responsible.

In this new entrepreneurial regime, as is shown by the psychoanalyst Aldo Ambrósio, the capture of the subjectivity is fundamental, for the individual must come to perceive his life as a specific type of capital,

a capital that accumulates in the form of the best aptitudes, of a better capacity, of a greater competence to gain in the future a certain pay, that is, an investment in the self and for the self is necessary for the subject to become competent enough to get a pay in the space framed by the artificial competition created by governmental action<sup>15</sup>. (p. 161).

The individual must invest in himself as a capital so as to be able to receive an income in the game of competition artificially created by the State, as the neoliberals believe that competition is not natural; the individual must think of himself as "an entrepreneur and as an entrepreneur of him, he being his own capital, being for himself the source of income", as says Foucault<sup>12</sup> (p. 311).



Well, the feminisms are also threatened by this normative logic, or by governmental rationality, that expands to the entire social sphere. And in order to face this challenge of the present, Johanna Oksala<sup>16</sup> discusses the "theory of human capital" and the ideal of the "entrepreneur of him\herself", following Foucault, making clear that neoliberal governmentality, going beyond economic policies or the traditional economic field, goes on to rule the rationality that operates in all social practices and institutions, directly affecting the behaviors of women and feminist thought. It can be clearly seen that nowadays women wish for power, wealth and success, beyond a happy home, and that also they see themselves as "new neoliberal subjects" capable of free choices, based on rational economic calculations. As with men, says this philosopher, women have been called to construct their subjective selves in neoliberal modes, constituting themselves as autonomous beings, as masters of themselves.

This is the sense in which the question of the production of the "neoliberal subject" or "neo subject", as Laval and Dardot<sup>14</sup> (p. 328) define this person that must work for the enterprise as if it were for himself, as if in answer to a desire coming from inside, throws an enormous challenge to the feminisms, as the discourse that posits the "being master of her own body", the taking responsibility for her own actions, the care of the self, the being the "the manager of the herself", are the demands of this new regime of truth. The limits between the notion of the "care of the self", as well as "the art of living" and the submission to the designs of capital become completely flimsy, leading to contrasting divergences. To that is added the strict valuing of citizenship, meaning the constitution of the subject of law, directly connected and submitted to the State, starting from the enlargement of rights of the citizen. It is the inclusion of those who had been excluded that we speak about here, the increase of the doors of access to the public programs of education, health, employment, labor rights, but also of the need of recognition of the individual by the State, becoming then with it a single and indivisible body.

### **Counter-conducts and the ethical subjectivities**

How then to think the foucaultian proposition of rejecting the individualization promoted by the State, the "refusal of what we are" to assert our own existence, inventing modes of life not yet imagined, constituting our own ethical subjectivities without renouncing ourselves, as postulated by Christianity? And how to think about post-identity feminist policies for the assertion of our own being and for the creation of philogynistic and supportive modes of being in neoliberal times? Contrary to the renunciation of the self promoted by the Church and the State we deal here with the affirmation of life itself through the "care of the self" and by the "government of the self", an outlook given by the reading that Foucault brings us from the Greco-roman experiences.

This is, by the way, the same philosopher that shows us that the "movements of counter-conducts", as he calls them, emerge continuously in reaction to governmentality or to "the conduct of conduct", as manifestations of the wish not to be governed, or at least not to be governed in this manner<sup>5</sup> (p. 257). In the present neoliberal regime they explode, rebelling against the experience of the enterprise as

constituting of all the spheres of the social, as is shown by Mauricio Pelegrini, who immediately emphasizes

the *occupy* movements, the resistance struggles of native peoples, the feminisms, the black movements, LGBT and the trans resistances as examples of the new inventive forms of counter-conducts that question the neoliberal hegemony and assert ethical subjectivities not submitted to the models in force<sup>17</sup>. (p. 101)

The feminisms have in fact pointed out possibilities of escape or examples of counter-conduct of women, faced with a regime of truths that defends the female autonomy captured as “entrepreneurs of themselves”, highlighting the importance of the ethical-aesthetical-political invention of themselves. I obviously understand that neoliberalism has not captured the feminisms, as stated by some feminist theoreticians, though the threat is strongly present, weighing mostly on the younger generations<sup>18</sup>.

