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Discourse and Human Agency

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The conceptualization of human agency is one of the oldest and most debated challenges in political theory. This essay defends the continuous relevance of this endeavour against a proliferating theoretical pessimism. Instead of engaging the much rehearsed structure–agency debate, the author conceptualizes agency in relation to discourses. However, such an approach inevitably elicits suspicion. Is discourse not merely a faddish term, destined to wax and wane with fleeting intellectual trends of the postmodern and poststructural kind? Does the concept of discourse, as many fear, suck us into a nihilistic vortex and deprive us of the stable foundations that are necessary to ground our thoughts and actions? Not so, argues this essay, and defends an anti-essentialist stance as the most viable chance for retaining an adequate understanding of how people situate themselves as agents and influence their socio-political environment. The ensuing analysis, which focuses on everyday forms of resistance, demonstrates how the very acceptance of ambiguity, often misrepresented as relativism, is a crucial precondition not only for the conceptualization of human agency, but also for its actual application in practice.

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The concept of human agency has occupied a central position in the history of political and social thought. From Aristotle onwards, countless leading minds have philosophized how people may or may not be able to influence their environment. Do our actions, intentional or not, bear upon our destiny? Or are we simply creatures of habit, blind followers of cultural and linguistic orders too large and too powerful to be swayed? Today these questions remain as important as ever. Who or what shapes the course of social dynamics in the late modern world, an époque of rapid change and blurring boundaries between nations, cultures, knowledges, realities? Can shifting social designs and their designers be discerned at all?

Questions of agency, this essay argues, can best be understood if approached through the concept of discourse. However, embarking on such a journey breaks theoretical taboos and evokes various forms of anxieties.



There are possible objections from those who employ the concept of discourse in their work, poststructuralists and postmodernists in particular. Very few of the respective authors, from Heidegger to Foucault to their contemporary interpreters, have dealt with questions of agency in an explicit and systematic way. White (2000, 76) speaks of a 'tendency to keep ontological affirmations austere thin or minimal.' This minimalism has often been equated with an image of the world in which human beings are engulfed by discursive webs to the point that action becomes no more than a reflection of externally imposed circumstances. Towards such interpretations, my challenge consists of demonstrating that it is feasible as well as worthwhile to conceptualize the notion of human agency. In fact, my analysis seeks to show how this alleged inability to speak of agency is largely a reflection of anti-postmodern polemic, rather than a position that is inherent to or advocated by most authors who have sought to apply a discursive approach to the study of social and political phenomena.

There are also objections from those who already pursue questions of agency. They often bestow the human subject and his/her actions with a relatively large sense of autonomy. This tendency epitomizes a fear of relativism that permeates particularly the social sciences — a fear that is expressed in the belief that an analytical focus on discourses would produce a fatalism that can do no more than express bewilderment at the complexities of life. Theorizing discourse, in other words, would undermine objective knowledge. It would open up the floodgates to a mass of relativistic ravings, according to which 'anything goes' and 'any narrative is as valid as another' (Østerud 1996, 386). Such a path, it is said, inevitably ends up in 'an intellectual and moral disaster' (Keohane, 1989, 89), for it prevents us from grounding human knowledge and action in stable and objective foundations — anchoring devices deemed necessary to exert human agency and ward off the lurking spectre of nihilism. Towards scholars who represent such positions, my task consists of demonstrating that discourse is, indeed, a concept that can be highly useful to theorize human agency.

Departing from both, a discursive fatalism and an overzealous belief in the autonomy of human action, I am following authors such as Bernstein (1983), Bourdieu (1990) and White (2000), for whom the central opposition that characterizes our time, the one between objectivism and relativism, is largely misleading. It is in itself part of a seductive dichotomy that is articulated in Either/Or extremes: either there is an ultimate possibility of grounding knowledge in stable foundation, or there are no foundations at all, nothing but an endless fall into a nihilist abyss. However, there are no Either/Or extremes. There are only shades of difference that contradict the idea of an exclusionary vantage-point.

My own attempt at overcoming the dichotomy between objectivism and relativism revolves around two propositions, which I sustain and expand



throughout this essay: (a) that one can theorize discourses and still retain a concept of human agency; and (b) that one can advance a positive notion of human agency that is neither grounded in a stable foundation nor dependent upon a presupposed notion of the subject. The point of searching for such a non-essentialist notion of agency is not to abandon foundations as such, but to recognize that they are a necessary part of our effort to make sense of the world. We need foundations, but foundations impose, exclude, and crumble. They should not be considered as stable and good for all times. They must be applied in awareness of their function and with a readiness to adjust them to changing circumstances. To render these abstract claims more concrete, the essay illustrates its theoretical points in reference to what could be called discursive dissent — practices of resistance that engage forms of domination that are embedded in societal values and customs.

One more preliminary remark needs to be made, a disclaimer, to be precise: to rethink issues of agency is to orient oneself in a vast array of knowledge fields. Relevant literatures are so extensive that selections have to be made, especially for the purpose of an essay length exposé. My inquiry is thus not meant to be a summary of debates on discourse or agency. There will be no discussions on various themes one would presumably expect, such as the structure–agency debate (see Giddens, 1984; Cerney, 1990; Sztompka, 1994) or the work conducted on discursive democracy (see Dryzek, 1990). Instead, I seek to make a contribution by drawing upon ideas and bodies of theory that have either existed in relative isolation from each other or so far been considered irrelevant to questions of agency.

