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Liberal Education and the Subjection of the Individual

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Michel Foucault sought throughout his work to bring to surface the myriad of ways in which individuals connect with the “games of truth” or “truth-games” that decisively shape and form them. The practices and discourses of education exemplify such “truth-games,” transforming as they do those subsumed by them into “selves” or “subjects.” I treat in this essay of “liberal education” — whose “liberationist” rhetoric is curiously set against apparatuses of subjection, interventions in relation to identity formation (e.g. “student,” “rational autonomous subject”), disciplines. I bring attention to bear in the first part of this essay on Foucault’s genealogical analytics — his account of how regimes of truth operate in order to establish subject identities. I supply in the second part something of a canvass showing the roots and aim/s of liberal education, with strokes broadly inspired by James Marshall in *Michel Foucault: Personal Autonomy and Education*. I conclude with a consideration of the *types of subjects* liberal education underwrites.

Regimes of Truth and the Subject

Late in his career, Foucault came explicitly to identify, and define, what for so long he had grappled with — which, contrary to popular assumption, was not power as such, but rather the subject, and truth’s relation to it. He became interested in the matter of how subjects are formed out of individuals who adhere to “regimes of truth” or truth’s discursive practices. He clarifies this in, “The Subject and Power”:

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... Thus, it is not power, but the subject, that is the general theme of my research.¹

In an interview conducted on January 20, 1984 (a few months prior to his premature demise at the age of 54), responding to the question whether his “current philosophical approach [was] still determined by the poles of subjectivity and truth,” and connecting by his answer his long running work at the prestigious Collège de France with the directionalities he had established for himself in 1966, as contained, for example, in *The Order of Things* — in which he had spoken of today’s humans taking on specific subjectivities *in and through* the “truths” produced by the discourses of life, labor, and language, Foucault says:

In actual fact, I have always been interested in this problem [of the subject and truth], even if I framed it somewhat differently. I have tried to find out how the human subject fits into certain games of truth, whether they were truth games that take the form of a science or refer to a scientific model, or truth games such as those one may encounter in institutions or practices of control.²

Bear in mind that, for Foucault, “subjectivity” does not refer to a substance. “It is a form, and this form is not primarily or always identical to itself.”³ Subjectivity is not a natural, pre-given mode of relationship that one has with oneself, but rather one that needs to

¹Michel Foucault, “The Subject and Power” in *Power: Essential Works of Foucault, 1954-1984*, vol. 3, ed. James D Faubion, trans. by Robert Hurley and others (New York: The New Press, 2000), pp. 326-327. This essay originally appeared in 1982 as an afterword to Hubert Dreyfus and Paul Rabinow’s *Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics*.

²Michel Foucault, “The Ethics of the Concern of the Self as a Practice of Freedom,” in *Ethics – Subjectivity and Truth: Essential Works of Foucault, 1954-1984*, vol. 1, ed. Paul Rabinow, trans. Robert Hurley and others (New York: The New Press, 1997), p. 281.

³*Ibid.*, p. 290.
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establish, even if has the character of being “only one of the given possibilities of organization of a self-consciousness.”⁴ To be a “subject” is only one form of identity the self can assume; other possibilities for the constitution of the self’s identity are available. Accordingly, to be a subject, one has to be the object of knowledge, and at the same time, the ground or foundation of that knowledge. It is to possess an objectively comprehensible identity, as its subject, not object — an identity linked to truths about oneself.

Foucault’s avowed interest in subjectivity is not very apparent in his early works however; at times even it comes across as opposed to his “postmodern” philosophical project. He appears at this point to be more preoccupied with interrogating official “truths” and what he terms their “regimes.” Nietzsche influenced him greatly in this regard. Not unlike this 19th century German philosopher, Foucault is seeking at this point to problematize truth according to its coercive force. His questions are, “How do we distinguish the true from the false?” — not “What is truth?”