The feminisms understand that female emancipation is going through structural transformations that go beyond the political and economical systems, reaching the forms of thought, of interpreting, of feeling and the subjectivizing of themselves. We learn to interpret the world starting from male codes of signification, as shown by the “philosophy of difference” that need to be transformed and that have been transformed. In the same way, the huge theoretical investment in the decolonization of the female body and psyche, in the historicization of the discourses that institute the identities and the oppressive realities for women has allowed them to bring forth strong arguments in favor of control of their own lives and bodies, such as the struggle for the decriminalization of abortion, for the punishment of sexual harassment, of rape, of domestic violence and of other forms of abuse.

I here put in relief the analysis of the production of the psyche in the neoliberal world by the Korean philosopher Byung-Chul Han. In his book “*Psicopolítica: Neoliberalismo y nuevas técnicas de poder*”<sup>19</sup>, he makes the observation that neoliberalism is a very efficient and intelligent system, that should be analysed beyond its dimension of biopolitics and biopower as a neoliberal psychopolitics, with its ever more refined forms of exploration of the psyche, reaching the unconscious. Technologies of power are at stake, he says, or psychotechnologies of psychopower that act on the psyche and not on the body alone. Contrary to shutting up, to silencing and repressing, it is in the name of the optimization of the individual that the “techniques of the self” happen, inciting him to participate, to get involved, to share his emotions and narrate his life. In his words,

the technique of power of the neoliberal regime adopts a subtle form. It does not take over the individual directly. To the contrary, it busies itself to make the individual act in such a manner that he shall by himself reproduce the lattice-work of domination that is interpreted by the individual as freedom. The optimization itself and the subjection, the freedom and the exploitation coincide here fully<sup>19</sup>. (position 407)

In the neoliberal regime the individual feels and is aware of himself as a “free project”, acting, enterprising, able to figure out his actions according to the logic



of the market, of benefit and cost, here included aspects of his inner life, love life or family life, seeing that the investment in the growth of his or her human capital is his main goal and his certificate of success. He does not feel subjected, does not notice the isolation in which he is placed, as friendship is impossible between competing business people, as Han shows: "personal freedom, that nowadays adopts an excessive manner, is after all nothing but the excess of capital"<sup>19</sup> (position 118). In this manner the system prevents the emergence of resistance, as the individual blames himself for his own failure. He does not see himself as a victim of labor exploitation, as Marx mentions, but as an impotent being, lacking the capacity for offering creative responses and of increasing his personal income.

Facing this absolutely frightful situation, the discussions and suggestions of Suely Rolnik<sup>20</sup>, in her new book "Spheres of Insurrection: notes for a non-pimped life" are rather encouraging and productive for the feminist movements as well, as they point to a mode of resistance that aims at the "decolonization of the unconscious". In this way it updates another field of questionings and work in the micropolitical struggle for the construction of more humane ways of living. As this psychoanalyst explains,

the decolonization of the unconscious implies in a subtle and complex work of each one and of many, that stops only in death; it is never given once and for all. But every time that a step forward is taken in this direction, it is one more particle of the dominant regime in and outside us that is dissolved, and this has the power of propagation. These are the moments in which life takes a leap and affords us the individual and collective enjoyment of a transfiguring affirmation<sup>20</sup>. (p. 145)

