

**READING GENDER AS EXPRESSION OF DOCILE BODIES
THROUGH FOUCAULT’S GENEALOGY OF POWER
- HISTORICAL PRACTICES OF NORMALISING INDIVIDUALS
THROUGH BIO- AND DISCIPLINARY POWER¹**

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Abstract: This article aims to define gender as a social discourse correspondent to two forms of power, the bio- and the disciplinary one, following Foucault’s critique on the normalization of the individuals’ behaviors and mentalities under the auspices of these constructs of authority and surveillance. Applying Foucault’s genealogical method of explaining power, in a specter of social, political and cultural acceptances, I will propose the hypothesis according to which gender represents the expression of the so-called “docile bodies”, meaning educated, controlled and surveilled individuals that adopt masculine or feminine discourses, attitudes and stereotypes considered *normal* and, implicitly, accepted by modern societies. Gender will be addressed in the current research as a paradigm of power. The main outcome of this paper consists in the possibility of developing, from these arguments, the analysis of different forms of subjectivity depending on gender’s main characteristics, as a composite of three elements – *power, knowledge and body*.

Keywords: biopower, disciplinary power, knowledge, feminism, docile body, normalization, surveillance, control, subjectivity, genealogy, individuals, education.

1. Introduction

The main aim of this paper is to examine the possibility of constituting a social critique of the feminism by applying a genealogical method of interpreting the history of gender. The working-hypothesis is that genders represent the social discourses of two paradigms of power, a *bio* and a *disciplinary* one, and they become cultural discourses only in terms of a process of *normalization*, in a Foucauldian sense. The advantage of this hermeneutical path is that a certain approach clarifies not only feminist receptions of Foucault’s theories, but also the context in which practices of historical constitution of genders were created following the interaction between three main concepts: body, subjectivity and power.

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According to Foucault, the genealogy provides the methodological analysis of a history that produces specific forms of subjectivity through the interaction between *power*, *knowledge* and *body*. Considered an exclusive discourse of the present, genealogy is developed as a social critique, applied to reconstruct the challenges of different conceptions of power in modern societies, based on two main significances of authority: the bio-power, interpreted as a historical discourse on the government of life as a social body, respectively, the disciplinary power, understood as the history of the so-called *docile bodies*, educated to support mechanisms of control, surveillance and normalisation. Gender becomes, in Foucauldian terms, the result of a cultural construct, obtained by controlling standards of normality and normative knowledges in modern societies. Individuals determine their identities in terms of scientific corps of knowledge that present them to be not only “normal”, but also “normalised” individuals. Is gender the result of a normalisation process? Moreover, how can the Foucauldian theory on the genealogy of power contribute to reinterpreting the moral and political discourses on feminism? What possibilities are leaved for resistance to manifest (even through a feminist discourse) since the Foucauldian theory empathizes with accepting that individuals, as docile bodies, are consequences or effects of power, and therefore, genders themselves might be understood as results of a creative power? In the light of these interrogations, gender will be studied, in the present research, as a paradigm of power.

2. Introducing the Genealogical Method in Studying Gendered Bodies

The relationship between gender and power has shaped the modern European culture in terms of life management and social discipline: questions of liberty, constituted on matters of adapting human subjects to the society by their natural needs and weaknesses, dictated by their body, equality and adequate self-representation in different human interactions are developed as results of normalising behaviours inspired by gender issues. Historically, hermeneutical prejudgments such as the natural inclination of women for motherhood, ethics of care and social institutions like marriage interfere with the contemporary need of recognizing gender equality. Hence, arguing gender as a historical cultural construction is insufficient in order to overcome the traditional contrast between male and female. Foucault realized that genealogy, as a form of critical history, is, in this context, the proper method of analysis that should be applied to gender tensions in terms of power, by excluding arbitrary contents of evenimential history. According to the French philosopher, genealogy can be distinguished by the classic historiography by defining it as

a form of history which can account for the constitution of knowledges, discourses, domains of objects etc. without having to make reference to a

subject which is either transcendental in relation to the field of events or runs in its empty sameness throughout history. (Foucault 1980, 149)