Of Discursive Cracks and Cracking Discourses

‘It is within discourse,’ one of Foucault’s much rehearsed passages (1976, 133) notes, ‘that power and knowledge articulate each other.’ The work of the French historian and philosopher epitomizes what is at stake in questions of discourse and agency. For Foucault, discourses are subtle mechanisms that frame our thinking process. They determine the limits of what can be thought, talked and written in a normal and rational way. In every society the production of discourses is controlled, selected, organized and diffused by certain procedures. This process creates systems of exclusion in which one group of discourses is elevated to a hegemonic status, while others are condemned to exile. Discourses give rise to social rules that decide which statements most people recognize as valid, as debatable or as undoubtedly false. They guide the selection process that ascertains which propositions from previous periods or foreign cultures are retained, imported, valued, and which are forgotten or neglected (see Foucault, 1969, 1971, 1991, 59–60).



Not everything is discourse, but everything is in discourse. Things exist independently of discourses, but we can only assess them through the lenses of discourse, through the practices of knowing, perceiving and sensing, which we have acquired over time. Discourses render social practices intelligible and rational — and by doing so mask the ways in which they have been constituted and framed. Systems of domination gradually become accepted as normal and silently penetrate every aspect of society. They cling to the most remote corners of our mind, for, as Nietzsche (1983, 17) once expressed it, ‘all things that live long are gradually so saturated with reason that their emergence out of unreason thereby becomes improbable.’

While providing compelling evidence of subtle forms of domination, a preoccupation with discourses may run the risk of leaving us with an image of the world in which the capacity for human agency is all but erased, annihilated by forces that are not only impenetrable, but also elude human comprehension. In his reading of Nietzsche, for instance, Foucault portrays the emergence of things (as the concept of goodness) as taking place in a void between the energy of the strong and the reaction of the weak. Since adversaries do not meet directly in this interstice, so we read, no one is responsible for its outcome. ‘Only a single drama is ever staged in this “non-place,” the endlessly repeated play of dominations’ (Foucault, 1984, 85).

If power and domination are so omnipresent, so invincible, how could anything ever change? If, as Foucault implicitly suggests, there is no conversation, no common language, not even a visible discursive meeting between the inside and the outside, the centre and the margin, how could one explain all those challenges from below, the moments when people take to the street and shake, successfully or not, the foundations of the established order?

These questions prompted many critics to dismiss approaches that revolve around discursive explanations of social dynamics. Countless authors have criticized Foucault for putting us in a situation in which we can do nothing but express bewilderment at an overwhelming world around us — a world in which the potential for human agency seems to have vanished altogether. Hartsock, for example, condemns this world as one in which systems move, not people, in which the subject becomes obliterated or reduced to an impotent passive object. She claims that in defining power as omnipresent, as ever expanding and penetrating all aspects of society, Foucault has made it very difficult to locate domination (Hartsock, 1990, esp 168–170). Resistance, then, becomes virtually impossible. Benhabib (1995, 20), referring to postmodern approaches in general, draws attention to their inability to speak of agents and agency. A postmodern position, she claims, mistakenly dissolves the subject into chains of signification that lie beyond human influence. We then find ourselves in a conceptual order dominated by overarching discursive systems. People are reduced to mere bystanders, passive and irrelevant. Crushed into

oblivion. But is this elusive analytical spectre called discourse really so menacing that it must be warded off at any cost? Is it leading us into an apocalyptic world in which 'man would be erased,' as a famous Foucaultian passage holds, 'like a face drawn in the sand at the edge of the sea'? (Foucault, 1966, 398).

Despite their power to frame the world, discourses are not invincible. They are not monolithic forces that subsume everything in sight, crush everything in reach. Discourses are often thin, unstable, and fragmented. There are fissures, there are cracks, there are weak spots: windows of opportunity that lead to transformative pathways. And Foucault, despite the nihilistic traits attributed to him, offers us possibilities of exploring these transformative potentials, for his work can be read in more than just one way. Foucault's earlier so-called archaeological phase (see 1969) privileges systemic and discursive restraints over the individual's capacity to employ power for emancipatory objectives. His later work, however, revolves around a more affirmative core, one that sees power not just as a negative and repressive force, but at least as much as something enabling, an opportunity, an instrument of resistance (Foucault, 1976, 133). Indeed, Foucault (1982, 125, 223) explicitly points out that acknowledging the omnipresence of power is not to say that it is a fatality that cannot be overcome. 'Where there is power,' he says, 'there is resistance.' Patton (1994, 61), extending this line of thought, convincingly argues that Foucault can be read in ways that 'offer a surrogate for hope.' By distinguishing between power, power over and domination, Patton shows that Foucault espouses a conception of human being. Even though this conception is 'thin,' it can 'be filled out in a manner which explains both resistance to domination and the possibility of transforming existing economies of power' (Patton, 1994, 66).

Mobile Subjectivities, or How Being Is Always Already That Which It Is Not

To excavate the possibilities for human agency that linger in discursive cracks, a shift of foci from epistemological to ontological issues is required. This is to say that in addition to analysing how discourses mould and control our thinking process, we must scrutinize how individuals, at the level of Being, may or may not be able to escape aspects of the existing discursive order. I approach this task through a discussion of Martin Heidegger's notion of Being, which is then brought into dialogue with feminist literature that explores hyphenated identities and mobile subjectivities. Together, these bodies of literature provide a conceptual base with which it becomes possible to understand challenges to discursive orders.



Heidegger's concept of Dasein constitutes a good starting point. Dasein is derived literally from a combination of the German words 'Das-sein,' the that-it-is of a being, its existence, as opposed to its essence, the what-it-is (Was-sein) of a thing or person (Heidegger, 1993, 48 (translator's footnote)). Dasein thus is the specific and concrete existence of a Being as incorporated into a cultural setting and constituted through interactions with people and things in this world. It always has a temporal character, it expresses the relation between Being and time. Heidegger (1993, 60) argues that Dasein derives its meaning in temporality, that it is only through time that Dasein can understand Being, that, indeed, 'the meaning of Being of that being we call Dasein proves to be *temporality*.'

