

A reading of gender as a *dispositif*¹² of power³

Patricia Amigot Leache y Margot Pujal i Llombart*

Universidad Pública de Navarra y Universidad Autónoma de Barcelona

En este artículo reflexionamos sobre los diversos usos de la categoría de género y apostamos por una consideración del género como dispositivo de poder, es decir, subrayando su operatividad como productor y regulador de la vida social y subjetiva, en interacción con otros dispositivos. Partiendo de las herramientas foucaultianas para pensar y analizar las relaciones de poder y recogiendo la aportación crítica de Judith Butler, expondremos aspectos teóricos y analíticos de esta operatividad del género como dispositivo específico de poder; partiendo desde la operatividad macrosocial hasta los procesos psíquicos del poder, performativos e identitarios.

Palabras clave: poder, género, dispositivos, discursos, prácticas, sujeción, subjetividad

In this article we reflect on diverse uses of the category “gender,” and argue for a consideration of gender as a *dispositif* of power, that is, emphasizing its operationality as a producer and regulator of social and subjective life, in interaction with other *dispositifs*. Using foucauldian tools to think and analyze relations of power, and picking up on Judith Butler’s contributions in this domain, we offer theoretical and analytic approaches to gender’s operationality as a particular *dispositif* of power; from its macrosocial operationality as this is articulated in discourses and practices, to the microsocial normalization of subjects’ identities through intersubjectivity and the psychic dimension of social norms and practices.

Key words: power, gender, dispositifs, discourses, practices, subjection, subjectivity

¹ Foucault’s term *dispositif* combines discursive and material elements, thereby complicating the concept of discourse as that which is productive of subjects. Foucault explicitly defines *dispositif* in terms of a “decidedly heterogeneous group that includes discourses, institutions, architectural installations, regulatory decisions, laws, administrative policies, scientific claims, and philosophical, moral and philanthropic propositions. The *dispositif* itself is the connection that can be established between these elements.” (Foucault, 1977b).

² Translator’s note: whereas *dispositif* can be translated as *dispositivo* in Spanish, there is no corresponding term in English; it has been translated as “technology,” “device,” “deployment,” and “apparatus.” In order to retain the precise meaning of the term, this translation retains the French *dispositif* throughout.

³ This text has been translated from Spanish to English by Claudia Castaneda <castan2@gmail.com>

Introduction

In this article we focus on the sex/gender system in a particular way. In affiliation with a Foucauldian approach, we will develop a consideration of gender as a specific *dispositif* of power, noting its analytical and theoretical value, as well as some evidence of its empirical usefulness in various feminist analyses. Michel Foucault's concepts and reflections, which were always open to reconsideration and resistant to static or totalizing formulations, requires a critical use of his work, in line with the prior work of other authors. These authors, such as Judith Butler, have generated analyses of power according to Foucauldian coordinates, applying them in new arenas that were at best only superficially addressed by Foucault himself, such as the emotional, unconscious dimension of the subjective operations of power (Butler, 1997a).

As we have noted elsewhere (Amigot and Pujal, 2006), there is an extensive and fruitful debate concerning Foucault's usefulness for feminist theory and practice. Certainly, Michel Foucault never specifically examined women's subordination or the sources of female subjectivation (Hekman, 2004). According to other authors, Foucault fails to analyze how gender produces and supports strategies deployed by *dispositifs* of power in the process of elaborating his theoretical and analytical tools (Rodríguez Magda, 1999). Furthermore, it could be said that he reproduces sexism in his global analyses in a way that is endemic to Western political theory (Bartky,

1988). Paradoxically, he seems to fall into the universalizing trap that his own philosophical project theoretically rejected, due to his "non-gendered vision of the body and his assumption of masculine sexuality as an analytic model" (McNay, 1992: 35). Perhaps, as Diana Fuss ironically notes, his work reveals a "desire not to know about women" (Fuss, 1989: 107). The author himself offered fleeting evidence of this blindness in an interview when he was asked about the existence of a major repression of women's sexuality: "these different types of repression have varied over decades, but I cannot say that I have found fundamental differences with regard to women and men. But I am a man" (Foucault, 1975b: 778-779).

Nevertheless, and recognizing this *androcentrism*, we believe that his work offers irreplaceable tools for understanding the relations of power – its reproduction and transformation. Nothing prevents us from *problematizing* his work from the perspective of gender in order to reuse his undeniable contribution to social thought and analysis. In fact, the author himself fled from *totalizations* and from dogmatic pretensions and emphasized the heterogeneity of relations of power, always situating them socio-historically, in specific contexts where discursive and non-discursive practices are regulated.

In this sense, Foucault's work has been and continues to be feminism's *strategic ally* in the understanding and exploration of contemporary relations of power, and a resource for problematizing limitations and omissions in that

very work. Even considering feminist criticisms, Foucault has become a privileged interlocutor in many theoretical developments concerning power as well as subjectivity. Since the publication of important books such as *Feminism and Foucault* (Diamond and Quinby, 1988) in the 1980s, feminist theory has deepened its analyses of power together with subjectivity, offering extremely important understandings of the body as a site of power, and in recent years, addressing the emotional and unconscious dimensions that are implicated in the incorporation of norms and the subjective (im)possibilities that this incorporation implies.

On the uses of the concept of gender

We consider it important to begin this article with a review and discussion concerning feminist uses of the concept of gender. This will allow us to frame our view and argue for the *relevance of the analytic of power in studies of gender*. We suggest that this category, gender, continues to have a strategic importance, under certain conditions, for feminist theory and practice. The category of gender continues to be used, frequently, in an unspecific way, as a catchall or umbrella term that is constructed in erroneously commonsense or confused ways. The resulting effects could, in our view, generate more confusion than new points of view and, on the other hand, could reduce the potential of gender as a concept to a merely descriptive, positivist complement to sex. This would restrict its potential for increasing the intelligibility of relations of power in contemporary social relations. could lead, in turn, to the

abandonment of the category: it would come to be seen as a way of maintaining the dualism that underlies the sex/gender distinction, on one hand, and incapable of accounting for the multiplicity of oppressive relations, on the other.

It seems to us that the theoretical remains extremely useful and necessary so long as we: a) identify the specific theoretical use we are making of the category of gender, b) depart from the inadequate feminist use of gender in a simple descriptive, positivist and psychologistic use, and c) connect the relational category of gender with the polymorphic dimension of relations of power in contemporary society, in terms of subjectivation, corporealization, and subjection (Foucault, 1975a; Butler, 1997a; Haraway, 1995). It can be used as a critical feminist analytical perspective, even as it is connected, contextualized, and expanded through other categories such as that of “situated experience” proposed by Carme Adán (2006), and with other *dispositifs* of power (class, ethnicity, sexuality, age, nationality, etc.) that operate to produce inequalities, as post-colonial feminism, among others, has shown (Anzaldúa, 1987; see also Lorde 2003; Mohanty, 1995; Moraga 1981; Sandoval, 1995; Spivak, 1985, Trinh, 1989).