Why, in fact, are we attached to the truth? Why the truth rather than lies? Why the truth rather than myth? Why the truth rather than illusion?... [H]ow is it that, in our societies, ‘the truth’ has been given this value, thus placing us absolutely under its thrall?⁵

As much for Foucault as for Nietzsche, truth and its power—truth, its *regime*, required analysis.

This analysis went through a development in the course of Foucault’s research. For quite some time, his analyses of the “regimes of truth” took shape as histories of the production and circulation of truth. *The Birth of the Clinic* and *The Order of Things* are two cases in point. Later inquiries were directed towards the regime of truth’s power, that is, its obligatory character, along with the mechanisms that make that obligation concrete. *Discipline and Punish* and *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction* are examples of this. Finally, there appeared

⁴Foucault, “The Return of Morality,” p. 253.

⁵Michel Foucault, “On Power,” in *Politics, Philosophy, Culture: Interviews and Other Writings, 1977-1984*, ed. Lawrence D. Kritzman (New York: Routledge, 1988), p. 107.

his research on human subjectivity and its fashioning, in *The Use of Pleasure* and *The Care of the Self*. In light of all of the above, Foucault sums up regimes of truth as

the types of discourse which [society] accepts and makes function as true; the mechanisms and instances which enable one to distinguish true and false statements, the means by which each is sanctioned; the techniques and procedures accorded value in the acquisition of truth; the status of those who are charged with saying what counts as true.⁶

James Bernauer believes Foucault began explicitly to treat of the problem of subjectivity and regimes of truth while investigating “the Christian experience.”⁷ His projected multi-volume work, *The History of Sexuality*, had led Foucault, in his preparations for it, to face questions relating to the moral problematizations that had preoccupied the Greek constituencies from fourth century Classical Greece, the early Greco-Roman period, and the early Christian era. Foucault understood that to be able to address those questions properly, he had to set aside his earlier historical inquiries into the modern period. This development turned out to be propitious insofar as his explorations into Antiquity’s and the Imperial Era’s ethical dispositions towards the *aphrodisia* (the pleasures of the flesh), as well as into Christianity’s traditions of confessional practice as ethical practice, occasioned the linkages between truth and subject-formation, attributable to Foucault, that are the subject of this study. Bernauer, additionally, points out that Foucault’s analysis of regimes of truth dovetailed with the history of “biopolitics,” or “biopower,” involving in its turn the work he performed on the multi-layered morphology of governance, or *governmentality*.

[Foucault] became preoccupied with the problematic of governance that appeared in the sixteenth century and

⁶Michel Foucault, “Truth and Power” in *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972-1977*, ed. Colin Gordon (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980), p. 131.

⁷James W. Bernauer, *Michel Foucault’s Force of Flight: Toward an Ethics for Thought* (New Jersey: Humanities Press International, Inc., 1990), p.161.
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that showed itself in the development and dissemination of discourses on personal conduct, on the art of directing souls, and on the manner of educating children... The exploration of the knowledge-power relations involved in governance directed him to an analysis of the Christian pastorate, and thus to a confrontation with the ethical formation critical to its way of obtaining knowledge and exercising power.⁸

In a piece of research that would have formed part of the volume on Christian sexuality in the scuttled seven-volume series on sexuality, Foucault examines John Cassian's *Institutiones* and *Conferences*, the sections in them particularly dealing with the battle for chastity, i.e., the battle against "the spirit of fornication." What thereby is brought to light is a form of asceticism, or self-formation, that characterized monastic life in the early Christian era, in which the self is treated as a text requiring continuous decipherment for its truth; as someone needing to be brought to confess that truth; as an absorbent ground awaiting the arrival of the truths of the faith, of its beliefs and prescriptions. Foucault writes:

In this chastity-oriented asceticism one can see a process of 'subjectivation' which has nothing to do with a sexual ethic based on physical self-control. But two things stand out. This subjectivation is linked with a process of familiarization which makes the obligation to seek and state the truth about oneself an indispensable and permanent condition of this asceticism; and if there is subjectivation, it also involves an indeterminate objectivation of the self by the self—indeterminate in the sense that one must be forever extending as far as possible the range of one's thoughts, however insignificant and innocent they may appear to be. Moreover, this subjectivation in its quest for the truth about oneself, functions through complex relations with others and in many ways. One must rid oneself of the power of the Other, the Enemy, who hides

behind seeming likenesses of oneself, and eternal warfare must be waged against this Other, which one cannot win without the help of the Almighty, who is mightier than he. Finally, confession to others, submission to their advice and permanent obedience to one's superiors are essential in this battle.⁹