Understanding Being through its temporality thus means that the past is not an époque gone, but an integral part of the presence of Being. In this sense, Dasein is always historical, or, in other words, one cannot separate who one is from how one grew up, from the education, the custom, the language and a whole set of other experiences and impressions that shaped our Being over time. Dasein is always circumscribed by the presence of these past discursive elements. Moreover, Dasein not only regulates what it transmits from the past, but also conceals this very process of regulation. This, in turn, means that all actions of individuals and, indeed, the very notion of human agency, are always delineated by the boundaries of this temporal dimension of Being.

However, the inevitable presence of its past is only one aspect of the temporal dimension of Being. Discourses do not overwhelm the subject entirely. Dasein also contains the future and all its various possibilities. In view of Heidegger's unconventional notion of time, this potential is not something that may or may not materialize. It is already contained in the very temporality of Being. Dasein, then, is in constant transformation, it is always in the process of becoming something else than what it is. This process of perpetual transformation is linked to such aspects as dialogue, consciousness and self-reflection:

Dasein...is ontically distinguished by the fact that in its Being this being is concerned *about* its very Being. Thus it is constitutive of the Being of Dasein to have, in its very Being, a relation of Being to this Being. And this in turn means that Dasein understands itself in its Being in some way and with some explicitness. It is proper to this being that it be disclosed to itself with and through its Being. *Understanding of Being is itself a determination of Being of Dasein* (Heidegger, 1993, 53–54).

The point, then, is not only that Dasein's awareness of Being influences the constitution of its own nature, but also that Being already embodies the transformative potential of Dasein to be something else than what it is. Dasein,



Heidegger (1993, 54) points out, always understands itself 'in terms of its possibility to be itself or not to be itself.' It is the task of thinking to explore the range of options contained in the double-edged character of Being. Self-reflection has the potential, at least up to a certain point, to undermine forms of concealment by which Being resists the possibility of being something else than what it is.

My own, more limited task, entails searching for ways through which this transformative potential of Dasein's relation to Being permits us to salvage a notion of human agency. For this purpose, it is necessary to transport Heidegger's theorizing from the level of abstraction to the level of dailiness — a domain he always refrained from engaging. However with this extra step, Heidegger can be read as a philosopher of resistance — if not against his will, then at least against his implied intentions. But how are we to do this without losing the benefits of Heidegger's more abstract insights into the question of Being?

Postpositivist feminist literature leads us in the right direction. Hardly any feminist reaches so blindly into abstraction that s/he loses sight of the more immanent political task of addressing the concrete circumstances within which women's lives are confined. Those who venture into metatheoretical spaces, and many do so successfully, often feel the need, unlike Heidegger, to justify their approach and draw attention to its direct political and ethical relevance (for instance, Ferguson, 1993, ix–xi). However, residues of Heidegger's approach to Being nevertheless linger in feminist theory, for the refusal to freeze and objectivize the subject, to transport the positivist discourse of science into the ontological realm, is also a key rallying point in postmodern feminism. Butler (1990, 16–17), for instance, rejects the notion of an authentic female identity, an essence that crystallizes when one digs deep enough. Instead, she analyses the process by which subjects are constituted as essences, to then explore the possibilities that emerge from their multiplicities. Others argue along the same lines. Trin (1989, 95–96) believes that there is no permanent essence of wo/man, and that, indeed, 'women can never be defined.' Ferguson (1993, 154) eschews the search for an 'essential reality to which our representations correspond' and Haraway (1991, 155) emphasizes that there 'is not even such a state as "being" female.' Being, in these interpretations, is not only evasive and constructed, but, much like Heidegger argues, it actually *is* not. It *happens*. Being is a constant process of renewal. Gender identity, then, should not be seen as a noun or a static cultural marker, but, as Butler (1990, 112) insists, as an activity, an incessant action of some sort, something that one becomes but can never be.

Recognizing the constructed and constantly shifting dimensions of being sits somewhat uneasily with many established approaches that, in Eagleton's words (1991, 197–198), claim that 'a certain provisional stability of identity is



essential not only for psychical well-being but for revolutionary political agency.' While recognizing the need for provisional foundations to articulate critique, a feminist and discursive approach locates manifestations of human agency precisely in the fluidity of identity, in its constituted and multiple dimensions. Rather than sliding into 'an irresponsible hymning of the virtues of schizophrenia,' as Eagleton (1991, 198) fears, an exploration of the discursive struggles that surround the pluralistic nature of identity is the very precondition for human agency and for an adequate assessment of the processes through which its transformative potentials are unleashed.

Hope emerges from a dialogue between Heidegger and postmodern feminism, even though such an encounter is neither widely present in the literature nor, for that matter, unproblematic. While one finds abundant references to psychoanalytical perspectives on the subject, especially via Freud, Jung, Lacan and Zizek, Heidegger's name is astonishingly absent from feminist debates. Only a few isolated authors theorize Being through more than just fleeting and symbolic footnotes to Heidegger. Yet, while his name is largely effaced, many of Heidegger's ideas are omnipresent in feminist literature. This is the case not only of his ontology, but also of his work on such topics as identity/difference, language, otherness, concealment or *Destruktion*. The presence of these insights, however, is concealed and mediated via Heidegger's more 'sanitized' and 'de-Germanized' contemporary French interpreters, such as Derrida, Foucault, Levinas or Deleuze (the concept of *Destruktion*, for instance, has been handed down, via poststructuralist thought, as deconstruction). Those feminist authors who deal directly with Heidegger deplore that his concept of ontological difference does not include sexual difference, which he fails to pose as the 'sexual question.' Braidotti, for example, reads Heidegger via Derrida's interpretation and criticizes both of them for placing the emergence of the subject beyond sexual difference. Such a conceptual notion of Being above and beyond sexuality, she argues, makes the mistake of reducing sexual difference to a derived given that is not constitutive of the subject (Braidotti, 1991, 104).