A synthetic approach to the different uses of the category of gender

As Adán (2006) argues, paraphrasing Nicholson (1994), there are two fundamental ways of making use of gender. The first considers gender as the full group of cultural qualities that are

established for a given sex. The second understand gender as a term that accounts for social constructs implied in the masculine/feminine relation, including those that refer to the *construction of sex itself*.

The first use, otherwise known as the “sex/gender system,” is based on Gayle Rubin’s classic work *The Traffic in Women* (1975). As Adán (2006) notes, while recognizing Rubin’s important contribution, her approach evidences one of the key problems in the feminist debate: gender is made complementary to sex rather than effecting its displacement. Instead of overcoming dualisms, this use of the category retains them in a latent form. This problem arises, as Nicholson suggests, when gender is understood as being superimposed on sex.

The second use, *gender as an analytic category*, comes primarily from Joan Scott’s (1986) theoretical work, which offers the following definition: “...gender is a constitutive element in social relations based in differences that distinguish the sexes and gender is a primary form of significant relations of power.” This double definition marks out the routes of access to the conceptual framework that the term gender is purported to signify; it entails the unveiling of all of the modes of reciprocal signification that obtain between gender and power (Adán, 2006).

We include in this second use the work of authors like Judith Butler or Teresa de Lauretis, who have exhaustively addressed the issue of power

and who, inspired by Foucauldian theory, have spoken of *technologies and dispositifs of gender* as producers of relations, subjectivities, and even of that which we call sex, sexual difference and sexuality (Butler, 1990; De Lauretis, 1987). From a Butlerian perspective, the use of gender as an *analytic category* requires making intelligible social practices and relations of power that produce identities and bodies and to attend to their historical and social specificities: to elucidate the homogenization of the term “woman” through always situated and limited genealogies of gender’s ontology (Butler, 1990).

Nevertheless, and parallel to these two major uses of the category, since the 1990s a certain *skepticism* about gender grew in the form of lack of trust in its explanatory capacity, including radical proposals for its deconstruction and theoretical as well as practical oblivion. It is true that certain uses of the category tend toward reification, the maintenance of modern dualisms, and the obliteration of power relations, as these are ignored when sex is reified as a cause. But rather than condemning the theoretical category of gender to disuse, it is important to make explicit the terms that are subsumed within it to avoid such traps. In this sense, feminist theory needs to make evident the terms and dimensions that are included in the category of gender in every analytical situation, without taking for granted androcentric epistemological traditions and inertias that disconnect it from power relations and reduce to a

mere superimposition that becomes secondary to sex.

We suggest that a reading of gender as a *dispositif* of power allows a non-reifying use of this category and offers great potential for analyzing the heterogeneity of situations and processes of women's domination, where both male and female identities and the relations between individuals are socio-historically produced and regulated. This approach allows us to avoid an essentialist perspective on subjectivity and sex, and to address *experience* and the reiterated *effects* of domination at both micro- and macro-social levels as well.

An approach to gender as a *dispositif* of power

Foucault's work tends to be the object of diverse periodizations that sequentially order frames of reference, objects of analysis, and theoretical work. Perhaps the most common approach establishes an archaeological phase followed by a genealogical one, and ends with Foucault's work on the subject and the practices of the self associated with ethics and aesthetics. Similarly, "diverse" Foucault's are identified, such as the structuralist or the poststructuralist, or he is included in an oversimplified and mistaken way under the label of postmodernism (Rodríguez Magda, 1999). It seems obvious that Foucault, nevertheless, is an author who resists classification and who requires a constant reconsideration of his previous work. In his evolution, his objects of interest become more complex as they are integrated in a spiral that opens up new fields of analysis and establishes new

connections and intensities between the issues addressed.

Three topics emerge as elements of progressive attention in his work: discursive formations, relations of power, and processes of subjectivation. While each one appears to be displaced in this process, as his focus shifts, the emphases and discontinuities are still linked together. For example, Foucault's structuralist analyses on discursive formations are displaced by genealogical analysis that underline the materiality of discourses but also re-link them to various strategies of power. So too, his conclusions on "the death of man," and his view on the processes of subjectivation of "docile bodies" are displaced in the later years by his consideration of the processes of subjective and active agents according to which an individual constitutes itself as a subject.

This progression in Foucault's work is influenced in part by new kinds of struggle, such as feminist or homosexual movements, which politicize the everyday. Foucault recognized that new political struggles articulated around and after '68 allowed him to "see the concrete face of power" and to incorporate what had remained until then outside of political analysis (Foucault, 1973:428). It is at this moment that the issue of power acquires great intensity in his work: he formulates a new paradigm, the *strategic*, in contrast to the *juridical* through which power had been (and still is) traditionally thought. Foucault developed a complex and wide-ranging work that allows for a different way of thinking: it emphasizes the

productive nature of power and insists on power/knowledge and the political economy of truth, while making new use of concepts such as discipline and norm, or the invention of terms such as biopower, with its two sides: anatamopolitics and biopolitics, or governmentality. He deployed a whole conceptual and analytic grid to make the heterogeneous relations of power intelligible and visible in a new way.

We do not aim to review his contributions exhaustively here, but rather use them as a conceptual and analytical framework for the operativity of gender. We will highlight, therefore, the most important aspects of his work. The notion of the *dispositif* allows us to consider heterogeneous and variable elements that operate to produce and regulate sexual identities and the subordination of women. Basically, we will refer to discursive and non-discursive practices and to technologies or practices of the self that Foucault identified as interacting with techniques of domination. The analysis of gender as a *dispositif* of power and the analysis of gendered power relations presuppose, in our understanding, part of what Foucault called a “critical ontology of our own selves.” That is, these forms of analysis problematize what we are and “seek[] to reach as far as possible for the undefined work of freedom itself” (Foucault, 1984c). We suggest that gender as a *dispositif* of power involves two fundamental and interrelated operations: on one hand, the production of the sexual dichotomy and of the subjectivities linked to it; and on the other hand, the production and regulation of power relations

between men and women. This specification may serve to avoid some problematic simplifications. In the first place, it helps us to understand that both men and women, as well as the existence of the dichotomy itself, are configured in networks of power; every subject, following Foucault, is “subject to” his or her socio-historical grid. Secondly, it helps us to understand that although “power is everywhere,” the *dispositif* of gender operates, in different ways, to subordinate women, even as this is forgotten in some analytics of power. At the same time, gender always appears in interaction with other *dispositifs* of inequality (class, ethnicity, sexuality, age, nationality, etc.) and that interaction configures specific experiences. This last assertion prevents us from forgetting the heterogeneity that exists among women in their particular situations.