On the one hand, the advantage offered by genealogy is that it expresses the contingency between power, knowledge and body, considered the primary cause of different historical forms of subjectivity. In my opinion, gender itself can be recognized as a cultural construct depending on these forms of historical subjectivity. On the other hand, if we accept Foucault's premise that both the body and the sexuality represent rather cultural constructs than natural ones, the historical instruments of investigation have to be passed in a secondary position, advancing instead a social critique of gender issues that is able to explain the adaptation of gender itself to the modern challenges of power.

This methodological delimitation allows me to argue that gender is a cultural reaction to the power in the social field, regarded as efficiency and discipline. Briefly, this work-hypothesis is inspired by Foucault's lecture of power in the modern era (mainly in the seventeenth and eighteenth century) as state control through central administration on what we may call "management of life" (Rainbow 2003, 14). In other words, this political attitude, introduced as bio-power, follows governmental instruments of organising "life processes of the social body", "regulating phenomena such as birth, death, sickness, disease, health, sexual relations and so on" (Hooti, Navidi 2014, 102) by manipulating, training and restricting the human body. The aim of the bio-power is to consider subjects exclusively as bodies that can exercise a convenient conduct until they normalise it, proving to be, at limit, what Foucault recognises as "docile bodies" (Foucault 1995, 135). This manner of producing obedient subjects for the social and political order is conceived in the terms of the genealogical social criticism as process of administrating through action mechanisms of control and disciplinary discourses identities subjected to predetermined categories, norms and standards of normality.

My thesis is that this method was applied to rise gendered bodies in a modern disciplinary society, through vehicles of organized control, surveillance and authority, that arbitrary and conveniently adopted standards of performance and efficiency, both physically and intellectually for individuals, by manipulating their natural dispositions according to the natural sex.

Adopting this method, I will address, in the current article, gender as an effect of power, arguing that it is nothing more than a cultural pattern of individualizing bodies. In the first part of my article I will examine Foucault's arguments on this concern, in order to develop from here a social critique of the so-called anti-essentialist project of the equality of genders. The second part of my research will be devoted to the attempt of reconstructing a moderate feminist resistance to the problem of gender inequality, in line with the Foucauldian bio- and disciplinary power argument of determining gender. Hence, I will observe to

what extent the historical practices of normalizing individuals, inspired from here, can advocate for reading gender as social and political empowerment. The rivalry between canonical methods of historical investigation and genealogical instruments will be followed, surprising their compatibilities, as well as their individual contribution to a transdisciplinary critical assessment of gender issues in the contemporary social and cultural field.

Before proceeding to the attempted analysis, I consider that a last justification should be provided for choosing genealogy as a proper method of overcoming traditional historical debates on gender inequality. The fact that it functions as a social criticism is not a singular reason for selecting this method of investigation. Genealogy offers a radical perspective on the unity of historical discourse on this matter, since is focused on what Foucault calls “subjugated knowledges”, meaning elements that have been considered irrelevant for the subject in cause. According to McLaren, Foucault

identifies two types of excluded or disqualified knowledge: erudite and popular. Erudite knowledge refers to formal theoretical or scientific knowledge that has been buried or ignored. Popular knowledge refers to knowledge that has been disqualified as formal historical knowledge; it is particular, local, regional knowledge. (McLaren 2002, 31)

Reanimating previous unities of content, underestimated or disqualified, creates a functional role of genealogy as criticism. It is exactly the essence of this reassessment that fulfills the challenge proposed by genealogy, that of addressing speculation and intrigue to dominant knowledge. Tracing the repercussion of the restored subjugated contents on current unities of discourse and authoritative knowledge, genealogy performs what Foucault argues being “the history of the present”, assumed as the result of the historical contingency of ideas, contents and social or political forces.

