

# “The Pervert’s Guide to Political Philosophy”. *Subjectless Revolutions* Slavoj Žižek and the Critique of Postmodern Historicism\*

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In the three previous chapters we mapped out Žižek’s philosophical thinking—territory in which we situated his critique of “postmodern historicism”, as well as his bleak assessment of the struggles of the contemporary left. We have also examined his theory of revolution and his recourse to Christianity as a paradigm for communist brotherhood that may well function as a real alternative to capitalism. Throughout this interpretative and reconstructive exercise, I subjected Žižek’s proposals to a hail of critical questions and commentary, on which I have not yet adequately elaborated. This will precisely be the task that I will undertake in the last two chapters of the book. Our starting point will be to pick up on some of Žižek’s central ideas with which I agree, while taking them to a philosophical terrain that will help us avoid their fatidic consequences: the avowal of *subjectless revolutions*. I am referring to two Žižekian motifs that are worth reconsidering: the ontology of incompleteness and the universal dimension of politics. Our goal is to “de-Lacanize” those concepts and to see how they could operate in a *different* kind of political ontology that does not resort to the figure of a transcendental subject, and that renders power as an inescapable condition of experience. I would then like to articulate the two aforementioned concepts with a third one—the Gramscian notion of hegemony—but read alongside the work of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe. The purpose of this exercise is to create the conceptual conditions to formulate an emancipatory theory of democracy—a matter that will be taken up in the following chapter.

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\* This is a draft version of the first part of chapter 4, pp 223-250, of the English-language translation by Douglas Kristopher Smith and Nicolas Lema Habash of Santiago Castro-Gómez’s *Revoluciones sin sujeto. Slavoj Žižek’s y la crítica del historicismo posmoderno* (Madrid: Akal, 2015).

## Agonism and the ontology of power

I would like to begin with Žižek's critique of Foucault, which we touched upon in the first section of Chapter 1. I had stated that for Žižek the overarching problem in Foucault's philosophy is its incapacity to think about resistance beyond power. If different types of resistance can only be thought of as an effect of the same power against which they struggle, then it is not possible to escape power, as power builds up a transcendental immunity to any resistance. The major problem that Foucault was never able to resolve was that concerning the continuity between power and resistance. And why was he not able to resolve it? Because Foucault postulates that the struggle against power relations is immanent to power relations themselves. That is, there is absolutely no room in the Foucauldian perspective to consider the irruption of an element that, without pertaining to the logic of power, could disrupt this very logic. In other words, in Foucault's theoretical edifice there is no place for thinking about the Real as an element repressed by power and that 'returns' to destabilize it. Therefore, as Žižek states, it should be of no surprise that Foucault discarded the repression hypothesis in *The Will to Knowledge*.

As we have seen in previous chapters, Žižek claims to have solved the Foucauldian problem regarding the continuity between power and resistance. And he does so precisely by evoking the figure that Foucault constantly denied: the transcendental subject. Contrary to Foucault, who seemingly reduces subjectivity to subjectivation, Žižek affirms that the subject cannot be reduced to its specific manifestations; that is, the subject transcends the historical processes of subjectivation and is not reducible to any of them. But, as we already know, this is not about the sovereign and transparent subject that some (mistakenly, according to Žižek) attribute to Descartes, but about a constitutively divided subject, rife with antagonism, as Hegel rightly pointed out. The *Spaltung* at the origin of the subject eludes the operations of power; it is capable of unsettling them. Foucault never understood this because he saw the subject as a *product* of disciplinary norms and biopolitical technologies. But what Foucault failed to notice, above all, was that there is a *fundamental antagonism*, irreducible to social relations of power. This antagonism operates as a rift that completely escapes the rule of power, and subverts it. Since Foucault and his postmodern followers did not understand the ontological function of antagonism, they eliminated the possibility of revolution, and created the bases for the uncritical acceptance of capitalism as the *ultima ratio* of contemporary life. But, can one actually sustain that Foucault reduces power to *social* relations of power, as Žižek asserts, or that there is no room in his theoretical edifice for an understanding of power as fundamentally antagonistic? Moreover, can it be said that the Foucauldian theory of power lacks an ontological dimension, confining itself to a mere "theory of discourse"?<sup>1</sup> In what follows, I propose to demonstrate that: (1) there is indeed an ontology of power in Foucault, taken directly from Nietzsche; (2) on the