1. The subject’s historicity and discursive intelligibility

Foucault addresses the insertion of subjects in historical “truth games” in his thesis on the history of insanity (*Madness and Civilization*) (1961), and proposes it as well, in a different way, in *The Order of Things* (1966). Both the discursive demarcations –*partages*– of madness and the objectivation of “man” established by the human sciences in the nineteenth century imply a complex production of the forms of the subject in historical truth games. It is important to note this effect of scientific and academic discourses because they appear to be *universal and neutral*. Furthermore, they operate in an *androcentric* manner: a sexual construction

lurked behind modern thought on the subject and its definition of the normative that equated the masculine with the neutral and universal, and the feminine (and other figures of the “other”) with the particular and dependent. The nature/culture dichotomy was reproduced alongside the masculine/feminine, where the feminine appeared particularly strongly linked to naturalized and essentialized elements. That which was to be avoided in the subject (irrationality, emotionality, corporality, etc.) was placed on the side of the feminine.

This had the effect of vastly proscribing the feminine, as the “nature” side was less capable of transcending materiality, and consequently more subject to a defining naturalized essence. As we will see, this discursive effect has to do with the *pragmatic dimension* of discourses and with the mechanisms that regulate sites of enunciation, elaboration and authority for constructing meaning – that is, with the *political economy of truth*.

In *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, Foucault aimed to clarify the rules of the formation of discourses. He distinguishes his archaeology from the analysis of language – a finite system that authorizes an infinite number of possible enunciations. He considers the archaeology to be an analysis centered on the more limited field of *historically produced* enunciations, highlighting their materiality and specificity (Foucault, 1969). Various authors have emphasized the *pragmatic* dimension of the archaeology and have explored its connections to the work of Wittgenstein, Austin or

Searle (Dreyfus & Rabinow, 1982) (Larrauri, 1999). Foucault himself recognized this coincidence: the terms *enunciation* and *speech act* are very similar; but he emphasizes that his analysis of discourse is more explicitly linked to historical contexts and, therefore, related to *social practices and relations of power* (Foucault, 1974).

The performative function of discourses of identity and the productive operativity of the concepts of sex and gender have been objects of important feminist analyses. The limits of intelligibility that they involve have been specifically explored by Judith Butler in order to denounce the (im)possibilities of social intelligibility for some subjects. According to her, the categories man and woman exercise a constructive operation that, problematized, becomes an exercise of “natural” exclusion. These categories, with historically naturalized contents, exclude an abject and invisible space occupied by those who subvert or are inadequate to the established discursive and practical order (Butler, 1990).

According to Foucault, with the emergence of the human sciences, the subject is objectified as an individual with *functions* that imply the possibility of determining *norms* of adjustment to them. Norms operate as natural rules that indicate whether the individual’s functioning is adequate or pathological. Given their productive dimension, norms regulate the functioning of the whole social body. As Foucault notes, from the eighteenth century onwards, it is not the law but the norm that

is a key element of the *dispositifs* of power. In relation to this, it is clear that femininity has been the object of a normalizing discursive construction for many centuries in the West. The reproductive *function*, for example, has been, and continues to be, a fundamental function of *normal* femininity.

The discourses that Foucault addressed, principally those of the human sciences, are inserted in regimes of historical truth making: they constitute a politics of truth that configure the objects of which they speak. Discursive practices, furthermore, imply a definition of the legitimacy of the subjects of knowledge, and delimit the objects and the norms of production and validation of knowledge. The idea of the *regime of power/knowledge* addresses this interrelation between one and the other. Discursive practices have established complex circular relations with other practices, such as disciplinary ones, in a system of mutual reinforcement: a) the *dispositifs* of power have determined the conditions of “true” discourses and have produced knowledge in their very functioning; and b) the development of knowledges has allowed for the increase of regulatory and disciplinary elements.

The genealogical analysis of the relation between knowledges and disciplinary practices has resulted in a very important exploration of the emergence of the subject “woman” in medical, psychiatric, and educational discourses, and in related institutional practices. Discourses of women’s nature are especially relevant in the production of “adequate” female bodies and

subjectivities. The idea of the regime of power/knowledge allows a critical look at scientific as well as religious or everyday narratives and discourses.

2. The regulation of bodies and populations: biopower and gender

a. On the reach of relations of power

Foucault situates the fundamental operativity of power in spaces otherwise habitually excluded from the political. In this way, he insists that power relations produce and regulate everyday practices. The term *microphysics* names the capillary reach that power relations gain in the social field. Due to this, struggles such as those that question “the ways of loving, the mode of sexual repression, or the prohibition against abortion,” are “explicitly political” (Foucault, 1973: 428). Both *Discipline and Punish* and *The History of Sexuality* describe these *dispositifs* of power that reach into and cross over bodies (Foucault, 1975a; 1976). Power establishes regulated dispositions and courses of action. Desires and pleasures also play in its networks: “desires are created and pleasures provoked...and there it is necessary to surprise it – power – and elaborate an analysis” (Foucault, 1975b: 772).

In this productive dimension of power, the individual becomes a “subjected” subject. Power – whether in its operations of discursive demarcation and construction of objects/subjects, or in the practices that are interrelated with them – establishes specific and historical processes of

subjectivation. The detailed Foucauldian characterization of *dispositifs* of power that developed in the most recent centuries that are prolific in their technics of normalization and control, provides tools for analyzing specifically *gendered* processes of normalization and control.

Conceived as a strategic *dispositif*, power becomes pertinent – now going further than Foucault – as a way of addressing the configuration of the sexed subject in relations of power that exceed rational or voluntarist dimensions. It provokes an analysis of sedimented and embodied practices without resorting to essentialist elements; it allows us to attend to the historical processes that produce such ontologies. *Genealogy*, the form of history that seeks to account for the constitution of objects and subjects, does not posit a transcendent subject in relation to the field of events, but rather allows consideration of the regularities and effects produced by such constitution.⁴ The notion of genealogy makes it possible to politicize the historical processes of the constitution of the feminine and the masculine; what Judith Butler has named a “genealogy of the ontology of gender” (Butler, 1990, p. 66).