Recognizing the historical contingency that led up to the present implies that things could be otherwise. Foucault’s detailed, if idiosyncratic, accounts of the histories of the penal system, madness, and sexuality highlight the contingency behind what are now seen as the inevitable outcomes of historical forces. Foucault intends his genealogies to be tools for current political and social struggles. (McLaren 2002, 31)

One of these struggles is represented by the tension developed by the clash of genders, as regularisation of the biased treatment of sexuality in alternative modern regimes of power. Social values gained by sex and sexuality in the modern era have been manipulated through political norms, sanctions and recognitions. Nevertheless, any normalisation of sexuality in terms of legislative discourses – rights, policies etc. – despite its affirmative or negative character, is the result of a repression, cultivated not exclusively politically, but also through

scientific, religious or psychiatric instruments. As Foucault noticed, power was used to simultaneously limit and create discourses on sexuality, advancing "a historical network of repression" (McLaren 2002, 32) in which I found integrated the clash of genders. In order to face this assumption, my working-hypothesis is that historical practices of subjectivity express the tendency to associate dispositions of individuals, conditioned by their natural sex, with characteristics of gender, which is a cultural construction. Repression animated the social will for "sexual liberation", following Marcuse's terminology, as reactive movements and cultural revolutions (Marcuse 1995), opening the premises for considering gender in the larger debate on the history of sexuality. McLaren's lecture on Foucault is, at this level, relevant: sex and subjectivity can easily be related as grounds for a new modern paradigm of power (McLaren 2002, 32). In other words, gender is empowered by sexuality. Yet, it is likely to be mentioned Foucault's attempt to organise genealogy as critique through a methodological ambivalence: rejecting traditional norms because they conceive an authoritative and normalising power on individuals, he remains uncommitted entirely to the modern norms that depend by political constraints. The social criticism engaged by genealogy favours the Kantian idea of freedom², to which he adds the necessity of resistance as part of the integrity of the very notion of freedom, conceived in all the social and institutional modern practices of normalising individuals. Genealogy allows to question domination by explaining what could have been a proper alternative to the present, that of asymmetric relations of power between female and male, coding a social ideal of rationality exclusively as masculine and subjecting contemporary methods promoted by the feminist project of emancipation from subordination to a reasonable doubt, as responsive constructs to existing norms of discriminating sexes and, sequentially, genders.

3. The Anti-Essentialist Foucauldian Argument for Gendered Bodies

Since the mechanisms of the patriarchal power has infiltrated in the micro politics of the personal life of the individual, women started to be associated with the social institution of marriage, argued by recourse to their natural dispositions

² "Foucault's genealogies derive their critical force in part from the critique of freedom as a universal norm. For Foucault, freedom is not a universal norm or a final realizable state, and thinking that it is may blind us to the ways that new institutions and practices may result in new forms of domination. However, domination is not total because not all power is normalizing, disciplinary power. Power itself is neither good nor bad; it is equally implicated in both resistance and domination. Foucault engages in social criticism with the understanding that there have been, are, and will be institutions and practices that are nondominating and nonnormalizing. But these exist alongside, and may become, practices and institutions that dominate and normalize. For Foucault, there is no utopian state where power ceases to operate and freedom is guaranteed." (McLaren 2002, 36)

to compassion, empathy, care. In fact, this particular argument appears in Gilligan's theory of the ethics of care as a feminist ethic: men and women naturally perceive morality, related to values that are primary for their gender (Gilligan 2008). Woman is preponderantly oriented toward care, while men are basing their rational and ethical judgments and decisions on ideals of justice. Nevertheless, this is not owed exclusively to natural dispositions of sex transposed in characteristics of genders and differences between them, but also in quotidian life contexts that address gender concerns in particular terms. The latter explanation takes into account multiple variables of the forms of control on the female body, as well as on the feminist thinking. As we can see, what is clearly a hermeneutical prejudgment – that of considering women oriented toward care because they give life – represents a biological argument, inspired by the functionality of the female body. The challenge, here, is to answer properly to the following question that obsessed the feminist movements among the world: “how to conceive of the body without reducing its materiality to a fixed biological essence?”³