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<sup>1</sup> This is the argument that is typically brought to bear against the supposed circularity of the proposition that "where there is power there is resistance." We can simply look back to the quote by Nicos Poulantzas (the first to point out this problem) cited in Chapter 1, according to which the kinds of resistance about which Foucault speaks "remain a strictly gratuitous assertion, in the sense that they are given no foundation." N. Poulantzas, *State, Power, Socialism*. London, Verso, 2014, .p. 149. Foucault's theory of power is, therefore, seen as lacking an ontological foundation. All that Žižek does is revive Poulantzas's old argument.

basis of this ontology we need not resort to the figure of the transcendental subject in order to conceptualize the ontological dimension of antagonism; and (3) it is nonetheless necessary to move beyond Foucault in order to account for the *political* dimension of antagonism.

Of course, to say that Foucault's theory of power is very much influenced by Nietzsche is nothing new; it has become commonplace, unanimously recognized by scholars. But, the extent to which this theory draws directly from Nietzsche's hypothesis in the *will to power* is something that has remained broadly unexamined.<sup>2</sup> To be sure, this is not the appropriate place to do so. However, I would actually like to put forward some preliminary ideas in that direction, the aim of which is to show that some of the issues that Žižek reflects upon can be reconsidered through another kind of political ontology, without necessarily resorting to a theory of the transcendental subject.

The first thing would be to point out that although Foucault (unlike Deleuze) never made direct reference to the Nietzschean ontology regarding the will to power, there is enough evidence to establish that, not only was he familiar with this ontology, but that his own conceptualization of power was based on it. This is insinuated from the first lecture of his 1971 seminar on the *Will to Knowledge*, the first of many Foucault was to give at the Collège de France, and where here presented an outline of what was to then become the research project that he would develop during the following years at that prestigious institution.<sup>3</sup> In that first lecture, Foucault sought to show how the foundation of the truth of knowledge does not stem from the social production of truth (what, in his inaugural lecture at the Collège de France, he would call the *order of discourse*), but rather from a different, ontological framework.<sup>4</sup> To argue this, Foucault appeals to a classic philosophical text: the beginning of the first book of Aristotle's *Metaphysics* (AI, 980a, 21-24), where the latter states that all men possess by nature the desire to know, and also that sensuous pleasure—in spite of its utility—is evidence of this naturalness. What Aristotle argues, according to Foucault, is that knowledge is present from the beginning (*Ursprung*), to such an extent that the will is already—in itself, in its ontological roots—of the order of knowledge.

What Foucault attempts to do in this 1970-71 seminar is to show that his previous works (*Madness and Civilization*, *The Birth of the Clinic*, *The Order of Things*), as well as the in research he will later conduct over the course of the following years, completely break with this 'Aristotelian model'. As he points out in the very first lecture:

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<sup>2</sup> For example, Alan Schrift's work heads in that direction, but does not fully develop this basic idea, in that the Foucauldian analysis of power should be read from the doctrine of the will to power developed by Nietzsche in his *Nachlass*. Cfr. Alan D. Schrift, *Nietzsche's French Legacy. A Genealogy of Poststructuralism*, New York, Routledge, 1995, p. 39-44.

<sup>3</sup> This is a key point of the argument I am putting forth. The role of the 1970-71 seminar is substantial because in it Foucault delineates his research interests that he will go on to develop at the Collège de France until 1976; that is, until he publishes the *Will to Knowledge*—a period in which he crafts the first version of his analysis of power (analysis that Žižek refers to in his critique).

<sup>4</sup> The lecture in question was given on December 2, 1970; that is, only one week after he gave his famous inaugural speech at the Collège de France.

a—This involves showing that there is a desire at the root of knowledge, at the historic point of its sudden emergence, and that this desire has no kinship with knowledge. No relatedness at the level of ends, or by origin or nature. It is not related by origin, since, if you like, knowing is living— because one is forced into movement, it is detestation [*detestari*]. There is no affiliation at the level of ends, since one knows in order to dominate, to get the upper hand, not in order to know. b—It involves showing that throughout its history and development knowledge has not been guided by the internal necessity of what is known, or by the ideal genesis of the forms of knowledge, but by a rule of will—which is asceticism. c—Finally it involves showing that spread out behind the very act of knowledge, behind the subject who knows in the form of consciousness, there is the struggle of instincts, partial selves, violence, and desires. Of course, all of this is in Nietzsche’s texts, and abundantly so.<sup>5</sup>