Genealogical analysis allows for the multidimensional character of power and consideration of intersectionality with other

⁴ With regard to this, Foucault notes that “it is important not to do with the event what has been done with structure. It is not a matter of situating everything on one plane, which would be that of the event, but rather to consider that there exists a whole stratification of types of different events that have neither the same importance nor the same chronological span, nor the same capacity to produce effects (Foucault, 1978, p.221) (our emphasis). First Published in the journal *L’Arc*. N° 70.

dispositifs of power (class, ethnicity, sexuality, age, nationality, etc.) that inevitably interact with gender to form hybrid identities such as those identified by post-colonial feminism; thereby avoiding a homogenizing gaze directed at women, which is simultaneously generative of the subaltern within the categories of imperialism and colonialism, as many authors have argued (Anzaldúa, 1987; Lorde, 2003; Mohanty, 1995; Moraga, 1981; Sandoval, 1995; Spivak, 1985; Trinh T. Minh-ha, 1989, etc.).

b. Bodily practices

At the beginning of the 1970’s, Foucault emphasized power’s productive microphysics. This production and regulation finds in the term *dispositif* the general operator that ties together a multitude of techniques and tactics in a historical technology. In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault analyzes the emergence of the modern prison, exploring significant shifts in the system of punishment. The spectacle of torture becomes, at the end of the eighteenth century, a punishment that continues to take the body as its object, but no longer as a surface that it marks with pain and physical suffering. The humanization of punishment involves the development of a *technology for the regulation of bodies*, linked in complex ways to various mutually enabled institutions, an *anatamopolitics* whose effects are not to produce suffering but rather to regulate through subjection and to produce that which is adequate to various institutional settings (1975a).

This apparent humanization hides a new technological involvement of power, which

incorporates the law into the body: it disciplines and normalizes. A machinery of agents who scrutinize the danger and the possibility of reinserting/healing will begin the discursive elaboration of normality/abnormality, will multiply in parallel trials, examinations and uninterrupted surveillance that, at the same time, will be the scene in which a new knowledge takes hold. A profusion of codes, of instructions integrated into *dispositifs* that regulate spaces, gazes and surveillance, time and positions, begin to develop in interconnected social sites.

In this sense, sexual difference is an element that disciplinary *dispositifs* have regulated in a *specific manner*. Nevertheless, Foucault made reference to “a neutral body, by which one must not be fooled, as it is a masculine body” (Le Blanc, 2004:17). Rosi Braidotti, likewise, argues that Foucault never locates the female body as the site of one of the most internal and operational divisions in our society and consequently, too, one of the most persistent forms of exclusion. Sexual difference, simply put, does not play a role in Foucault’s universe, where the technology of the subject refers to a “human” subject that is desexualized and general (Braidotti, 1991).

At the same time, this limitation in Foucault’s analysis has been especially suggestive for feminist research. The identification of “gender blindness” in thought about the disciplinary politics of the body has stimulated analyses about the disciplining of women’s bodies. Among analyses of the practices that subject and shape the body, Susan

Bordo’s work on agoraphobia and female anorexia (1988, 1993)—considered by the author as the embodied crystallization of particular cultural imperatives and practices of power—stands out; along with Sandra Lee Bartky’s work that analyzes contemporary aesthetic practices as disciplinary practices that subject women, while highlighting the active dimensions of this subjection (Bartky, 1988, 1990).

Dispositifs of power are not neutral from a gendered viewpoint and must make visible the processes of women’s subordination.⁵ As the work we have identified show, female bodies have been and continue to be objects of normalizing techniques of the body that vary according to different contexts. As we have noted elsewhere, in the Franco regime in Spain, women’s everyday life was strictly regulated in terms of time and space, configuring a kind of confinement – a domestic confinement – with particular characteristics that Foucault did not address in his analysis of institutions (Amigot, 2005). One of the main failings of the *disciplinary model* is that it surreptitiously accepts the division between public and private, minimizing the latter to make of it a mere reflection of the first (Rodríguez Magda, 1999). An analysis of disciplines, spaces and corporeal mobilities can be very fruitful in making

⁵ Such as the regulation of time and space in feminine enclosure in the Western context in the nineteenth- and twentieth centuries, or the disciplinarization of the body advocated by medical precepts (use of corsets and other forms of restriction on mobility, enforced sedentarism, the pathologization of other bodily functions, etc.), as well as religious ones (the incitement to vigilance with regard to the smallest transgression by women as sinners and objects of sin), and social ones (indoctrination, codes, advice, suggestions and norms for proper femininity).

visible the mechanisms that regulate gestures, postures, physical appearance, surgeries, etc.: control, surveillance, and interventions in the body that make it adequately feminine.

**c. Social functions and social regulations:
*the sexual crossroads***

The idea that from the end of the eighteenth century, power directs itself, for the first time in history, toward the production and regulation of life—biopower—, aimed at both the individual body and the species-body (Foucault, 1976), allows us to approach, as we have noted, the forms that the *dispositif* of gender uses to configure proper feminine bodies; but also to locate in *women* the *reproductive function* and the *care of the population*. The idea of biopower is crucial for de-essentializing female identities and functions, and for interrogating any generic “destiny.” The two faces of biopower, *anatamopolitics* (of the individual) and *biopolitics* (of the species-body), find a nexus or hinge in the *dispositif* of sexuality.

Beginning with *The History of Sexuality*, the female body appears as a strategic space, a blank site for the exercise of biopower, that is subject to a progressive system of objectivation and control by medical and psychological discourses. Foucault names this the *hystericization of the female body*. This pathologization of the body is linked to the responsibility required of women to ensure children’s health, the maintenance of the institution of the family, and the health of the society (Foucault, 1976)—control related to the social

production of the “sexual division of labor” identified in feminist analyses. The importance given to the regulation of masculine and feminine positions as relations of power leads Foucault to propose a future volume of the *History of Sexuality* that he would never write (Foucault, 1977a:261).

Nonetheless, failings can be found here as well in Foucault’s work that, at the same time, can stimulate new lines of investigation. First, there is the analysis of how the idea of gender lies at the heart of biopolitics and the idea of the species-body; how bio-power relies on and consolidates the sexual division of labor (Rodríguez Magda, 1999); this requires a *reverse analysis* similar to Carol Pateman’s on the social contract, in which she argues that the contract is supported by a *previous sexual pact* that excludes and naturalizes women (Pateman, 1988). Second, with regard to the idea of biopower, there is the analysis of how policy regulating the life of populations has used the family as an instrument and has been directed very significantly at women.

The production of sexuality is one of the issues that has been given a great deal of attention in feminist readings. Foucault argues that “sexuality was defined ‘by nature’ as: a domain penetrable by pathological processes, and that therefore required therapeutic or normalizing interventions [...] (Foucault, 1976: 86). This definition “by nature” has been identified in feminist thought as one of the main *dispositifs* specific to female subordination. If we address the construction of the feminine, the process described

by the author seems to be in greater operation: the *truth* described women in terms of their bodily nature and reproductive function, less capable than men of transcending the truth of their nature and, therefore, more susceptible to pathology and to normalizing intervention.