While "truths" and their obligations have been understood by every society to be significant "either for the constitution of, or the transformation of, the self,"¹⁰ in Christian societies this relation between "truths" and the constitution of the self played itself out in either of two ways: (1) the confession of one's faith, identified by Foucault with the practice of *exomologesis*, or the profession of a truth and of one's assent to that truth,¹¹ and (2) the confession of one's sins, and of the truth of one's self, soul, heart, identified by Foucault with *exagoreusis*, or the examination of one's thoughts, the frequency of their occurrence, their sources, their triggering effects in relation to one another, to better to be able to convey them to an elder or teacher, the confessor who, on his appraisal of them, would instruct the penitent as to what he should do in regard to them.¹² According to Foucault, these technologies, which calibrated obligatory practices to the various levels of "truth," soon overstepped the bounds of the Christian religion.

In his 1979 lectures, delivered at Stanford University, and in his essay, "The Subject and Power," Foucault adverts to the programmatic "swarming" of these originally sectarian confessional technologies throughout modern societies, in order to produce the identities and delimit the behaviors of the "governed."¹³ The correlations between

⁹Michel Foucault, "The Battle for Chastity" in *Ethics, Subjectivity and Truth: Essential Works of Foucault, 1954-1984*, vol. 1, ed. Paul Rabinow, trans. Robert Hurley and others (New York: The New Press, 1997), p. 195.

¹⁰Michel Foucault, "Sexuality and Solitude" in *Ethics, Subjectivity and Truth: Essential Works of Foucault, 1954-1984*, vol. 1, ed. Paul Rabinow, trans. Robert Hurley and others (New York: The New Press, 1997), pp. 177-178.

¹¹Michel Foucault, "On the Government of the Living" in *Ethics, Subjectivity and Truth: Essential Works of Foucault, 1954-1984*, vol. 1, ed. Paul Rabinow, trans. Robert Hurley and others (New York: The New Press, 1997), pp. 81-82.

¹²*Ibid.*, pp. 83-84.

¹³See Michel Foucault, "Politics and Reason" in *Politics, Philosophy, Culture: Interviews and Other Writings, 1972-1977*, ed. Lawrence D. Kritzman (New York: <https://archivum.ateneo.edu/budhi/vol11/iss1/4>

them he establishes through the instrumentality of a *genealogical* analytics that sweep him across the axes of truth, power, and ethics,¹⁴ unmasking within each domain its manifestations of both truth and power as worldly and contingent, not absolute, historical, not transcendent, manufactured, not discovered. Not only are truth and power not disjunct; for the sake of coherence they pair up, in “regimes of truth” produced, supported, promulgated by power relations — that is, “power/knowledge.” Quite the reverse, then, of behaving as if it bore within itself a presumptive timelessness and universality, each regime of truth operates according to “rules” that divide it against itself, qualifying certain classes of propositions as true, others as false, and still others as unmeriting categorization or mention of any kind,¹⁵ even as it accommodates to additional re-alignments, re-positionings, re-valuations among the rules themselves. Within the spaces of freedom opened up by Foucault’s genealogical analyses, we find scope to mull over the truth-regime, the hitherto unseen forces aligned with it, and our resolve never again so arbitrarily to be ruled by them.¹⁶ To one such “unseen force,” liberal education, I now propose to turn.

Routledge, 1988), pp. 67-73. See also “The Subject and Power,” pp. 333-334.

¹⁴“Three domains of genealogy are possible. First, a historical ontology of ourselves in relation to truth through which we constitute ourselves as subjects of knowledge; second, a historical ontology of ourselves in relation to a field of power through which we constitute ourselves as subjects acting on others; third, a historical ontology in relation to ethics through which we constitute ourselves as moral agents. So, three axes are possible for genealogy...”