Foucault posits the need to invert the model that Aristotle proposes. If such a model gave ontological priority to knowledge over will, now the idea is to show that the will derives pleasure that is genetically and ontologically prior to knowledge. This means that what Aristotle calls the ‘desire to know’ is not anchored in human nature, and that knowledge itself (especially scientific knowledge) is not brought to bear with an internal logic that pertains to its own historical problematizations. There is something—neither of the order of truth nor of history—that overdetermines the rules governing the historical production of the truth in question. And this ‘other of the truth’, just as Nietzsche had established, is the incessant struggle of forces, the general agonism underlying all social conflicts: the *will to power*. What Foucault in his previous texts had pointed out as that which is ‘prior’ to knowledge, as the untrue *Savoir* upon which truth is laid out, now becomes a rightly *ontological* field of agonistic forces—a field that does not stem from or originate in the ontic domain of knowledge. We could say then that the research project announced by Foucault in his 1970-71 *Lectures on the Will to Knowledge*, which would later culminate in the publication in 1976 of a book under the same title, takes as its main point of reference the Nietzschean ontology of power contained in his fragments from the 1880s.<sup>6</sup> These seem to be the texts by Nietzsche that Foucault mentions in his lecture on 9 December 1970<sup>7</sup>. Therefore, what I will argue is that this *ontology of power* contains a very different notion

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<sup>5</sup> M. Foucault, *Lectures on the Will to Know. Lectures at the Collège De France 1970–1971*, London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2013, p. 25. T.N. Although we are citing from the well-known English translation, it is important to mention that the end of letter b “which is asceticism” is not present in the Spanish translation quoted by Castro-Gómez.

<sup>6</sup> In an interview with Gerard Raulet, Foucault states that, “what I owe Nietzsche, derives mostly from the texts of around 1880, where the question of truth, the history of truth and the will to truth were central to his work.” M. Foucault, “Structuralism and Post-Structuralism: An Interview with Michel Foucault”, in *Telos*, 1983, (55), p. 204

<sup>7</sup> It is important to bear in mind that in 1967 Foucault, along with Deleuze, oversaw the publication of the complete works of Nietzsche in French. When asked, in an interview with Jacqueline Piatier, as to why a new edition of Nietzsche’s works was needed, Foucault responded that the book known as the *The Will to Power* was a fraud, pieced together by the philosopher’s sister. As such, he stated that this “book” had to be brought back to its origins: the posthumous manuscripts that take up at least two volumes of the current edition. Cfr. M. Foucault, “Sobre Nietzsche. Entrevista com Jacqueline Piatier”, en P. Artières, J.-F. Bert, F. Gros. y J. Revel (eds.), *Michel Foucault*, Rio de Janeiro, Forense Universitaria, 2014, pp. 79-80.

of antagonism from that of Žižek; and that it may provide us an alternative way of thinking about politics to the one he put forth.

As I have said, this is not the place to develop a detailed account of the problem of the will to power in Foucault and Nietzsche, but I would like to briefly go over the main characteristics of Nietzschean ontology, then come back to Foucault, and finally reengage with Žižek. Firstly, I would like to defend the thesis that Nietzsche's posthumous fragments delineating his theory on the will to power are actually an ontological transposition of the reflections developed by the young Nietzsche regarding Greek *agonism*. Let us recall that in early texts, such as "Homer's Contest" (*Hommers Wettkampf*), Nietzsche characterized the Greeks as "agonistic" people, because they held permanent struggle as an ideal for life.<sup>8</sup> This agonistic impulse, this *will to struggle and dispute*, makes it possible to affirm the tragic character of existence without falling into pessimism. By wholly accepting that conflict, suffering and tragedy are part of life, and that they cannot be eradicated, it is possible to transform that *agon* into a form of play (*Wettkampf*) that feeds into politics.