My intention is to highlight here the form of the essentialist argument of gender inequality in order to combat it by addressing an anti-essentialist Foucauldian critique, conceived genealogically. The formula that I propose for synthesising the essentialist argument is the next one: *Biological differences between sexes represent the grounds for legitimising gender inequalities.*

On the one hand, such an argument can be easily supported by relating it to social traditions and customs that accommodate individuals to different institutions, such as the family. Patriarchal perspectives on nuclear social entities, namely families as micro-groups, provide ideals based on exclusive masculine capacities: the power to ensure security through faith, physical resistance, the aptitude to fulfil operational tasks on the field, the tacit responsibility of material welfare in order to leave the mother to raise children, as vulnerable social actors. So, the first hidden-hypothesis of the essentialist argument is that the body of women is considered inferior according to social norms that stress standards of performance and efficiency by following masculine capacities as adequate to accomplish social functions. On the other hand, from this context, a second hidden-hypothesis emerges: biological functions are considered related to social functions. In order to reject the essentialist argument, one has to deconstruct, first, these premises. Both are operable with the condition of accepting that sex and gender are two isolated concepts, since the former is recognised as a biological category for targeting individuals, while the latter is determined as a social category. Their essence, therefore, is not overlaid nor should be correspondent. To drop essentialism, one should admit that both sex and gender are situated in a

³ To be consulted, for further reading, the article of Aurelia Armstrong, “Michel Foucault: Feminism”, available at: <http://www.iep.utm.edu/foucfem/> (accessed at the 20th September 2016)

difference of nature and degree: the fact that gender circumstantially becomes contingent with sex is that the first one is discursively produced as an identity that inverts a body with a predefined nature. Foucault's anti-essentialism argues that sex is irrelevant for the cultural and social construction: it is used to manipulate, in essentialist paradigms, the production of power connected with sexuality. Considered "normal" to be likewise, gender politically had to correspond to sex.

As a consequence, in my opinion, a series of working-hypothesis for the anti-essentialist argument can be reconstructed, in a Foucauldian acceptance, as it follows: (1) Social identity must confront two corporeal natures: a real one and a cultural one; (2) The real corporeal nature is conceived as the natural sex of an individual; (3) The cultural corporeal nature is conceived as the gender of an individual; (4) Gender is the effect of alternative practices of transforming a given body, with its natural sex, into a feminine or masculine body; it reflects, in fact, the subjectivation of these practices by an individual that accepts gender as result of a cultural constitution; (5) In the end, gender involves the process of normalising different behaviours which become, through self-discipline, the source for what might be called as stereotypes of feminine and masculine identity.

The most striking conclusion in an anti-essentialist argument, such as Foucault's, is that sexuality is a social construct, a product of historical, political and cultural practices, subsumed to a bio-power. It is an instrument of controlling the population in terms of management and production of life, through manifestations qualified as normal or abnormal. Significant is the fact that in this logic, what is considered abnormal is assimilated as unnatural⁴. One must subject itself to social behaviours claimed as normal. Hence, at least three problems derive from this concerns.

The first is that the woman social status is discursively operated as subordinated to the man's, paradoxically, based on the highest argument of associating them for the ethics of care: that of being givers of life and, consequently, appropriate actors for rising children, through empathy, dedication, tenderness. From this tension rises the following question: "Is something sufficient in the man's nature for the understanding of other men?"

Here is Foucault, arguing that

Nothing in man – not even his body – is sufficiently stable to serve as a basis for self recognition or for understanding other men (Foucault 1991, 87-8)

⁴ "Identities have the social function of organising bodies and behaviours and controlling, through a reward/punishment mechanism, the bodies and behaviours considered 'normal' and 'natural' in relation to those considered 'abnormal' and 'unnatural', therefore pathological or deviant or even criminal. It is power, through speech, language and society, which gives meaning to bodies, practices and desires." (Palazzani 2012, 43)

Answering negative obliges us to visit the possible alternative: “Is it the same situation for the female’s nature?” This issue is reconsidered in many feminist debates that reject essentialism because it prospects characteristics common to all women and this should individualise them as privileged or discriminated groups. According to Alison Stone, the feminist movement of the 1970s and 1980s accused essentialism of promoting false claims, presumably universal, about women and their femininity.