While there are obvious and perhaps even incommensurable differences between Heidegger and feminist theory, there are also strong and reinforcing parallels. They are above all located in the political potential that is contained in recognizing the constructed dimensions of Being and in the tension between identity and difference (see Heidegger, 1969). For feminist authors, this potential does not only lie in the Heideggerian temporal aspects of Being, in future possibilities that are already contained in the existential self-aware of Dasein. It is captured at least as much by drawing attention to the multiple dimensions of Being that exist simultaneously. This is to say that for many feminists, potential for resistance is to be found not so much, or at least not



only, in differences between men and women, not even in differences among women. Strategies of dissent can emerge from exploring differences *within* women. The terms fractured or hyphenated identities are most commonly used to convey the theoretical starting point for this innovative approach to difference. Braidotti (1989, 93) speaks for many when arguing that the synthesizing power of the term 'I' is nothing but a grammatical necessity, 'a theoretical fiction that holds together the collection of differing layers, the integrated fragments of the very-receding horizon of my identity' (see also Ferguson, 1993, 153–183; Haraway, 1991, 155–161; Harding, 1986, 163–196; Trinh, 1989, 95–96). Women (and men) have multiple, fractured and ambivalent subjectivities that move back and forth between such terrains of identity as class, race, gender, nationality, language and sexual preference. This conceptualization of Being displays important parallels with that of Heidegger, for in both temporal or simultaneous dimensions, Being is always already that which it is not. Discursive domination is a crucial force to be reckoned with. However, it is not the end of the story. There are ways of eluding discourse. There are glimmers of hope. There are fractured visions of human agency.

What exactly is the potential for resistance contained in these hyphenated identities? How can they lead to expressions of human agency? Some of the above feminist authors claim convincingly that hyphenated identities open up chances for undermining the regulatory norms established by these very identities. They give individuals the opportunity to escape the suffocating impact of discursive orders, to seek out its cracks and weaknesses, and explore the enabling potential that lingers in them. Ferguson employs the term 'mobile subjectivities' to capture possibilities that arise from moving back and forth among various hyphenated identities and its corresponding mental resting places. This process not only entails travelling across and along axes of power, domination and resistance, but also destabilizes the regulatory norms that have been constructed through the delineation of these identities (Ferguson, 1993, 158–163). By being aware of the arbitrary and excluding nature of identity constructions, such as class, race or gender, individuals gain the possibility of taking part in daily processes that slowly but constantly redraw the political boundaries of identities. Haraway talks in a similar vein of 'situated knowledges,' of how moving back and forth between various subjectivities can open up multiple visions. The point is, she emphasizes, not to ground one's knowledge in stable standpoints, but to explore visions of change that unfold through multidimensional, shifting and always eluding hyphens of identity (Haraway, 1991, 183–201). Potential for human agency is then contained in the transgression of boundaries that has been enabled through an awareness of the flexibility contained in various forms of identities.



Domination and Resistance: Lessons from the Everyday

More layers of abstraction must be removed to enable a conceptualization of human agency. Needed is another shift of focus, one that moves from contemplating the becoming of Being towards investigating specific ways in which individuals employ their mobile subjectivities to escape discursive forms of domination. I embark on this move by investigating, at a conceptual level, everyday forms of resistance, seemingly mundane daily practices by which people constantly shape and reshape their environment. One can find such forms of resistance in countless activities, such as speaking, writing, laughing, gossiping, singing or dwelling. It is in these spheres that societal values are gradually transformed, preparing the ground for more open forms of social change. Heidegger shied away from addressing this domain of everydayness. For him, and to some extent for the Nietzschean tradition in general, the sphere of *Alltäglichkeit* had to be transcended by poets and thinkers, by those who are able to distance themselves from the seductive but suffocating dangers of the herd instinct (see White, 1991, 2000, 131–133). The feasibility and desirability of such a move can, of course, be discussed at length. Less disputable, though, is that Heidegger's insight into Being and identity can, even against their original intention, serve as useful markers to understand political dynamics of the everyday. Michel de Certeau shows us why and how.

For de Certeau, the search for human agency in everyday life starts by refuting the widespread assumption that common people are passive onlookers, guided by the disciplinary force of established rules. For him, they are not simply faceless consumers, but active producers, 'poets of their own affairs, pathfinders in jungles of functionalist rationality' (de Certeau, 1990, 57). De Certeau does, however, remain anchored in the Nietzschean tradition. He makes use of Foucault's research by turning it upside down. He opposes Foucault's notion of a panoptical discourse, one that sees and controls everything. He considers unwisely spending one's entire energy analysing the multitude of minuscule techniques that discipline the subject and paralyse her/him in a web of microlevel power relations. Such an approach, de Certeau argues, unduly privileges the productive apparatus. Instead, he suggests that if the grid of 'discipline' is becoming increasingly extensive, it is all the more important to search for reasons why a society is not totally subordinated to this form of suffocation and concealment. One must pay attention to popular procedures — equally minuscule and quotidian — that manipulate and evade the mechanism of discipline (de Certeau, 1990, xxxix–xxxxl). These various procedures are the practices by which people can reappropriate the space controlled through the existing discursive order. The question now is how to locate, theorize and explore these 'networks of anti-discipline,' as de Certeau (1990, xi) calls them.