The "antagonistic play of forces" is precisely what was front and centre in Nietzsche's notes at the end of the 1880s<sup>9</sup>. For example, in fragment 9[151], from 1887, he writes that "the will to power can only express itself against resistances [*Widerständen*]; it seeks what will resist it"<sup>10</sup>; and in fragment 14[93], of 1888, he adds that "it is essentially a world of relationships" considering that "its being is essentially different at every point: it presses on every point, every point resists it"<sup>11</sup>. In fragment 9[91] of 1887, he similarly puts forth that "all that happens, all

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<sup>8</sup> Nietzsche illustrates the value of 'the Greeks 'agonal culture' through the institution of ostracism. Anyone who demonstrated absolute superiority over others was expelled from the city, so as to not hinder the spirit of competition, which contributed to the vitality of the *Polis*: "If one wants to see that sentiment unashamed in its naïve expressions, the sentiment as to the necessity of contest lest the State's welfare be threatened, one should think of the original meaning of *Ostracism*, as for example the Ephesians pronounced it at the banishment of Hermodor. 'Among us nobody shall be the best; if however someone is the best, then let him be so elsewhere and among others.' Why should not someone be the best? Because with that the contest would fail, and the eternal life-basis of the Hellenic State [...] The original sense of this peculiar institution [Ostracism] however is not that of a safety-valve but that of a stimulant. The all-excelling individual was to be removed in order that *the contest of forces might re-awaken*". F. Nietzsche, "Homer's Contest," in *Early Greek Philosophy & Other Essays*, New York, Macmillan, 1911, p. 58.

<sup>9</sup> My reading of the posthumous fragments of Nietzsche is informed by the interpretation of German Philosopher Wolfgang Müller-Lauter, especially the one he lays out both in "Nietzsches Lehre vom Willen zur Macht" and "Der Organismus als innere Kampf." See W. Müller-Lauter. *Über Werden und Wille zur Macht. Nietzsche Interpretationen I*, Berlin, Walter de Gruyter, 1999. The fragments cited here are from the Spanish-language edition of Nietzsche's posthumous manuscripts, under the direction of Diego Sánchez Meca. See F. Nietzsche, *Fragmentos póstumos (1885-1889)*, Vol. IV, Madrid, Tecnos, 2008. T.N. The Stanford University Press, English-language edition of the complete works of Nietzsche has only gotten to *Unpublished Fragments (Spring 1885-Spring 1886)*. Also, the Cambridge University Press's *Writings from the Late Notebooks* only offers a selection of entries from these texts. Consequently, where the Stanford and Cambridge editions fail to provide an existing translation of these fragments, we have offered our own—along with all the possible shortcomings they may entail.

<sup>10</sup> F. Nietzsche, *Writings from the Late Notebooks*, Ed. Rudiger Bittner, Trans. Kate Sturge, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2006, p. 165. We have removed the emphasis (italics) from this English translation so that the text matches more closely the unformatted version found in the original Spanish.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 250

movement, all becoming as a determining of relations of degree and force, as a struggle”<sup>12</sup> What does all of this mean? The first thing is that the *will to power* is a *relational* concept. It refers to a play of multiple antagonisms in which forces ‘measure up’ their power in accordance with their capacity to defeat the resistance offered by other forces<sup>13</sup>. The will to power is not a substance; it is not a principle to which all being ultimately hearkens back, as Heidegger asserted, but a multiplicity of forces in conflict.<sup>14</sup> It is not a *fundamental* instance, since what is inherent to the will to power is that relations are in constant change; forces are never the same. For Nietzsche, this antagonism is necessarily pluralistic and multiple. There is no single will from which all antagonisms emanate, but a multiplicity of wills in confrontation.

Yet, the agonistic character of will is not reducible to *political* and *social* power relations between human beings. It is no longer, as it was in his first writings, a particular characteristic of Greek culture, but has now acquired an ontological character. The will to power cannot be reduced to purely sociological phenomena; rather it is the dynamic of *life* itself. In fragment 9[13] of 1887, Nietzsche states: “Life itself is not the means to something else; it is the expression of forms of growth and power.”<sup>15</sup> And in fragment 14[81], of 1888, he adds that the will to power is “the will to accumulate force, as specific for the phenomenon of life, for nutrition, reproduction and heredity, for society, the state, customs and authority.”<sup>16</sup> Nietzsche affirms that the dynamics of all entities is not the self-conservation of life, but the expansion of force, the unfolding of one’s own power. This means that all forms of life, from the simplest to the most complex ones, including of course the relationships between human beings (society, State, authority), are permeated by the will to obtain a *surplus* of force, to augment the sensation of one’s own power. But this can only be achieved by overcoming resistance, by appropriating the force against which one struggles. Antagonism lies in the fact that every force struggling in conflict wills to ‘appropriate’ (*Anneigung*) the opposing force, thus integrating it into its own force. In fragment 9[151] from 1887, Nietzsche states that “the will to power can only express itself against resistances; it seeks what will resist it”<sup>17</sup>. And it does so, no so much to *destroy* that which resists it, but in order to ‘incorporate’ it (*Einverleibung*): “Assimilation and incorporation is, above all, a willing to overwhelm, a training, shaping and reshaping, until at last the overwhelmed has passed entirely into the power of the attacker and augmented it”<sup>18</sup>.