However, by the 1990s it had become apparent that the rejection of essentialism problematically undercut feminist politics, by denying that women have any shared characteristics that could motivate them to act together as a collectivity. An ‘anti-anti-essentialist’ current therefore crystallized, which sought to resuscitate some form of essentialism as apolitical necessity for feminism. (Stone 2004, 135-36)

At a first glimpse, in these terms, the principle issue is that the clash between essentialism and anti-essentialism reveals a co-dependent relationship: the latter appears as a reaction to the former, but the former is reinforced by the latter in order to justify common social movements of feminism. A potential way of solving this theoretical conflict is represented by the revaluation of feminism as project of “the relation between social power and the production of sexually differentiated bodies.” (Grosz 1994)⁵

The second problem is represented by compensating, through gender construction, what the modern regimes of power would address as the lack of the fulfilment and usefulness of a “docile body” that serves to the biopolitical control of population. In my opinion, this challenge can be also understood as a path for creating resistance to this disciplinary power, by overcoming the general perception that sex is bounded to gender. A critical inquiry in this matter is highly developed by Deveaux, according to whom the problem that I have previously enunciated splits, actually, in three different concerns, correspondent to three waves of Foucauldian literature in the feminist political theories.

One represents the reception of the “docile-bodies”, related to the notion of biopower; one is developed in spite of Foucault’s “antagonistic” model of power, in which power relations manifest not only as control and surveillance, but also as opportunity of resistance; and one asserts that “prevailing categories of sex identity are the result of the transition to a modern regime of power and a proliferation of subjectifying discourses on sexuality.” (Deveaux 1994, 223)

⁵ According to Armostrong, previously quoted, “Elizabeth Grosz argues that, unlike some other versions of poststructuralist theory which analyze the representation of bodies without due regard for their materiality, Foucault's insistence on the corporeal reality of the body which is directly molded by social and historical forces avoids the traditional gendered opposition between the body and culture.”

I will briefly criticize these three waves of the Foucauldian reception in the feminist literature in order to address a consistent explanation to the mechanisms in which genders should manage their mutual resistance when are considered effects of social, political and cultural power. The key, here, is to regard the particularities of the modern regime of power. It is minimalist, since it is based on the fact that individuals are disciplined not only by exterior factors, but also through a self-disciplinary attitude, inspired by their subjection to instruments of control and surveillance. This aspect is related to Foucault's thesis on Panopticonism – prisons, institutions of education, hospitals are built by placing in their center a turn of control from where the authoritative power can watch subjects placed all around, at equal distances from the center itself, without being watched – inspired by the analysis of Bentham's sketches.

This new political anatomy that conceives the mechanics of power as effects on the human body is specific to the modern paradigm of power: the body adopts the efficiency and the behavioral obedience that were predetermined through the standards of the power to which it is subjected. Reinforcing La Mettrie's conception on "the human-machine", Foucault observes that the individual is regarded as a utile and intelligible body, docility unifying here the "analyzable body and the manipulated body" of the individual (Foucault 1995, 137). Discipline invest subjects with self-control: knowing that are watch and sanctioned if they disrespect norms, individuals "police themselves" (Deveaux 1994, 225), meaning that they normalize dictated behavior.