See Michel Foucault, “On the Genealogy of Ethics: An Overview of Work in Progress” in *The Foucault Reader*, ed. Paul Rabinow (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984), pp. 351-352.

¹⁵An affinity between Foucault’s “archive” and Wittgenstein’s “language games” has been noted by the Anglo-American commentators of Foucault who are also acquainted with the Wittgensteinian corpus. See for instance, Paul Rabinow, “Introduction” in *The Foucault Reader*, ed. Paul Rabinow (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984).

¹⁶It should be noted, however, that the space of freedom or the “outside” revealed by Foucault’s genealogical analytics is but another regime of truth whose own validity is within a particular historical, cultural, and hence, contextual domain. This note should undercut any question about the possibility of a self-referential contradiction in Foucault raised by critics like Putnam, Merquior, and notably Habermas and Taylor. Cf. Gary Gutting, “Reason and Philosophy” in *Critical Essays on Michel Foucault*, ed. Karlis Racevskis (New York: G. K. Hall & Co., 1999), pp. 25-33. Also C. G. Prado, *Starting with Foucault: An Introduction to Genealogy* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1995),

Liberal Education and Subjection

James Marshall, in *Michel Foucault: Personal Autonomy and Education*, traces the origins of liberalism to an early 19th century Spanish political party, collectively known as the “*liberals*,”¹⁷ organized for the establishment of a constitutional government in place of the Spanish monarchy. Marshall explains that the term, “liberal,” was later “taken over into other countries to designate governments, parties, policies, opinions, or people who advocated freedom from authoritarianism.”¹⁸ Indeed, the notion of freedom from every sort of authority was central to liberalism — excepting, of course, freedom from the sovereign self, which the major political theorists of the day (e.g. Thomas Hobbes, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, but most especially John Locke) took as the condition of possibility for the operation of that individual consent which ties one to the collective order in order to be governed by it.¹⁹ In the absence of the sovereign or autonomous self, the very existence of political society would be in serious doubt. Political society and authority do not so much depend on tradition, religion, and myth, as on individuals’ accord with it.

Things changed in pace, however, when, loudly uttering the battle cry, *aude sapere!* [dare to know!], Immanuel Kant led the struggle for humans to emerge into a space of freedom by disengaging themselves from every form of tutelage. Under no circumstances, chimes in J.S. Mill, must authority, *unless it be rationally authorized authority*, be allowed to stand in the way of the choices and activities of individuals. Rationality and freedom from authoritarianism were thereby yoked together in individuals in order to produce, as J.S. Mill writes in the *Autobiography*:

unchecked liberty of thought, unbounded freedom of individual action in all modes not hurtful to others; but also convictions as to what is right and wrong, useful and pernicious, deeply engraved on the feelings by early

¹⁷James Marshall, *Michel Foucault: Personal Autonomy and Education* (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1996), p. 55.

¹⁸*Ibid.*

¹⁹Marshall fairly points out that though freedom is a core tenet of liberalism, the nature of this freedom is fragmented by the various strands of liberal thought.

education and general unanimity of sentiment, and so firmly grounded in reason and in the true exigencies of life, that they shall not, like all former and present creeds, religious, ethical, and political, require to be periodically thrown off and replaced by others.²⁰