The feminisms have had an extensive investment in the transformation of culture, social life and the production of new forms of subjectivity, of new politics of ourselves, resulting in noteworthy effects that can be observed in the new generations, notwithstanding a very frightening panorama of the rise of reactionary, misogynistic and right wing forces. There is no denying that the youth of today start from a new height of freedom and self knowledge in comparison with their mothers and grandmothers, which does not mean they do not have to face problems and hurdles originating from male power. Rather the opposite, at each stage of freedom that is reached an avalanche of misogynistic and male chauvinistic responses makes itself felt. These power relations come to the surface as never before. A stage of autonomy has however been conquered by women, as new forms of relationship with themselves and among them were and have been practiced, bringing into question the modes of subjection that made of the mothers devoted, asexual women, destined to be in the background in the organization of family and social life. Women are in the streets, the squares, in the occupations, in the collectives, universities, bars and restaurants, acting in common interests and occupying the public sphere in another manner, that is, in a daring, transgressive and subversive manner, besides re-inventing the private sphere, sometimes with the support of fellows, relatives and filogynist friends. It should be emphasized that many positive transformations are in course in gender relations.

I therefore believe that the feminisms have created "feminist aesthetics of existence" along many decades, that are to be seen both in the relations that women establish

among themselves these days, as in the very "care of the self". Allow me to recall briefly the subject of friendship among women, discredited in western philosophic thought since ever. Considered to be naturally unstable, voluble, irrational, competitive, violent and envious, women were discredited in their capacity to be friends, from Aristotle to Nietzsche to our days; they were seen as figures orbiting and competing around a man, be him the father, the brother, boyfriend or husband<sup>21</sup>. As to the care of the self, women tend to be seen as exclusively concerned with bodily beauty, with the narcissistic aesthetic care of the body to adjust to the rules of fashion and so on. In spite of that, feminist researchers have shown, starting from different narratives and viewpoints, experiences that differ very much, in the past and today.

Having the objective of highlighting some of these feminist practices of the self, and availing myself of foucaultian operators, I observe how the notion of "parrhesia", or the courage to speak the truth in a situation of danger, has been observed as a feminine practice in several contexts. The Brazilian philosopher Salma Tannus Muchail<sup>22</sup> for instance, reads the course of Hypatia, astronomer, geometer and pioneer philosopher and transgressor in ancient Greece in the light of this concept that Foucault finds in Classic Antiquity, questioning if we could not consider this brave and curious woman, who dared question, doubt and speak her mind to the authorities, as a parrhesiast.

In my researches<sup>23</sup> I have interpreted the practices of feminist activists, such as the former political prisoners Amelinha Teles and Crimeia Schmidt de Almeida, the former exile Maria Lygia Quartim de Moraes, the philosopher and nun Ivone Gebara and the prostitute Gabriela Leite, who passed away some years ago, along the course of their lives, as parrhesiast attitudes, mainly when it is a matter of daring to speak the truth and to live in truth, in the context of the enormous danger of police violence in the military dictatorship, of ecclesiastical power and bourgeois morality. The cost of daring these things was very high and traumatic, counting the arrests, tortures, exile and other forms of humiliation, punishment and moral and political condemnations. We know that since Eve curiosity has led woman not only to perdition, but to be held accountable for the fall of the first man and all humanity.

The American philosopher Margaret McLaren, in her turn, defends that parrhesia be a concept taken in by the feminisms in order to read their own practices of "truth telling", as in the case of the "awareness groups", "a practice of contestation of the Women's liberation movement", seen as a "practice of the self that involves not self transformation alone, but political and social transformation as well"<sup>24</sup> (p. 155). Thus is the subjectivity in the feminisms led into the political dimension, seeing that making oneself free means a ceaseless struggle against the forms of subjection, capture and seduction that fall upon women at all moments.

It is clear to me that cultural feminization, that we have been going through for decades and are the result of micropolitical struggles of the feminist movements may point to new manners of "being in the time of the world", of re-imagining the present in radical opposition to the misogynistic, sexist, racist, highly destructive forces, activated by business capitalism, as we have seen, asserting to the contrary a happy, supportive, feminist and positive way of life, considering both the collectivity and the new "artist of the self", that makes herself in other social networks and in new territories of the affects.

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