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<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 155

<sup>13</sup> Deleuze understood this quite well, as can be seen in his reading of Nietzsche: “Every force is thus essentially related to another force. The being of force is plural, it would be absolutely absurd to think about force in the singular.” G. Deleuze, *Nietzsche and Philosophy*, London, Continuum, 1983, p. 6.

<sup>14</sup> Heidegger bases his interpretation on a handful of sentences from Nietzsche’s work; for example, fragment 37[8], from 1885, in which the philosopher affirms that the world is will to power and “nothing else” (*nichts ausserdem*). He also bases this assertion on fragment 14[80], from the spring of 1888, where Nietzsche states that, “the innermost essence of being is the will to power.” These affirmations lead Heidegger to posit that the multiplicity of ontic manifestations ultimately stem from a sole will to power that is the underlying principle for all things that exist. For this discussion, see W. Müller-Lauter. *Über Werden und Wille zur Macht*, cit., pp. 44-57.

<sup>15</sup> F. Nietzsche, *Fragmentos póstumos*, cit., p. 238.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 535

<sup>17</sup> F. Nietzsche, *Writings from the Late Notebooks*, cit., p. 165.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

The antagonism to which Nietzsche makes reference in his concept of the *will to power* is not, then, a dynamics of arbitrary domination, as suggested, for example, in Habermas' interpretation. The 'victory' of a force (or a set of forces) over another is not achieved when the opposing force is destroyed, but when it is 'hegemonized'; that is, when the defeated force accepts the *interpretation* of the victorious force as the means of continuing its antagonism. This implies that when the triumphant force appropriates the defeated one, the process necessarily requires a *selection*. Appropriation is always selective, because it is not about incorporating all the defeated force's elements, but only those that are capable of increasing the power of the victor. Said elements are in-corporated, assimilated into the victor's own *body*, which presupposes that the conflicting forces 'know' which elements augment their power and which ones diminish it. This interpreting activity of the will to power, as Nietzsche explains, is inherent to life itself. Fragment 2[148] of 1885-1886 establishes the following: "The will to power interprets: in the formation of an organ interpretation is at stake; it demarcates, determines degrees, power differentials [...] In truth interpretation is a means itself of becoming master over something. (The organic process presupposes constant interpreting.)"<sup>19</sup>. Antagonism thus implies a process of 'evaluation,' of mutual interpretation of conflicting forces.

We have seen that the will to power is not a unity, an underlying principle, but this does not mean that conflicting forces are not able to *articulate* themselves. Some forces may become commensurate with others and form a 'block' (*Gebilde*), which allows them to struggle for hegemony over other forces. It is here where the Nietzschean conception of *Quanta* appears—a word found only four times in his posthumous fragments. In fragment 10[82], of 1887, it is said that the "quanta of force" are forces organized in groups "that aspire to have privileges and predominance."<sup>20</sup> That is to say that in the midst of generalized conflict (antagonism), some forces articulate themselves with other forces to establish a *hegemony* that would allow them to impose their sense on all the other forces. It is not the case that the most 'capable' forces automatically establish their hegemony over the 'weakest' (as if weakness and strength were defined a priori), but that what will determine which forces are victorious or suppressed is the *result* of the struggle for hegemony. The strength and weakness are characteristics 'retrospectively' defined (as Žižek posits), once the dust on the battlefield has settled.

Given all that has been stated thus far, it may seem that Nietzsche has a *naturalist* conception of antagonism. Power relations would amount to nothing more than the expression of natural forces, such as those studied by Newton: cause and effect, action and reaction. However, a closer look at his critique of scientific positivism will offer us a different perspective. It is important to point out that, at this time (1887-88), Nietzsche had already begun to meticulously study the natural sciences. He was trying to ground more solidly his rejection of modern science's objectivist aspirations—a topic with which he was engaged from his earlier texts as a youth. As Müller-Lauter has shown, Nietzsche came from a Kantian tradition according to which the ability to provide something with a 'form' (*Gestaltung*) comes from within, it comes from

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<sup>19</sup> F. Nietzsche, *Unpublished Fragments (Spring 1885-Spring 1886)*, Trans. Adrian Del Caro, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2020, p. 376. T.N.- We have removed the emphasis (italics and bold) from this English translation so that the text matches more closely the unformatted version found in the original Spanish.

