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MICROPHYSICS OF POWER: MICHEL FOUCAULT AND BIO-POLITICS

Gianfranco Tomei¹, Ivan De Santis²

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Abstract

The analyses on Power, in modern thought, have drawn very important lines and led to formulations of undoubted value. Some of these analyses were developed by the philosopher Michel Foucault. In his last writings he defined the "Microphysical" Power and elaborated the theory of Bio-politics. These analyses are intertwined with those of Pier Paolo Pasolini on the same topic: social homogenization, anthropological degradation, which culminate in the film "Salò or the 120 days of Sodom" and in the "Lutheran Letters", a posthumous collection of journalistic articles. Power, from being paranoid and repressive, becomes pervasive, perverse and hedonistic. The two authors underline that where this power has no influence the Elsewhere are being reduced, and a modification on the bio-physical level of the citizens' personality is taking place.

¹ Researcher and Aggregate Professor in General Psychology – University Roma Sapienza. Mail to: gianfranco.tomei@uniroma1.it.

² Psychologist and psychotherapist. Psychology Lecturer. – University Roma Sapienza

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The philosopher Michel Foucault formulated some analyses on the mechanisms of Power present in modern society, analyses that are still a nodal point everywhere in the study of this topic. Especially in his most recent works, *Microphysics of Power* (Foucault, 1977) and *The History of Sexuality* (Foucault, 1976) (in 4 volumes), the question is addressed in original terms that have influenced modern and contemporary studies. The mechanisms of power are intrinsic to States, and according to a Marxist perspective, power is the result of the possession of the means of production and it divides society into classes at war with each other. Power produces, even before “being repressive”; above all it produces power relations, models, and ultimately it produces "people". "Power" says Foucault, paraphrasing Von Clausewitz "is war going on by other means" (Foucault, 1977). According to Foucault, Power is not only impersonal and anonymous, but also omnipresent and all-enbracing, since it represents a sort of "diabolical machine" that takes everyone in its gears. An image that well expresses this situation or characteristic of power is the Panopticon devised by Jeremy Bentham; that is a utopian place of confinement in the shape of a ring with a tower erected in the center that allows you to monitor the prisoners of the surrounding cells. The

prisoners end up “interiorize” and exercise the regulating gaze of power on themselves and on others (Foucault, 1977).

"The exercise of power perpetually creates knowledge, and vice versa knowledge brings with it effects of power" (Foucault, 1977). In fact, according to Foucault, power, being omnipresent, does not have a precise and privileged "place" of residence since it lives everywhere and operates in countless ways and in the interplay of unequal and mobile relations. *“Power is everywhere: not because it encompasses everything but because it comes from everywhere (Foucault, 1976) "power is not an institution, it is not a structure, and it is not a certain power some would be endowed with: it is the name given to a complex strategic situation in a given society”* (Foucault 1976).

In the footsteps of Nietzsche, Foucault instead defends the structural character of power, conceived as the founding reality of associated life. Secondly, Foucault disputes Marx's macrophysical approach, that is, the tendency to neglect elementary and local power relations in favor of the great power relations embodied by social classes and their political projection, which would be the State. Consistent with his “microphysical” perspective, he instead affirms the dependence of state macro-mechanisms on social micro-mechanisms. A State, according to Foucault, is superstructural in relation to a whole series of networks of power that pass through bodies, sexuality, family, attitudes, knowledge, techniques (Foucault, 1977).

In connection with the above, Foucault criticizes Marx for the tendency to think in terms of global and binary oppositions (state-subjects, dominant-dominated, bourgeoisie-proletariat). In reality, according to our author, in the microphysics of everyday life, great divisions between dominated and

rulers are not possible, since each individual or group is at the same time the one and the other (e.g. the worker undergoes power in the factory but he exercises it in turn in the family or within the union or the party).