According to Bartky, Foucault's argument on docile bodies is truth, with an amendment that the French philosopher does not seem to recognize or operate: there is the prejudgment that female bodies are more docile than male ones; furthermore, Deveaux regards Bartky's criticism as an attempt to picture, following Foucault's argument, a Panopticon for the woman's becoming, but in terms of liberating from a patriarchal power. Feminism is conceived, in these terms, as a Panopticon for those who adhere to it. Moreover, as Terry argues, modern bio-power inspired mechanisms of "parental surveillance" – controlling the population through laws and correspondent practices of health, birth, reproduction, parental care – which emerged in a "natal Panopticism" (Terry 1989). In other words, women internalized all these standards, without questioning or critically reacting to them. Foucault's observation is that where is power, resistance appears by default, and this should be reflected, in the context of gender inequality, as resistance of individual agents to practices and discourses of subordination. This Foucauldian assumption should be gathered to another one, stressing that power is not a question of possession, but a reflexive, circulated and productive construct, manifested in all human interaction. For a feminist project, these correlative statements take us in front of the impossibility to create a neutral world shared by genders. Deveaux revisits, in this sense, Fraser's critique that

“domination, viewed from above, is more likely to appear as equality” (Fraser 1989, 31) since “power is everywhere and ultimately nowhere” (32) and Hartsock’s argument that the Foucauldian omnipresence of power argues, actually, for the permanence of gender inequality. Therefore, Deveaux proposes a new context of thinking the possibility of resistance in a Foucauldian equation, based on its contribution to defining this reactive movement in an institutional framework:

Feminists need to look at the inner processes that condition women’s sense of freedom or choice in addition to external manifestations of power and dominance-and Foucault’s understanding of power is decidedly inadequate to this task. Women’s “freedom” does not simply refer to objective possibilities for maneuvering or resisting within a power dynamic but concerns whether a woman feels empowered in her specific context. (Deveaux 1994, 234)

Because my paper regards exclusively a critique of a Foucauldian genealogical construction of gender that takes into consideration the thesis of docile bodies, as well as the antagonist model of power understood as force and resistance, without opening a political debate on the consequences manifested by this perspective, I will not develop Deveaux’s previous point of view in this line. Yet, it seems relevant to me that resistance can be also interpreted as expression of disempowerment. Mainly, this lack of empowerment is owed to the association of natural sex with the so-considered rightful correspondent gender force and domination. This is a personal work-hypothesis: Foucault is not arguing it, even though this idea apparently represent a tacit premise of his thesis on empowerment, neither does Deveaux, who sanctions this relationship just in terms of operating it to distinguish power by violence and domination, in a Foucauldian logic.

To define male power as an inherently separable phenomenon from male force and domination, as Foucault would have us do, is to disregard the ways in which this power is frequently transformed into violence. A woman living in an abusive relationship feels the continuum of her partner’s anger and force, sees that the day-to-day exercise of power is the stuff out of which explosions of abuse and violence are made. Foucault’s distinction between power and violence, freedom and domination, do not allow us to ask whether this woman feels complicit or victimized, powerless or empowered to leave the situation of abuse. (Deveaux 1994, 236)

My main concern is that sexual identity is reproduced in gender identity in order to satisfy exigencies of the state apparatus, such as security or integrity. They become non-negotiable identities that should be regarded as effects of the process of subjectivation of different practices of self-creation and becoming. This

last aspect represented the third problem raised from the analysis of Foucault views on essentialist and anti-essentialist paradigms.

4. Conclusion

In the light of these observations, I conclude that this contrasting Foucauldian lecture could be embraced by any moderate feminist project addressing the revaluation of its premises. Feminism should be revisited not as an anti-essentialist reaction, blindly adopted by militant woman for their independency and liberty misunderstood, but as a form of social criticism through which gender construction and equality are conceived in terms of (dis)empowerment, selective appliance of knowledge practices and discourses, normalization of docile bodies, regardless their natural sex. Foucault's theories represent, at least for objectives of the present research, a significant tool for explaining the failures of the transition from sex to gender, manipulated in the social and political field as convenient for the state-apparatus, a shift that is questionable in what concerns its legitimacy and sufficient reasons. In this manner, I consider that the prejudgment of thinking gender inequality solvable through cultural revolutions of sexual liberation might be overcome.

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