De Certeau focuses primarily on the uses of space in Western consumer societies, on how everyday practices like walking, shopping, dwelling or cooking become arts of manipulation that intervene with the prevalent discursive order. Other authors locate daily practices of subversion in different spheres of life. James Scott has dealt in detail with everyday forms of peasant resistance. For him too, the big events are not peasant rebellions or revolutions. They occur rarely anyway. What deserves our attention, he argues, is the constant everyday struggle between the peasantry and those who seek to extract labour, taxes, rents and the like from them (Scott, 1985, xv–xvi). Through extensive, detailed and highly compelling research, Scott demonstrates the prevalence of low-profile forms of resistance. These are the critiques spoken behind the back of power. Although such utterances are very rarely expressed openly, they are nevertheless in the open. Indeed, this form of critique is almost omnipresent in folk culture, disguised in such practices as rumours, gossip, jokes, tales or songs. They are the vehicles of the powerless by which they ‘insinuate a critique of power while hiding behind anonymity or behind innocuous understandings of their conduct’ (Scott, 1990, xiii, 19, 136–182). We find a perfect example of such a practice in Margaret Atwood’s fictional but all too real authoritarian word (1985, 234):

There is something powerful in the whispering of obscenities about those in power. There’s something delightful about it, something naughty, secretive, forbidden, thrilling. It’s like a spell, of sorts. It deflates them, reduces them to the common denominator where they can be dealt with. In the paint of the washroom cubicle someone unknown had scratched: *Aunt Lydia sucks*. It was like a flag waved from a hilltop in rebellion.

The scene of an obscenity anonymously scribbled on a bathroom wall is enough to evoke the subversive aspects of this act. Anonymity provided the security necessary to scream out what cannot even be whispered in the face of the oppressors. There is a clear target, but no visible author, no agitator who could be prosecuted. The audience is potentially limitless. Scott insists that such a politics of hidden dissent, of disguise and anonymity, is neither empty posturing nor a substitute for real resistance. It is resistance of the most effective kind, for these subversive gestures eventually insinuate themselves, in disguised form, into the public discourse. They lead to a slow transformation of values, they nurture and give meaning to subsequent, more overt forms of resistance or rebellion. They may bring upon an explosive political situation during which the *cordon sanitaire* between the hidden and public transcripts is torn apart (Scott, 1990, 19–20, 183–227).

The range of possible everyday forms of resistance is, of course, endless. One could find them in all epochs, places and aspects of life. Michael Bakhtin has shown how the 16th century French writer François Rabelais successfully



interfered with discursive practices at the time. His five books about the adventures of Gargantua and his son Pantagruel are episodes of carnival, laughter, mockery and fantastical imagination. They include, for example, a chapter on how his father realized 'Gargantua's marvellous intelligence by his invention of an Arse-wipe' (Rabelais, 1966, 66–69). Laughter opened up, at least for a short moment, a glimpse at utopian freedom, a life beyond the heavy Christian mythology of death and eternal punishment in the form of Hell after death. Laughter, Bakhtin argues, purified from dogmatism and pedantry, from fear and intimidation. It shattered the belief that life has a single meaning (Bakhtin, 1968, 123). In this sense, laughter, in both practice and writing, created mobile subjectivities and situated knowledges. Carnival becomes a revolutionary act, one that slowly transformed values and norms, one that entered political spheres. Rabelais satire, blessed with immediate popular success and equally swift condemnation from the leading clergy, rendered support for an emerging humanist movement and contributed to the eventual death of God, the gradual decay of an unchallenged theocentric weltanschauung.

Discursive dissent happens even in those circumstances where domination seems all but total. Docker (1994), for instance, discovered resistance in the seemingly homogenizing forces of popular culture, such as television, where he detects, much like Rabelais did half a millennium before, carnivalesque challenges to the narrow and single representation of reason in the public sphere. The historian Kotkin found signs of resistance in a very different suffocating context. He analysed in great detail aspects of everyday life in the Soviet industrial city of Magnitogorsk during the 1930s. Although life during this period almost perfectly epitomized the despotic character of Stalinism, Kotkin demonstrates how ordinary citizens constantly reshaped the environment in which they lived. 'New categories of thinking suddenly appeared, old ones were modified; nothing stood still' (Kotkin, 1995, 356). Challenges to authority occurred through seemingly insignificant acts, such as the process of naming and explaining new phenomena people encountered in the market place or their living quarters. Kotkin (1995, 21), relying on a Foucaultian approach, documents how individuals were often able to circumvent existing rules by engaging in 'resourceful, albeit localise, resistance to the terms of daily life that developed within the crusade of building socialism.'

Despite engendering powerful and hidden mechanisms of change, everyday forms of resistance are not unproblematic. Like all aspects of life, they cannot escape discursive orders. Here too, the work of Rabelais is illustrative. For all his subversive carnivalesque writings, his views on women undoubtedly supported existing patriarchal practices. Consider the following famous passage in book one, when Rabelais describes Gargantua's arrival in Paris and his annoyed reaction to the curious crowd that surrounded him. The



passage epitomizes both the subversive aspects of Rabelais' grotesque satire and his refusal to grant women even the status of subjecthood:

Then, with a smile, he [Gargantua] undid his magnificent codpiece and, bringing out his john-thomas, pissed on them so fiercely that he drowned two hundred and sixty thousand, four hundred and eighteen persons, not counting women and small children (Rabelais, 1966, 74).

In his celebrated discussion, Bakhtin misses entirely the discursive consequences that arise from Rabelais' treatment of women as faceless objects. Instead, he analyses the various metaphorical aspects of scenes like the tossing of excrement, drenching in urine or, in general, Rabelais' repeated focus on 'images of the material bodily lower stratum' (1968, 147–152, 368–436). Bakhtin draws links to circles of birth, life and death, fertility and renewal, but never touches upon the issue of gender relations and related systems of exclusion. He never asks who laughs about whom in Rabelais' world. He never notices that only men laugh about masculine themes, that women often 'view the laughter of others as an instrument of control over them' (Caviness, 1993, 361).