This constitutes none else than the rational, autonomous person — liberal education's (in Marshall's account of it), most important driver of production. To make his point, he rehearses the ideas of three liberal educators, Richard Stanley Peters, John Dewey, and Kenneth Strike. As "the leading figure in philosophy of education for nearly two decades in Great Britain... writing from within a liberal democratic framework,"²¹ he notes that Peters subscribed to the ideals of fairness, equality, faith in rationality, individualism, and adherence to rational decision making — all of them the hallmarks of liberal thinking. Following Rousseau, he suppresses liberalism's more collectivist elements, but departing from Rousseau, is not anti-social, advocating as he does, a strong "consideration for the interests of others and respect for persons."²² Identifying education with the endeavor to develop rationality until it arrives at the truth, he speaks of its "development of the mind through the search for truth, essentially in the traditional academic disciplines."²³ Peters' philosophy of education is *liberal*, because not unlike other liberals, he accords top value to rationality, the development and deployment of which are crucial to the educational process. He also believes, however, that the pursuit of rational truth takes on public forms and must be carried out, as such, in the public realm. "[T]he person, the *autos*," as "source of the law, the *nomos*,"²⁴ imbeds this law in publicly canonized forms of thought, and brings himself thereby to submit to it. Marshall explains:

For Peters the development [of mind] is more than the acquisition of such things as spatio-temporal and causal categories and principles, and requires further

²⁰John Stuart Mill, *Autobiography* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1967), p. 107.

²¹Marshall, *Michel Foucault*, p. 69.

²²*Ibid.*, p. 70.

²³*Ibid.*

²⁴*Ibid.*
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differentiation by immersion in the Western intellectual inheritance (at the least). The development of mind therefore requires immersion in different, differentiated, and public forms of thought such as, science, history, religions, and other aesthetic, moral and technical forms of thought and action.²⁵

This implies, however, that the freedom secured by rationality actually yields a so-called “autonomy” imprisoned in these publicly sanctioned “knowledges,” or “truth-regimes.” In other words, in liberal education, an individual is freed from authoritarianism by means of his submission to rational forms of discourse that in turn constitute the laws and principles that determine what may be called free, rational, autonomous. More significantly, in liberal education, the individual’s submission to these rational forms also effects the formation of his identity as a subject. Marshall writes: “It is the laws and principles of these forms of thought which become the ‘*nomos*’ of laws, which constitute the autonomous person... [I]t is also these forms of thought which structure the individual’s identity...”²⁶ This is similar, of course, to Foucault’s point about individuals implicating themselves in the disciplines through their pursuit, within the apparatuses of liberal education, of the truth/truths about himself.

One finds the aforementioned also contained in the views of John Dewey. Marshall’s begins his examination of Dewey by taking a close look at the “Preface” to *Democracy and Education*, in which he asserts that, since social life cannot be transmitted by the family alone, society depends for its continuing existence on its educational apparatuses, which are apparatuses for the continuing transmission of social life. Were these absent from the social equation, society would literally collapse, and civilization itself eventually crumble to pieces. “Unless pains are taken to see that genuine and thorough transmission takes place,” Dewey warns, “the most civilized group will relapse into barbarism and then into savagery.”²⁷ Dewey is at one with liberalism’s faith in rationality, specifically, *scientific* rationality. The proper and

²⁵*Ibid.*, p.71.

²⁶*Ibid.*

²⁷John Dewey, *Democracy and Education: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Education* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1997), p. 9.
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routine deployment of the scientific method is expected to produce outcomes that could be expected to intensify democratic societies' efforts to subsume a phenomenal heterogeneity under a shared rational nature, as opposed to merely shared interests. Apropos to this Marshall remarks:

The notion of a liberal democratic society is a fundamental assumption in Dewey's thought... [He] sees the discussion, resolution and solution to problems as lying in rationality.²⁸

He sums up Dewey's philosophy of education as follows.

The construction of mind is crucial to liberal education, the development of thinking, and the constitution of the individual self.²⁹

Personhood, in Dewey's view, results from the mind's efforts to assert and exercise itself, but within the bounds of the traditional (western) disciplines. At the same time, therefore, that liberal education frees the individual from the authoritarianism of myth, religion, and tradition, it subjects him to the tutelage of so-called rational discourses.

Finally, Marshall takes up the thought of Kenneth Strike (a neo-liberal by his own account). He finds motive, at this juncture, to summarize the doctrines of liberalism that have shaped liberal education – such as the rational autonomy, liberty, equal rights.³⁰ Marshall notes:

- i. liberals assume that knowledge is a function of experience, not authority, and that individuals have the competence and duty to be rationally autonomous;
- ii. liberals assume that there are limits on social authority and that there is a private sphere of beliefs and conduct over which the individual should exercise

²⁸*Ibid.*, p. 75.