Foucault believes that since there is no privileged place of power, there are also no privileged places of resistance to it, such as “the proletariat” of classical Marxism or “the oppressed by the System” of a certain sociology of the Frankfurt school. In fact, if power relations can only exist as a function of a multitude of resistance points, the latter will be present everywhere. “Therefore there is not, with respect to power, a place of the great Refusal-soul of the revolt, the hotbed of all rebellions, the pure law of the revolutionary, but various resistances that are examples of species: possible, necessary, spontaneous, wild, solitary, creeping (Foucault, 1976)

In other words the basis for an effective struggle against power does not lie in an upper class with a unique and mythicized place for all repressions but in the plebeian element (which connects to the "body") present in every individual of any group, class or social body. Foucault therefore does not believe in "macrophysical" frontal clashes between homogeneous and antithetical forces, or in "dialectical" revolutionary leaps. In his opinion, the usual reality of the story is another: "the points, the nodes, the hotbeds of resistance are scattered with greater or lesser density in time and space, sometimes causing groups or individuals to arise definitively, suddenly igniting certain parts of the body, certain moments in life, certain types of behavior. Are these great radical ruptures, binary and massive divisions? Sometimes. Much more often they are mobile and transient points of resistance ”(Foucault, 1976).

"It is easy to see how for Foucault any group of relationships developed around a project, immediately implies the codification of power

relationships so that neither the party nor the union can carry the project, the project itself being the expression of power relations, of the codification of power relations. Conversely, the struggle against power must be nomadic: that is, not organized in a project or an institution, but developed following the taking of power to oppose it” (Foucault, 1977). This distrust of everything that is "institution", "organization", "plan", "codification" etc. explains Foucault's distrust of the "socialist project", which, like any utopia, appears to him dangerously all-encompassing and destined to infinitely reproduce the forms of power that they wanted to overthrow. In conclusion, a “socialist project does not differ from the capitalist one. However, it presents itself as a form of domination over individuals”. Consequently, more than in the wake of traditional revolutionary thought, Foucault moves on the horizon of a post-Marxist neo-anarchism based on the idea of a decentralized and never concluded process of struggle against the "microphysical" and multifaceted aspects of everyday power.

In *History of Sexuality* Foucault exposes a power that manipulates bodies according to the logic of disclosure. Unveiling of sexual practices, introduction into the universe of the discourse of the secrets of the thalamus, etc. The citizen is led to reveal everything about himself, being traced and identified in his tastes, attitudes and consonances. Biopolitics for Foucault is all-encompassing, it implies all the moments in the life of the citizen, it directs his moves, movements, tastes, everything. It is a politics that has bodies at the center, and shapes them for its benefit. In this aspect it differs only in part from the great totalitarian movements of the last century.

According to Massimo Recalcati (2001), the totalitarian movements of the last century relied on a population that absorbed the messages in a paranoid sense: the base was the State, the Country, etc. Thus a compact block was formed that could be sent to die in war, to rot in trenches, etc. Today it is no longer possible to find such an agglomeration, because the mechanisms and relations between power and its citizens-subjects have changed. Today power is perverse in the sense that it tends, in the relationship with citizens and in the flattery it offers them, on the promise of unlimited enjoyment (Lacan, 2013): today's mass is carried away by the promise of pleasure, physical pleasure, of the Freudian Libido always in turmoil. In this sense, modern Bio-politics, unlike the repression operated in the past, tends to unveil the underground impulses, to detect the repressed experience that become an expression of the sexuality of individuals from the most hidden recesses of the mind, to the portrayal on the stage of social modernity.

Pier Paolo Pasolini in his film "Salò or the 120 days of Sodom" suggests a vision and a perspective on Power similar to that contained in Foucault's writings. The Lords of the villa in Salò show a pervasive, sado-masochistic and scatological power, which feeds on the death instincts of its "subordinates" to lead them to an extreme enjoyment in which Eros mixes with Thanatos (Murri, 2007). In this the links with Freud's text "Discomfort of civilization" (Freud, 1930) and with all the literature on paraphilias, from Krafft-Ebing onwards, are very evident (Krafft-ebing, 1964).