Confronting Incommensurability/Seeking Contingent Foundations

It is one thing to recognize the potential and limits of everyday resistance. It is an entirely different thing to conceptualize the ensuing dynamics such that they can be positively endowed with the capacity to exert human agency. The latter task is far more intricate and calls for analytical and theoretical caution. It requires, in Wittgensteinian language, 'to say no more than we know' (Wittgenstein, 1964, 45). One must seek to avoid anthropocentric judgements about what lies beyond human comprehension. That is, one must carefully reflect not only about the limits to human agency, but also about what one could possibly know and say about these limits without superimposing preconceived ideas upon far more complex social dynamics.

A conceptualization of human agency cannot be based on a parsimonious proposition, a one-sentence statement that captures something like an authentic nature of human agency. There is no essence to human agency, no core that can be brought down to a lowest common denominator, that will crystallize one day in a long sought after magic formula. A search for such an elusive centre would freeze a specific image of human agency to the detriment of all others. The dangers of such a totalizing position have been well rehearsed. Foucault (1982, 209), for instance, believes that a theory of power is unable to provide the basis for analytical work, for it assumes a prior objectification of the very power dynamics the theory is trying to assess.



Bourdieu (1998, 25) speaks of the 'imperialism of the universal' and List (1993, 11) warns us of an approach that 'subsumes, or, rather, pretends to be able to subsume everything into one concept, one theory, one position.' Such a master discourse, she claims, inevitably oppresses everything that does not fit into its particular view of the world.

What, then, is the alternative to anchoring an understanding of human agency in a foundationalist master narrative? How to ground critique, actions, norms and life itself if there are no universal values that can enable such a process of grounding? Various authors have advanced convincing suggestions. Consider the following three examples:

- (1) de Certeau (1990, 51) attempts to avoid totalitarian thought by grounding his position not in a systematic theory, but in 'operational schemes.' A theory is a method of delineation. It freezes what should be understood in its fluidity. An understanding of operational schemes, by contrast, recognizes that events should be assessed in their changing dimensions. Rather than trying to determine what an event is, such an approach maps the contours within which events are incessantly constituted and reconstituted. Or, expressed in de Certeau's terminology, one must comprehend forms of action in the context of their regulatory environment.
- (2) Butler (1992, 3–7) speaks of contingent foundations. Like de Certeau, she too believes that the Foucaultian recognition that power pervades all aspects of society, including the position of the critic, does not necessarily lead into a nihilistic abyss. It merely shows that political closure occurs through attempts to establish foundational norms that lie beyond power. Likewise, to reopen this political domain is not to do away with foundations as such, but to acknowledge their contingent character, to illuminate what they authorize, exclude and foreclose. One must come to terms with how the subject and its agency are constituted and framed by specific regimes of power. However, this is not the end of human agency. Quite to the contrary. Butler (1992, 12–14) argues persuasively that 'the constituted character of the subject is the very precondition of its agency.' To appreciate the practical relevance of this claim, one must investigate the possibilities for agency that arise out of existing webs of power and discourse. One must scrutinize how social change can be brought about by a reworking of the power regimes that constitute our subjectivity (Butler, 1992, 13).
- (3) Deleuze and Guattari (1996, 3–25, 377) go a step further. Opting for the rhizome, they reject all forms of foundations, structures, roots or trees. The latter three, they say, has dominated much of the Western thought. A tree is a hierarchical system in which ones becomes two, in which everything



can be traced back to the same origin. Roots and radicles may shatter the linear unity of knowledge, but they hold on to a contrived system of thought, to an image of the world in which the multiple always goes back to a centred and higher unity. The brain, by contrast, is not rooted, does not strive for a central point. It functions like a subterranean rhizome. It grows sideways, has multiple entryways and exits. It has no beginning or end, only a middle, from where it expands and overflows. Any point of the rhizome, Deleuze and Guattari emphasize, is connected to any other. It is a multiplicity without hierarchies, units or fix points to anchor thought. There are only lines, magnitudes, dimensions, plateaus, and they are always in motion. To travel along these lines and dimensions is to engage in nomad thought, to travel along axis of difference, rather than identity. Nomad thought, says one of Deleuze's feminist interpreters, 'combines coherence with mobility,' it is 'a creative sort of becoming, a performative metaphor that allows for otherwise unlikely encounters and unsuspected sources of interaction of experience and of knowledge' (Braidotti, 1994, 21). The extent to which this form of thinking constitutes a grounding process may be left open to question. Judging from Deleuze's own work it is clear, however, that the exploration of difference and multiplicities does not prevent him from taking positions for or against specific political issues. What he does forgo, however, is a central authorial voice — to the benefit of a polyphonic array of whispers and shouts.

There are, of course, various differences between the above authors and their suggestions. Not all of their propositions are equally suited to anchor an understanding of human agency. However, they have at least one important trait in common. They all rely on what White (2000, 6–8) has called a 'weak ontology,' that is, an approach that insists on advancing affirmative political commitments while, at the same time, recognizing that these commitments are historical and essentially contestable.

Approaching the political — and by extension dilemmas of agency — requires tolerance towards various forms of insight and levels of analysis, even if they contradict each other's internal logic. Such differences often only appear as contradictions because we still strive for a universal standard of reference that is supposed to subsume all the various aspects of life under a single totalizing standpoint (Adorno, 1992, 17–18). Every process of revealing is at the same time a process of concealing. Even the most convincing position cannot provide a form of insight that does not at the same time conceal other perspectives. Revealing always occurs within a frame. Framing is a way of ordering, and ordering banishes all other forms of revealing. This is, grossly simplified, a position that resonates throughout much of Heidegger's work (1954, 35). Taking this argument to heart is to recognize that one cannot rely



on one form of revealing alone. An adequate understanding of human agency can be reached only by moving back and forth between various insights. The point, then, is not to end up with a grand synthesis, but to make most out of each specific form of revealing (for an exploration of this theme, via an analysis of Kant's *Critique of Judgement*, see Deleuze, 1994).