As a thread of the argument in *The History of Sexuality*, Foucault establishes the *productive incitement* that the *dispositif* of sexuality produces: sexuality, understood schematically, is not repressed but rather the object of intense incitement. But, the “policing of enunciations” that does not prohibit but rather incites inquiry concerning sex, has it been a-gendered historically? And Foucault’s *history of the subject of desire* that analyzes the growing link between truth and sex from the beginning of the sixteenth century, does it not forget the particularities linked to sexual difference? It would be appropriate to qualify Foucault insofar as many discourses have established *less* possibility for stubborn inquiry by female subjects into truth as it is linked to their sex, than for truth’s over-determined “naturalization” of that sex.

That “Western man has been seen for three centuries attached to the task of saying everything about sex,” as Foucault writes in *The Will to Knowledge*, opens up the question of whether this intense incitement has functioned in exactly the same way for women. We suspect that this link between desire and sex does not speak exactly to the configuration of the feminine, given that femininity has been historically deprived of the characteristics of an actively desiring subject and

has tended to configure itself as the *object of the other’s desire*.

Probably, discursive formations and practical *dispositifs* have constructed a *truth* of sex and of female sexuality without a desiring subject – more object than subject –, or with a pathologically desiring subject. The “truth” of sex in women is not shifted so much toward desire as toward a biological and maternal function. Women have seen their sexuality as linked, on one hand, to reproduction without pleasure,⁶ and on the other, to pathology (hysteria, criminalization). Certain historical *dispositifs* have excised both desire and pleasure from feminine sexuality. As Judith Butler notes, “*asexuality* is something that is at times united with the dominant conception of the heterosexual woman” (Butler, 1997b: 217).

In any case, the Foucauldian perspective on sexuality as the effects produced in bodies, behaviors, and social relations – and not something spontaneous or natural –, has been used by feminist theory for its de-essentializing effects. Feminist theory has also extended this notion of the *dispositif* of sexuality to the *dispositif* of *gender*, understanding that to “ask of sex the question of what we are,” in addition to being an interrogation of sexuality, is a *construction of the subjective truth in the ascription of the sexual*. The consideration of gender as a “*dispositif*” or “technology” constitutes, both as practical analysis and theoretical elaboration, one of the most interesting and

⁶ As Laqueur notes with regard to the “discovery” of the female orgasm was not necessary for procreation (Laqueur, 1994).

suggestive contributions to feminist theory in, for example, the work of Judith Butler and Teresa de Lauretis.

d. States of domination

The relations of power that traverse the social field imply a consideration of resistance. But relations of power, which are mobile and reversible, can nevertheless become fixed in such a way that the margins for action are extremely limited. Foucault named such situations *states of domination*; in them, relations of power are perpetually asymmetrical. As an example, he offers the conjugal structure of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in which “it can not be said that there was only male power: the woman could do a series of things: trick him, take money from him, reject him sexually. Nevertheless, she suffered a state of domination insofar as all of this did not constitute in the end more than a certain number of tricks that never changed the situation” (Foucault, 1984b: 720-21).

In states of domination it is difficult for forms of resistance to be effective or to strategically multiply themselves. In these situations, dispersed and heteromorphic processes and sites of power have been transformed by global strategies. Foucault does not elaborate on the decisive implications that such situations could have for transformation, but he does indicate the necessity, in such cases, of *processes of liberation* (1984b).

Still, some years earlier, the author argued that “power can be come from below,” that there is

no “general matrix for a global opposition between dominators and dominated” (Foucault, 1976); great dominations are the hegemonic effects sustained in that extensive microphysics of power. In that moment of his work, Foucault identifies the “law of double conditioning” as a characteristic of power: no strategy could ensure global effects if it did not rely on the precise and tenuous relations that serve it.

This explicit refusal to establish a distinction between dominators and dominated has provoked much feminist criticism. We would like to make two points: first, that his insistence on the operativity of “precise and tenuous relations,” rather than a simple global strategy of domination, is very useful for addressing practical processes of inequality and their everyday implications. Second, that the further development of his work, with its idea of *governmentality*, for example, turns the microphysical view of power in the direction of a more exhaustive consideration of forms of government, including centralized and hegemonic ones.

Certainly, he did not effectively analyze a situation of domination such as the one that regulates the production of the sexes and the relation between them. He tended to consider every kind of global domination as the *final* form of power – and not to analyze it (Foucault, 1976), such as, for example, patriarchal power. In addition, his tendency to make *distinctions*, such as those he establishes between relations of power and violent relations, or between relations of power and slavery

(Foucault, 1982a), obscure any consideration of situations of women's oppression.

However, a space of important inquiry opens up here, around the recognition of a *gradation* in power relations (at one end mobile relations, at the other states of domination, violence or slavery) in which there may be a major or minor limit on what is possible. There are some situations that determine more than others and these are, precisely, many of those experienced by women: they have been and are free, but less than others. It would be interesting to analyze the elements that coincide, intensify, or relieve situations of domination; and, in that way, to qualify the differences in power between groups of women and not to always equate inequality with a global and homogeneous situation of gender domination.

3. The subjective operativity of power

a. *Practices of the self*

The Foucauldian intent to understand how the experience of sexuality was constituted in modern western societies unravels as it proceeds. It becomes a *genealogy of the western subject* open to new elements of study. It returns to Greco-Latin civilizations and turns its interest toward forms of self-constitution. The *practices of the self* are those operations that individuals can perform on themselves – and are incited to enact by the social contexts to which they belong – to transform themselves or to reach some kind of state of perfection (Foucault, 1981). Those practices that allude to the “modalities of relation with oneself

through which the individual constitutes himself and recognizes himself as a subject” (Foucault, 1984a: 12). These techniques are always established in a historical context and allude to the *active dimension* of the individual, but they are never invented by the individual alone (Foucault, 1984b).

From the beginning, Foucault analyzed different modes of the historical constitution of subjects (*discursive objectivation*, *partages*, the *disciplining* of the body); in his later work he elaborated the techniques that the individual used on himself. From historical analysis of the techniques established by Christianity—the *examination* and *the confession*—, in which the subject is interpellated and forced to speak his internal truth, the author returns to Greco-Roman antiquity in which other *truth games* establish ways of treating the self as an object. In Antiquity, the truth of the subject is not an *a priori* interiority, but rather the *effect of a process*, of a constant exercise with oneself. This type of practice, which Foucault links with the birth of *ethics*, allows for greater autonomy and problematizing reflection. And it is at this point that he speaks of “practices of freedom.”

Foucault suggests that practices of the self differ in the ways they link with *normative codes*: some forms of subjectivation oriented towards codes and others towards ethics. That is, there are techniques that obey codes, and techniques that *problematize* experiences as continual working on the self. The latter are linked to possibilities for transforming and creating new forms of existence.