Always Pier Paolo Pasolini in the collection of journalistic articles "Lettere Luterane" (Pasolini, 1976) elaborates a short treatise on pedagogy, which consists of the "Letters to Gennariello". Gennariello for

Pasolini is a 'funny and cheerful' Neapolitan boy. He imagines and describes him thinking he is having a conversation with him. Why does Pasolini have to create this character? Because he needs an interlocutor, though an imaginary interlocutor who is not an adult his peer - Adults are compromised with power - and who is not the average fellow of Italian youth. Young people are, for Pasolini, "either criminaloids, or neurotic or squalidly hedonistic" (Pasolini, 1976). Thus he creates this out-of-the-ordinary type, a cheerful and carefree underclass boy from an underclass city like Naples.

Pasolini believes Naples has remained miraculously intact for centuries (he will later be forced to retract this declaration), one of the last outposts not attacked by the petty-bourgeois and modernist infiltrations that anthropologically and irremediably disfigure other Italian cities and their inhabitants. So Pasolini explains to the imaginary young interlocutor the 'Italy of the years of lead', the prevailing conformism and the consumerist ideology that have taken over the nation. To this imaginary, likeable, vital boy, not at all hateful like most of his peers, the author dedicates some very enlightening lines on his thought.

Pasolini's thought comes to a radical condemnation of the agencies through which education is conveyed in Italy and which are responsible for formation of the minor to adult life. In another famous article he proposes, in a somewhat provocative and paradoxical way, but not without sensible hints, the abolition of compulsory schooling and television for the way they were understood in Italy in that particular period (1960s-1970s) both bearers of conformist and involuntional values (Pasolini, 1976).

In this sense, Foucault's Biopolitics finds a foothold, a resistance, and exposes that "plebeian" argument mentioned a little above. The last phase of Foucault's theoretical and historical production focuses on the philosophy of power and is characterized by a rethinking of sexuality in the light of the links of power, knowledge and pleasure and in the light of the emergence of the "modern" subject. Obviously the sexuality Foucault deals with is not sexuality as such, but sexuality as an object of knowledge and a device of power, that is, as the set of techniques developed in the modern Western world to keep subjugated the bodies of men, by means of 'knowledge-power'. His notes on sex must be understood according to Foucault's characteristic "microphysical" scheme, that is, as an anonymous network of rules and prescriptions, both negative and positive. "It is a question of immersing the abundant production of the discourse on sex in the field of multiform and mobile power relations" (Foucault, 1976).

At this point it is evident that the theme developed by Foucault is in clear contrast to the so-called "repressive hypothesis" of a Reichian and Freud-Marxist imprint. "In other words, the limit of the" widespread "repressive hypothesis (taken up by Marcuse) would consist in not having understood that even the mechanisms for the official ban on sex are part, in hindsight, of an overall strategic plan, albeit microphysically articulated, aimed at giving importance to sexuality and favoring a real discursive "explosion" around it. The essential thing is the multiplication of discourses on sex, an institutional incitement to talk about it, and to talk about it more and more". (Foucault, 1976). This program of inciting the desire for sex, starting from the nineteenth century, ended up leading to a real exasperation of it, that is to an imperative of sexuality. It aroused the irrepressible desire "to approach it, to discover it, to have it, to free it, to

articulate it into discourse, to theorize it" (Foucault, 1976). Actually, Foucault admonishes, we must not "believe that, by accepting sex, one refuses power, on the contrary one follows the thread of the general device of sexuality". Getting rid of the instance of sex therefore becomes mandatory in order not to be entangled in the mechanisms of power, or at least to operate "a tactical reversal of the various mechanisms of sexuality . Against the device of sexuality the point of support for the counterattack must not be sex-desire, but the bodies and the pleasures" (Foucault,1976).

According to Pier Aldo Rovatti: "It is a matter of subjectivity. Which are the traits of an identity that escapes the "construction" of the subject? What is a subject in the era of the microphysics of power (AaVv., 1986).

In the era of Bio-politics, the Subject is built up within his practices, it impresses himself on the bodies and only from the bodies does he draw an ultimate root to constitute "self-control" and not hetero-directionality, as far as possible within the modern Panoptic (Fisher, 2018).

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