Conceptualizing Human Agency

The last, and perhaps most difficult task left, is to figure out how operational schemes, contingent foundation or rhizomes can be employed to imbue discursive dissent with the capacity to exert human agency. Ensuing attempts inevitably differ, but they generally diverge from how traditional philosophy has framed the understanding of human action, that is, in teleological, causal and intentional terms (see Bubner, 1982, 125–156). An anti-essentialist approach to understanding human agency does not establish links between means and ends; it does not assume that every form of agency needs an identifiable agent that causes an identifiable outcome; and it does not limit agency to those outcomes that stand in a relation with a declared intention.

Contrasting strategic and tactical action may help to clarify the problems entailed in conceptualizing agency. In a strategic form of dissent, agent and target can be separated and the attempt is usually made to articulate a causal relation between them. An identifiable agent (as a protest march) exerts influence on an identifiable target (as a change in policy desired by the march.) A non-essentialist understanding of human agency cannot rely on such strategic and causal assumptions. The duality of cause and effect as we commonly perceive it does not exist, Nietzsche (1982a, 127–131) already knew. What there is, instead, is a continuum of complex factors from which we arbitrarily isolate a few pieces and fit them neatly into the image we had already made ourselves of the world.

A specification of operational schemes aims at understanding human action in tactical, rather than strategic terms. The link between action and outcome in tactical forms of dissent is diffused, subtle and impossible to articulate through a causal formula. In contrast to strategic action, de Certeau explains, tactical forms of resistance have no clearly specified target, no visible place to exert influence on. There is no direct causal relation between the subject of will and the exterior circumstances at which this will is directed. Tactical actions cannot be autonomous from their target. They always insinuate themselves into the Other, without seizing it entirely, but yet without being able to keep their distance (de Certeau, 1990, xlvi).

Take the rather mundane example of a critical and environmentally aware consumer in an industrialized society who refuses to buy milk that is bottled in



non-reusable glass. Alone this shopper does not stand a chance of exerting human agency in the traditional sense. However, if a substantial part of the population engages in similar daily acts of protest producers will eventually be compelled to adjust to changed market conditions. But where is the agent and the causal relation in this form of protest? One cannot pick out a particular shopper who epitomizes this tactical and collective act of dissent. Consumers may have a whole range of reasons for refusing to buy milk in non-reusable glass bottles. They may, for example, have environmental concerns, oppose commercial dairy farmers or be vegan. Moreover, where is the target of this tactical form of dissent? Is it the supermarket? The retailer? The producer of glass bottles? The farmer who delivers milk? Government authorities who fail to impose sufficient environmental standards? Fellow shoppers who still buy milk bottled in non-reusable glass? Or even the society as a whole, of which the said shopper is as much part as anybody else?

A tactic does not have the possibility of perceiving its adversary in a space that is distinct, visible and objectifiable. Indeed, the space of tactic is always the space of the Other (de Certeau, 1990, 60–61). This is to say that a tactical form of dissent, like shopping, cannot keep its distance from the object of the action. It always operates in the terrain of the opponent. Tactical actions leave their assigned places, enter a world that is too big to be their own, but also too tightly woven to escape from. Since tactic does not have a specific target and cannot separate between the I and the Other, it can never conquer something, it can never keep what it wins. Tactic must always seize the moment and explore cracks that open up in discursive orders. It must constantly manipulate its environment in order to create opportunities for social change (de Certeau, 1990, xlvi–ii, 61).

It is through the concept of temporality that we can appreciate the ways in which tactical actions unleash their transformative potential. The causality entailed in such manifestations of human agency, as far as one can speak of causality in this diffused context, is always mediated through time. Tactical action, de Certeau stresses, operates along 'indeterminate trajectories.' This means, in a first instance, that tactic works discursively, that it transforms values and becomes visible and effective only through maturation over time. In a second instance, the indeterminacy of the trajectory refers to the fact that tactical actions defy the spatial logic established by the organizing procedures of a particular system. Expressed in de Certeau's somewhat idiosyncratic language, tactical actions cannot be perceived as a conventional succession of events in space. Rather, they evoke a temporal movement through space, but one that focuses on the diachronic succession of points, rather than the figure that these points establish on a supposedly synchronic and achronic space. The latter view, de Certeau stresses, would make the mistake of reducing a



'temporal articulation of places into a spatial sequence of points' (de Certeau, 1990, 58–59).

The above-mentioned refusal to buy milk bottled in non-reusable glass may help to clarify the suggestion that tactical manifestations of human agency are not bound by spatial dynamics. The consumer who changes his/her shopping habits engages in a tactical action that escapes the spatial controlling mechanisms of established political and economic boundaries. The effect of such a tactical action is not limited to the localized target, say, the supermarket. Over an extended period of time, and in conjunction with similar actions, such tactical dissent may affect practices of production, trade, investment, advertisement and the like. The manifestations that issue from such actions operate along an indeterminate trajectory insofar as they promote a slow transformation of values whose effects transgress places and become visible and effective only by maturation over time. In the case of tactical protest actions of environmentally sensitive consumers, it may still be too early to ascertain a definitive manifestation of human agency. However, various indicators render such an assertion highly likely. Changing attitudes and consumption patterns, including an increasing concern for environmental issues, have produced easily recognizable marketing shifts in most parts of the industrial world. For instance, health food sections are now a common feature in most supermarkets. And there is empirical evidence that suggests that consumer preferences for costly 'ethical' production technologies can lead to increased competition between producers, which, in turn, may gradually increase the level of adoption of such ethical technology (Noe and Rebello, 1995, 69–85).