Readings of these approaches from a feminist theoretical perspective have increased in recent years (Allen, 2004: 235). There is an explicit assessment of these works because they introduce a dimension of *agency* that is obliterated in the concept of the *docile body* (McNay, 1992), and because they underline the possibility of exercising freedom, although always situated in terms of an exercise of emancipation or transformation (Sawicki, 1996; McNay, 2000). The fact that the practices of the self are conditioned on the socio-historical matrix makes it possible to consider women's agency within specific and multiple social constraints. Combining the attention to various *dispositifs* of power with the attention to women's creative potential, it becomes possible to analyze in a non-schematic way diverse and heterogeneous sites of oppression as well as diverse ways of subverting and modifying them.

However, the techniques of the self in Greek culture that Foucault studies, whose stylization originates in an ethics and aesthetics, refer to a masculine model. This model proposes the practice of domination of the self by a subject *who dominates others*, a subject who must learn to dominate and care for himself *precisely because* he must dominate others. The "uses of pleasures" and the "care of the self" sustain themselves within a structure of domination. In this structure it is women, with other social groups, who occupy the position of the dominated. Probably it is "the feminine that acts as a dialectical element and regulator of the position of the free subject"

(Rodríguez Magda, 1999:254). The relation with youths, for example, that requires a sexual practice primarily problematized in classical Greece, is situated on the axis of an asymmetrical relation: the active/passive. In contrast with the youths, whose passivity is transitory, women are *essentially* passive. They find themselves excluded from the problematization that stylizes existence.

Foucault does not analyze, therefore, something that he reveals, paradoxically, in *The Uses of Pleasure* (1984a). He notes that the free male, insofar as he had authority and would presumably exercise it in his domination of the self, should limit his sexual options. The female should simply obey. We see, therefore, how two different positions of *power* imply very different possibilities with regard to the care of the self. This interaction between the practices of the self and positions of power remains as a field of inquiry and study. Only noted by Foucault, the relation between these practices and techniques of domination (1988) could *situate* the agency of subjects and find in it the effect of more extensive strategies of power. This point, obscure in his work, becomes especially relevant for feminist politics. If the operativity of power converts us into agents of our own subjection, when might this activity on ourselves become a creative and liberating one? When might the practice of the self respond to strategies of self-subjection or self-vigilance? The exploration of these questions may allow us to consider the implication of women in the production of our own subject and, simultaneously, the capacity to

transform it, avoiding both victimization and guilt. We will return to this point through Judith Butler's work.

In exploring this space that links techniques of domination and practices of the self, but also practices of the self and practices of freedom, we find that a consideration of intersubjectivity is very relevant; something that is certainly diffuse in Foucault's analysis. First, we see that the processes of the constitution of subjectivity and embodied effects that hegemonic *dispositifs* produce work precisely *through* intersubjectivity. Second, this assertion leads us to think of intersubjectivity as a site of possibility for the transformation of power relations. The rules that regulate truth games are never individual or transcendent: they are enacted and realized in practices whose regulation exceeds individuals. An intersubjective practice that problematizes configured sexual identities and the truth games in which they are inscribed, fractures and permits resignification and transformation. Intersubjective practice thereby becomes a site of "empowerment" and of the possibility of engaging in practices of liberation for groups of women. Feminism's political "wisdom" has consisted fundamentally of this.

b. The psychic life of power⁷

As we have noted above, Judith Butler takes a further step in the analysis undertaken by Foucault concerning the operativity of power in the subjective realm. As we cited above, Foucault

conceived of power as a producer of desires, for example, but he does not elaborate on the emotional dimensions of this production. Butler, in her analysis of the *dispositif* of gender, offers an explicit analysis of power in relation to the subjective dimension, which is not transparent but rather full of embodied or opaque desires and motivations (Pujal, 2003). This analysis seeks to make visible the *corporealization* of power effects, in the sense of addressing the existence of complex affective and unconscious processes— the psychic life of power," in Butler's words (1997a). This implies an analysis of the historic nature of the subject, including that which exceeds the discursive in particular historical moments. In this sense, Butler's analysis can be interpreted as a step toward the articulation of the techniques of domination and of the self, as well as their respective forms of resistance, given that her analysis emphasizes the paradox that subjection is the necessary *condition* of resistance and freedom, rather than its opposite.

We wish to highlight from *The Psychic Life of Power* (1997a) three axes that constitute the individual as a social subject who is capable of transforming her own socio-historical condition to some degree. We have named the three axes (Pujal, 2006):

- Fundamental vulnerability of the human being as a social subject
- Conscience, self-policing and identity
- Constitutive melancholia as an affective instability

⁷ The title is taken from Butler, 1990.

• *Fundamental vulnerability of the human being as a social subject*

The central concept that Butler develops is that of *subjection*, which defines both the process of being subject to power and the process of becoming a subject. No subject—no sexed-subject from the perspective of gender—can emerge without a passionate tie to those on whom it depends in an essential manner (although the dependence may sustain itself through a negative passion). We subject ourselves in order to exist, and in this process a passionate tie to subjection emerges, Butler would say. In order to survive psychically and socially there must be dependence and the formation of ties, because there is no way of not loving when love is yoked to basic necessities. Since subjection makes existence possible, that existence becomes unconsciously conditioned to subjection.

In this sense, the inherent dependence of every being, of women and men, makes that being vulnerable to a specific form of subordination and exploitation. The desire to survive, the desire to “be,” is an eminently exploitable desire that means: “I prefer to exist in subordination than not to exist.” On the other hand, the characteristic of this impassioned tie to subjection that makes possible the self and its existence is its invisibility. That is, it becomes unconscious in the course of its formation, partially negated as it incorporates itself into the subject that constitutes it. Consequently, the “I” comes into being founded on repudiation. The “I” sees itself threatened, at an essential level,

by the phantasm of the reappearance of this passionate tie to subjection, and is condemned to re-enact that tie in the unconscious. This process therefore involves a traumatic repetition of that which is repudiated, a negation and re-enactment of dependence that generates suffering. Therefore, the “I” is dynamic, fragmented and modulated by a constant tension of disequilibrium.

We, men and women, become a body that is born as a subject when it is constituted as a social subject in a way that is invisible to us. But the still potent *Sexual Contract* that Pateman (1988) brilliantly made visible, is a condition that also marks a difference between the sexes in this matter, given that the association of women with nature through discursive and non-discursive practices constitute her and have constituted her as having an “extra” dependence in relation to the male and therefore also as subject to an “extra” subjection and vulnerability in the process of subjection/constitution.