<sup>20</sup> F. Nietzsche, *Fragmentos póstumos*, cit., p. 325.

internal, rather than external forces. It then becomes clear why, from this perspective, the ideas of nineteenth century science, which highlighted the relevance of external forces (mechanicism) and of adapting to the environment (Darwinism), were emphatically rejected by Nietzsche; and why Kant (and not Hegel) will be the point of reference in his reflections.

Let us see how the problem is posed in fragment 9[91], from 1887, where he affirms that “‘mechanical necessity’ is not a fact” rather “it is we who have interpreted it into what happens.”<sup>21</sup> Here Nietzsche is referring to the modern conception that explicates the world by way of models provided by mechanics, that is, on the basis of *physical forces* that act on one another, according to the laws of cause-and-effect: everything that moves is moved by an external force. What Nietzsche asserts is that the concepts of cause and effect are ‘projections’ introduced in the world, based on the false assumption we have of the ‘subject’ (something caused by ‘someone’). Kant had already pointed out that cause and effect are *a priori* conditions of sensibility; the principle “every effect is preceded by a cause” is not a law of nature, but a law of the human intellect. But Nietzsche radicalizes this point put forth by Kant, in that he plucks away the subject’s transcendental status.<sup>22</sup> What fragment 9[91] affirms is that from the notion of subject-in-itself (as an agent, or ‘doer,’ that sets something in motion) we then arrive at the notion of thing-in-itself. One should note that, before turning substance into subject, as Hegel does (a movement that Žižek unreservedly takes back up), Nietzsche establishes the notion of the subject as a *fable*. In fragment 9[98] of 1887, he explains that, “the concept of ‘reality’, of ‘being’, is drawn from our feeling of ‘subject’. ‘Subject’: interpreted from the standpoint of ourselves, so that the I is considered subject, cause of all doing, doer.”<sup>23</sup> And in fragment 9[91] of that same year, he asserts that it was only us who have “invented *thingness*,” and that the ‘subject’ is undoubtedly “merely a fiction.”<sup>24</sup>

This can lead us to the conclusion that Nietzsche grounded his thought on Kant, rather than on Hegel, while radicalizing the former; science thinks it is talking about a world-in-itself, when it has not actually gone beyond the *bodily* world. What Nietzsche says is that interpretation is an act that is not anchored in consciousness, but in the state of the multiple forces that comprise the body. As Nietzsche puts it, in the words of Zarathustra, the body is that “great reason” that selects, evaluates, hierarchizes and channels forces. But when speaking of the body (*Leib*), Nietzsche is not referring primarily to a physiological entity (*Körper*). There is no “physicalist” perspective of body here. The evaluation, interpretation and selection that bodies perform are not *biological* operations. The conflicting forces are not a set of biological states that

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<sup>21</sup> F. Nietzsche, *Writings from the Late Notebooks*, cit., p. 154.

<sup>22</sup> This argument was presented in a text from his youth “On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense” (which was highly esteemed by Foucault). The short text begins with Kant, which he reads through the lens of Schopenhauer, and posits that between our knowledge of the world and the thing-in-itself there is no connection. Knowledge is nothing more than an ‘invention’ (*Erfindung*)—or an ‘interpretation’ (*Auslegung*), as he will later state—whose sole objective is keep man alive. The truth generated by knowledge tells us nothing at all about the world; its value lies only in its “usefulness for life.” The world our knowledge refers to is merely *our* world, to such an extent that all of our knowledge is an anthropomorphic fiction—an illusion that results from the use of language, and metaphor. One such metaphor that we project onto the thing-in-itself is the notion of ‘subject.’