²⁹*Ibid.*, p. 76.

³⁰Kenneth Strike, *Educational Policy and the Just Society* (Urbana, Illinois: Illinois University Press, 1982), p. 3, quoted in Marshall, Michel Foucault, p. 79.

authority;

iii. liberals assume that social privilege and authority are neither natural nor inheritable, as social position must be earned and authority must be justified.

The philosophy of education that Strike espouses coincides with all of those ideals. To elaborate, Strike stresses privacy (“doing one’s own thing”) and individualism as crucial to the development of rational and moral autonomy, that is, of independent thinking. Yet such “independent thinking” has a very specific structure and form. It must remain within the bounds that scientific and calculative thinking have set for it. On Marshall’s account, therefore, as much as both liberalism and liberal education take personal (rational) autonomy as their goal, what it comes down to is itself a type of authoritarianism. It is one more truth-regime competing with and supplanting previous truth-regimes. More significantly, it exposes the type of identity that is being produced and formed in individuals *subjected* to liberal education, namely, the rationally autonomous subject. From Marshall’s standpoint, and also Foucault’s, liberal education involves the *subjection* of the individual to a regime of truth, that is, to a specific identity that in turn submits him to the authoritarianism of scientific reason.

A key insight of Foucault is that truth-regimes with their power/knowledge doublet manufacture or produce subjectivities that remain invisible to those who acquire them. In Foucault’s thought upon the matter, there looms a not-so-veiled insinuation that who we are right now — *what we are right now* — is a product of unseen forces. Its implication is that our so-called identities are not so much *ours* as imposed upon us arbitrarily.

This may be the case with the regime of truth produced, circulated, and enforced, by liberal education. Consider the example of a young woman, 16 or 17 years of age, who enters a learning institution espousing liberal education. Her actions assume a specific configuration because of the kind of formation she has entered into. She has, for instance, to wear a uniform and an ID, to go to classrooms, attend classes, do homework, participate in co-curricular and extra-curricular activities, etc. She enters into differentiated relationships with school officials, teachers, fellow-students, the school staff. But in following this schedule, and in abiding by the said institution’s official statements, an

identity is created in her whether she intends it or not.

If all this sounds banal and trivial, it is because — as Foucault would point out — these things are taken matter-of-factly. The whole process has become “natural” to us. And precisely because of its “natural” quality, this whole process where, for instance, a girl of 16 or 17 hailing from a remote coastal *barangay* (village), is transformed into a “sophisticated” college student, does not motivate us to take a second look at the said process. It has become hegemonic in that it is invisible.

One could ask, is there anything wrong with any of the above? Perhaps nothing. Truth-regimes and power relations, according to Foucault are, in themselves, neither bad nor wrong. It is simply that they are dangerous. They establish norms whose effect on people could be to impede or restrict the possibilities for their identity. In apparently paradoxical fashion, liberal education shapes individuals into becoming rationally autonomous, and pushes to the margins those who either are unable to submit to it or who refuse their development into “rationally autonomous subjects.”³¹ In normalizing a huge segment of the population, liberal education marginalizes and prohibits “other” identities even as it produces identities of a particular kind.

The clear danger of such normalization is the concealment of other possible identities, a development that traps us into docilely accepting our current subject-identity. For Foucault, it is identity that, very often enough, entails “all varieties of fascism, from the enormous ones that surround and crush us, to the petty ones that constitute the tyrannical bitterness of our everyday lives.”³²

³¹Consider, in lieu of Foucault’s insane individuals, our so-called “taong grasa” who do not subscribe to rational procedures or fit the description prescribed by liberal education.

³²Michel Foucault, “Preface to *Anti-Oedipus*” in *Power: Essential Works of Foucault, 1954-1984*, vol. 3, ed. James D. Faubion, trans. Robert Hurley and others (New York: The New Press, 2000), p. 110.