It is in this sense that we argue that, as gendered subjects, we can only come to survive, exist, or “be” subordinated to the specific category of gender that interpellates us (always in conjunction in a specific way with other categories such as class, age, ethnicity, etc.), and inheriting that passionate tie that is created in the relational process of care and social interpellation of our constitution. This tie inevitably leads us in diverse ways to stubbornly desire to be masculine or feminine without knowing it fully (and without having to know what it means) and therefore

without having chosen it. We are formed as female- or male- subject allowing ourselves to be interpellated by that *ideal social regulator or mandate* that pushes us to respond passionately to the mandates of gender, through reiterated bodily representations of hegemonic social norms.⁸ In the specific case of women, the interrelation of the tie to subjection and the mandate of feminine gender constructs the woman-subject as a “subject of the other’s desire” in a double sense: to be another’s in one’s dependence and to be another’s in lack. The woman-subject is another’s in lack given that, symbolically, in our culture the man is not the other of the woman but the woman is the other of the man—the One. This creates women subjectively as having an “extra” dependence, like a “Being the Other” in capital letters, divesting them subjectively of any higher state. This is women’s fundamental vulnerability as social beings: becoming “a subject of the other’s desire” in a powerful sense. This is a profound and heavy vulnerability in the process of gendered subjective and social transformation and in the relation between the sexes.

But it is necessary to remember that the desire to persist in the self is only negotiated within the conditions of social life. To make viable the transformation of power relations between the sexes, a change in social conditions—in institutions, laws, norms, and discourses—must parallel the transformation of the self.

⁸ This refers to the performative turn in the analysis of the construction of gender that is developed by others. J. Butler (1990)

• *Conscience, self-policing and identity*

Subjection implies that the subject is initiated through a primary submission to power, but out of this submission, since it is parallel to the process of becoming a subject, there will spring the possibility of resistance and agency. On the other hand, this primary submission is expressed through *conscience* and *bad conscience*, producing and regulating an identity in the subject. This identity will not be anything other than the product of a continuing self-regulation. Gendered identities, among others, are identities of this kind. However, as we have already noted, as gendered identities, masculinity and femininity can only be considered comparable in a part of the process, due to the persistence of the sexual contract.

Let us see how the author develops this concept through the recuperation of three classic works. Butler, beginning with a re-reading of how the subject is formed through subordination in Hegel’s *Phenomenology of the Spirit*), which describes the approach to freedom by the subjected person through a disappointing fall into “unfortunate conscience” or bad conscience. The search for freedom is no more than the transmutation of social power into psychic reality in the form of bad conscience and self-censure—the *soul* that Foucault cites but does not develop: the soul, the body’s prison (1975a). This soul or conscience will imprison the body through *self-mortification* or *self-punishment*.

Given that conscience is the transmutation of social power, forms of *bodily suffering* (physical ailments such as pain and psychological ones such as depression) that are seen above all in women as a product of their *double determination* as subject and as other-subject, can be interpreted as the product of auto-mortifications that arise in the process of subjection. The “extra” of auto-censure in women entails a continuing self-deferral in the sense of aborted goals, forced silences, and self-imposed renunciations in the process of social interaction, as the “subject of the other’s desire.” Paradoxically, however, these same specifically female ailments must also be seen as a condition of possibility for the emergence of intersubjective relations that make possible significant problematizing reflection and a significant development of autonomy.

Different studies on women and health have demonstrated a difference in morbidity between the sexes (Valls, 2006) that is arguably affected by the gender *dispositif* of power. Consequently, the necessity of analyzing and translating this differential morbidity through a gendered lens has been called for both within and outside of medicine⁹.

On the other hand, in her re-reading of Nietzsche’s *The Genealogy of Morals*, Butler takes up the idea that social repression and regulation generate what she calls “the return of the subject on

or against oneself” (referring to conscience and bad conscience) that become essential in the persistent and continuing formation of the subject as a social subject. In this way, power takes a psychic form that constitutes the subject’s identity through the exercise of *continual reflexivity and vigilance*. This describes the production of a certain self-othering, in which desire “returns” along its own path, which produces another type of desire: the desire for the same circuit, the desire for subjection.

In the case of the woman-subject’s normative identity, conscience will make possible self-knowledge (self-concept) as an obstinate self-regulation in relation to *myths*, and social and cultural *stereotypes* of the feminine. Bad conscience in women, as various studies noted above have shown, materializes as constant negative feelings of guilt, fear, shame and inadequacy (O’Grady, 2005). These negative feelings function to keep her, with regard to herself, close to the specific mandates of gender for each context and to give her *social intelligibility*, but they also to push her to *over-adapt* herself continually and without rest, to the extent that she occupies a position of subordination. In the subject-man, given his position of power, there is less adaptation to the other, in the sense that the adaptation is mobile and reversible; the position of the subject can exchange itself with the position of the object in order to be inserted into relations between equals and mutual recognition for the existence of the social pact.

⁹The recent collection published in number 10 of the journal *Feminismo/s* edited by Elizabeth Mora Torres and Albert Gras i Martí (2007) for example, constitutes such an analytical review. From our point of view, this perspective must increasingly address the functioning of the category of gender as a *dispositif* of power.

Finally, Butler emphasizes in Althusser's work, *Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses*, re-examined in relation to Foucault's analyses, the intervention of language and discourse in the active production of the subject. What she calls reiterated linguistic interpellation produces in the subject self-recognition and self-difference in terms of identification-disidentification. In the case that we are analyzing, this produces the sexual dichotomy of gender. The simultaneous identification and disidentification with this discursive dichotomy gives the subject intelligibility and a possibility for social existence insofar as it introduces the proto-subject into language and intersubjectivity.

In conclusion, as these theoretical contributions are applied to the identity of feminine gender, we understand that this identity is performed¹⁰, realized through the reiteration of specific normative acts (the making of *woman*), that respond to the continued interpellation of the subject *as a woman* by society. As such, the "stable essence of gender" is only an appearance (substantial but contingent in the final analysis) that has been constructed and incorporated through the sustained reiteration of corporeal acts. This is the idea of *gender performativity* according to Butler.

• *Constitutive melancholia as affective destabilization*

The primary submission to gender to which we have referred leaves a mark on the constitution

¹⁰ J. Butler develops the theory of performativity according to which what we consider to be a stable essence of gender is not that, but rather an appearance that has been constructed through the sustained repetition of bodily acts.

of the subject not only at the corporeal level and the level of conscience and identity but also at the level of the subject's *affective possibilities*. According to Butler (1997a), in the process of subjection another type of social prohibition operates that is different from repression, namely repudiation. This lies outside the circuit of self-reflection¹¹ and generates a *constitutive melancholia in the subject*. In melancholia, the social world seems to be eclipsed and, as a result, an internal world emerges, structured through ambivalence. The exacerbated conscience and self-policing that we have discussed above are identified as indices of melancholia. In the author's words, "the ego becomes moralized on the condition of ungrieved loss" (p. 200). This melancholia will be, simultaneously, along with vulnerability and identity, a condition of possibility for the emergence of resistance and agency.