Conclusion

The task of articulating a discursive notion of human agency towered at the entrance of this essay and has never ceased to be its main puzzle, a cyclically reoccurring dilemma. How can we understand and conceptualize the processes through which people shape social and political life. Where is this fine line between essentialism and relativism, between suffocating in the narrow grip of totalizing knowledge claims and blindly roaming in a nihilistic world of absences? How to make a clear break with positivist forms of representing the political without either abandoning the concept of human agency or falling back into a new form of essentialism?

Confronting the difficulties that arise with this dualistic dilemma, I have sought to advance a positive concept of human agency that is neither grounded in a stable essence nor dependent upon a presupposed notion of the subject. The ensuing journey has taken me, painted in very broad strokes, along the



following circular trajectory of revealing and concealing: discourses are powerful forms of domination. They frame the parameters of thinking processes. They shape political and social interactions. Yet, discourses are not invincible. They may be thin. They may contain cracks. By moving the gaze from epistemological to ontological spheres, one can explore ways in which individuals use these cracks to escape aspects of the discursive order. To recognize the potential for human agency that opens up as a result of this process, one needs to shift foci again, this time from concerns with Being to an inquiry into tactical behaviours. Moving between various hyphenated identities, individuals use ensuing mobile subjectivities to engage in daily acts of dissent, which gradually transform societal values. Over an extended period of time, such tactical expressions of human agency gradually transform societal values. By returning to epistemological levels, one can then conceptualize how these transformed discursive practices engender processes of social change.

I have used everyday forms of resistance to illustrate how discourses not only frame and subjugate our thoughts and behaviour, but also offer possibilities for human agency. Needless to say, discursive dissent is not the only practice of resistance that can exert human agency. There are many political actions that seek immediate changes in policy or institutional structures, rather than 'mere' shifts in societal consciousness. Although some of these actions undoubtedly achieve results, they are often not as potent as they seem. Or, rather, their enduring effect may well be primarily discursive, rather than institutional. Nietzsche (1982b, 243) already knew that the greatest events 'are not our loudest but our stillest hours.' This is why he stressed that the world revolves 'not around the inventors of new noise, but around the inventors of new values.' And this is why, for Foucault too, the crucial site for political investigations are not institutions, even though they are often the place where power is inscribed and crystallized. The fundamental point of anchorage of power relations, Foucault claims, is always located outside institutions, deeply entrenched within the social nexus. Hence, instead of looking at power from the vantage point of institutions, one must analyse institutions from the standpoint of power relations (Foucault, 1982, 219–222).

A defence of human agency through a Nietzschean approach does inevitably leave some observers unsatisfied — desiring a more robust account of what constitutes human actions and their influence on political and social life. However, a more firm and detailed theory of agency is unlikely to achieve more than essentialize a particular and necessarily subjective viewpoint on the political. Needed, instead, is what William Connolly has termed an ethos of critical responsiveness — that is, an openness towards the unknown, unseen, unthought and a resulting effort to accept and theorize our limits to cognition (see Connolly, 1995, 154, and for a discussion White, 2000, 106–150). The key, then is to turn this inevitable ambiguity into a positive and enabling force,



rather than a threat that needs to be warded off or suppressed at all cost. The present essay has sought to demonstrate how such an attitude towards human agency is possible, and indeed necessary, in both theory and practice.

In the domain of political practice, everyday forms of resistance demonstrate that transformative potential is hidden in the very acceptance of ambiguity. Consider the countless and continuously spreading new social movements, pressure groups and other loose organizations that challenge various aspects of local, national or global governance. These movements operate in a rather chaotic way. They come and go. They are neither centrally controlled nor do they all seek the same objective. Some operate on the right end of the political spectrum. Others on the left. Some oppose globalization. Others hail it. Some seek more environmental regulations. Others defend neo-liberal free trade. And, it is precisely through this lack of coherence, control and certainty that the respective resistance movements offer a positive contribution to the political. They are in some sense the 'quintessential aspect of postmodern politics, of local resistance to metanarrative impositions (see White, 1991, 10–12; Walker, 1988). They embody what Connolly (1995, 154–155) believes is the key to cultural democratization: a certain level of 'productive ambiguity,' that is, the commitment always to resist 'attempts to allow one side or the other to achieve final victory.' Ensuing forms of human agency, anarchical as they may be, thus generate regular and important public scrutiny and discussion of how norms, values and institutions function.

At a theoretical level too, an engagement with human agency needs to accept a certain level of ambiguity. And there too, this ambiguity can be turned into a positive force. A discursive notion of human agency is grounded precisely in the recognition that there is no end to circles of revealing and concealing, of opening and closing spaces to think and act. Revealing is always an act, not something that remains stable. Anything else would suggest a static view of the world, one in which human agency is annihilated, one in which the future can never tear down the boundaries of the present. Just as the interaction of domination and resistance has no end, efforts of coming to terms with them will never arrive at a stage of ultimate insight. One must move back and forth not only between unconnected bodies of literature, but also between theory and practice, abstraction and everydayness, epistemology and ontology, space and time, discursive domination and possibilities for dissent that arise from fissures in them. Each of these sites is crucial. Each offers a unique vantage point, but none of them holds the key to ultimate insight. Indeed, every process of revealing is at the same time a process of concealing. This is to say that by opening up a particular perspective, no matter how insightful it is, one conceals everything that is invisible from this vantage point. One must thus think in circles, move between different insights into the question of human agency, even if these insights are at times incommensurable.



Since discursive dissent operates through a constant process of becoming something else than what it is, a theoretical engagement with its dynamics can never be exhaustive. An approach to understanding human agency remains useful only as long as it stays open and resists the temptation of 'digging deeper' by anchoring itself in a newly discovered essence, a stable foundation that could bring order and certainty to a complex and turbulent late modern world.

Note

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