Melancholia is a relation that substitutes for the tie that has been severed, has disappeared, or is impossible; and therefore, it continues the tradition of inherent impossibility in the tie. Melancholia is the limit to the subject's sense of *pouvoir*, of its sense of what it can achieve, of its power. This loss marks the limit of the subject's reflexivity; it exceeds and conditions its circuits. Understood as repudiation, this loss inaugurates the subject while threatening it with dissolution. It is the loss of the possibility of love itself, the infinite mourning for

¹¹ J. Butler takes from Freud the distinction between repression and repudiation, noting that "repressed desire" can exist in a moment that is distant from its prohibition, while "repudiated desire" is rigorously excluded and constitutes the subject through a certain type of preventive loss. In chapter 5 of *The Psychic Life of Power*, the author suggests that the repudiation of homosexuality appears to be fundamental to a certain heterosexual version of the subject.

that which founds the subject. Melancholia converts the subject constitutively into an unstably affective subject.

Butler asks, what happens when a certain repudiation of love is converted into the condition of possibility of social existence (p.35)? When repudiation determines the form that any tie can take? And she compares it with the Foucauldian notion of the *regulatory ideal* (certain forms of love are possible and others impossible). The social sanction produces the possible realm of love and loss through repudiation. It operates as a regulatory ideal. It produces certain kinds of objects and excludes others. It is a matter of mechanisms of production that can have an *originary violence* as its foundation.

The feeling of guilt emerges in the course of melancholia and acts to preserve the object of love (through idealization) and through idealization it also preserves the possibility of loving and being loved (aggression becomes the self-censure of the superego). It serves to prolong love (in a less passionate manner, separate from the body and pleasure) as an effect of repudiation, which is why we have interpreted it as a *limiting affective instability*. It constitutes the social subject as melancholic, unstable in its possibilities for loving, or with a tendency to love through idealization and social norms, *more than in terms of the body-pleasure-desire*.

In the case of the woman-subject, this melancholia intensifies as a result of social

sanction, given that subordination produces the woman basically as a subject of love more than as an object of love. The woman-subject is constructed with the responsibility of the tie; she is associated with the figure of the *caretaker* due to her proximity to *nature*. This addition of melancholia and the position of subordination involves a “rule of double conditioning” specifically for the woman that converts her into an “impossible caretaker and melancholic *par excellence*.”

This reading of *The Psychic Life of Power* establishes that social power is transmuted into psychic power and produces, on one hand, certain *modalities of reflexivity* in the subject, and on the other, certain *forms of corporality*, and finally, *limits its forms of sociality* (whose contents are related to the specifically social categories through which said subject is interpellated). That is, social power operates in terms of psychic phenomena to restrict and produce desire and the realm of livable sociality. In this sense we want to highlight along with Butler, although we will not develop it here, that exacerbated conscience, self-censure and the melancholia that sustains them, constitute the foundation of normative gendered identities. And that the process of un-making these gender identities and create a *devenir* and displacement in the *gendered subject* will require the development of a dramatic language from experience and affect, that will make it possible to represent the *ambivalence* and *loss* that are characteristic of said normative gender identities.

Toward an inherent but situated freedom

From his first reconsiderations of the complex issue of power, Michel Foucault conceived of resistance as an intrinsic element in the exercise of power. As we have seen, Judith Butler sees in subjection an operation that subjects but also enables an agentic subject at the same time. If power “operates in a field of possibility in which the behavior of active subjects is inscribed, inciting, facilitating, and disabling, restricting absolutely on limited occasions” (Foucault, 1982b: 237), only on *limited* occasions does it completely determine such possibilities. Resistance, in a more or less articulated manner, is always present. As a complex, temporal and heterogeneous exercise, power never absolutely determines, although its presence in the disciplinary productive of docile bodies obscures this point. On the contrary, as he himself would insist later, courses of action are open to unexpected effects, displacements or strategic articulations of resistance. Butler proposes something similar when she affirms that the “defective repetition” of social mandates opens up new possibilities (1997a). Foucault’s insistence on the ubiquity and productivity of power does not negate the possibility of freedom although it does imply a situated and partial consideration of it in practice.

Within his conceptual network, as he had done with power, Foucault rethinks and reconsiders freedom: there would no longer exist any relations outside of the operativity of power; nevertheless, there would always be a certain level of liberty

exercised and, so too, the possibility of the intensification of points of resistance and of their articulation in emancipatory processes.

The Foucauldian analytic of power and its development in Butler’s work pushes us to analyze the inherent tension between *subjection and agency* that reiteratively shapes corporeality and subjective forms but does not determine them, without allowing an imaginary space of absolute freedom and exteriority to the historical and social conditions of its emergence. We have identified this as one of the most engaging fields of inquiry that his work opens up, around the link between practices of the self and techniques of domination.

As Foucault writes, freedom always emerges when discourses of identity, relationships, and the naturalizing and diverse effects of *dispositifs* of power are problematized: “in what is given to us as universal, necessary, and obligatory, what is the role of that which is singular, contingent and due to arbitrary constraints. It is a matter, in sum, of transforming the critique exercised in the form of a necessary limitation into a critical practice in the form of a possible liberation” (Foucault, 1984c: 574).

Conclusion

As we have discussed in this article, we believe that it is important to conceive of gender as a *dispositif* of power, following the theoretical axes laid out by Michel Foucault. The non-totalizing character of the Foucauldian work provides extraordinary resources for analyzing gendered

relations of power and the working of that *dispositif*. In addition, feminist readings of his work, such as the brilliant development of some of his unexplored intuitions, including Judith Butler's on the subjective operativity of power, produce a profoundly important springboard for research, and for reflection on this work's implications for political practice.

The consideration of gender as a *dispositif* of power problematizes social identities, relationships, institutions, and discourses, including those that are considered to be progressive. This consideration opens up spaces of theoretical and analytic inquiry of the greatest importance. In addition, we believe that the introduction of a gender perspective is pertinent for any analysis of power. The analysis of *dispositifs* of gender, insofar as they establish *women and men*, can contribute a new intelligibility to the joint consideration of power and liberty. In the analysis of the *dispositif* of gender, power's corporealizing effects acquire a special visibility and indicate the existence of complex affective and unconscious processes: "the psychic life of power," discussed above. The analysis of resistance and proposals for political action require a special consideration of women's impediments, ailments and unnamed suffering, as well as strategies of resistance and subversion that do not conform to the hegemonic model of the tactics of struggle.

Finally, in any analytic of power a *situated perspective* is appropriate along with an exploration of relations of power and of resistance in *specific*

contexts; the heterogeneity and historicity of *dispositifs* generates interactions between them that configure specific situations and experiences that are constantly evolving.

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* Patricia Amigot Leache, Doctora en Psicología Social.

Margot Pujal i Llombart, Doctora en Psicología Social.

La correspondencia relativa a este artículo debe ser dirigida a

Margot Pujal i Llombart, Doctora en Psicología Social: Margot.pujal@uab.cat

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