<sup>23</sup> F. Nietzsche, *Writings from the Late Notebooks*, cit., p. 158.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 154.



can be quantified and observed by science. Beyond a mere set of physical or chemical forces, or an “organism” that adapts to the environment for survival, the body in question in Nietzsche is an *unstable field of forces* capable of self-regulation. The outcome of this self-regulation depends on what forces, and at what moment in time, impose their interpretative hegemony. This idea is clearly stated in fragment 14[74] of 1888, “The protoplasm appropriates something and then integrates it into its organism, which therefore becomes stronger and exercises power to strengthen itself,” thus expressing that the chemical behavior of bodies stems from something that, in itself, is not chemical: the struggle of wills that are constantly interpreting in order to strengthen themselves. The will to power is ontologically prior to the world of chemistry, as it is clear in fragments 14[74] and 14[81] from 1888, where it is said that the phenomenon called ‘nutrition’ is only the manifestation of a set of wills seeking to augment their own power. The agonism of forces is irreducible to biology and psychology; it is not exhausted in the world of entities. This means that, for Nietzsche, antagonism should not be *confused* with phenomena of a physical, mental, political or sociological order. The relationship of forces has an *ontological* character—a point was perfectly understood by Foucault.

In effect, if we examine the Foucauldian conception of power through what has just been laid out, we will realize how short the objections raised by Žižek fall. In the second chapter of *The Will to Knowledge*, Foucault tells us that power is not a substance, but a set of relations; power does not “emanate” from a specific centre (the State, corporate class, etc.)—power is practiced from a multiplicity of points immanent to any social formation. By the same token, although there are always calculations and strategies in any exercise of power, such exercises cannot be conceived of as anchored in the autonomous decisions of a subject.<sup>25</sup> Neither is power a binary relationship between oppressor and oppressed, between those who dominate and those who are dominated; rather, it is a *general matrix of antagonisms* that spans the whole of the social body.<sup>26</sup> It is useless, then, to comprehend power as something *reduced* to groups that control States apparatuses, to committees of experts that make economic decisions, etcetera. Why is that? Because, just as Nietzsche had realized, the will to power is ontologically *prior* to the facticity of the socio-political order. One thing is the ontological form of agonism, and another very different thing is its specific ontic contents. The sense of Foucault’s famous phrase, “politics is the continuation of war by other means,” stems from this distinction.<sup>27</sup> Of course, Foucault does not mean *empirical* war (one particular military confrontation or another), but the incessant agonistic struggle that unfolds at *all* levels of social life. Existence, as such, is a state of permanent war. And it is here, on this point, where the famous passage that Žižek takes as the basis for his critique comes into play:

Where there is power, there is resistance, and yet, or rather consequently, this resistance is never in a position of exteriority in relation to power. Should it be said

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<sup>25</sup> Cfr. M. Foucault, *Historia de la sexualidad. Vol. 1: La voluntad de saber*, Mexico, Siglo XXI, 2009, p. 115.

<sup>26</sup> No one understood the problem of the agonism of forces in Foucault as well as Deleuze: “In every social formation, all forces have a relationship with others, whether they are affecting them, or being affected by them; and both at the same time: there is no force that does not affect others, no force that is not affected by others.” G. Deleuze, *La subjetivación. Curso sobre Foucault*, t. III, Buenos Aires, Editorial Cactus, 2015.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 113.

that one is always ‘inside’ power, there is no ‘escaping’ it, there is no absolute outside where it is concerned, because one is subject to the law in any case? Or that, history being the ruse of reason, power is the ruse of history, always emerging the winner? This would be to misunderstand the strictly relational character of power relationships. Their existence depends on a multiplicity of points of resistance: these play the role of adversary, target, support, or handle in power relations. These points of resistance are present everywhere in the power network. Hence there is no single locus of great Refusal, no soul of revolt, source of all rebellions, or pure law of the revolutionary. Instead there is a plurality of resistances, each of them a special case: resistances that are possible, necessary, improbable; others that are spontaneous, savage, solitary, concerted, rampant, or violent; still others that are quick to compromise, interested, or sacrificial; by definition, they can only exist in the strategic field of power relations.<sup>28</sup>

Žižek’s interpretation of this passage claims that resistance is at the same level as the power against which it fights; it is for this very reason that Foucault is incapable of offering alternatives to the power currently exerted by capitalism. If there is no *ontological discontinuity* between power and resistance, if both elements are part of the same horizon of sense, then all resistance will always already be coopted by capitalism and by liberal democracy. In other words, what Žižek says about Foucault is that his theory of power lacks an ontology, because it only offers an ontic (historical) version of antagonism. If his theory of power had an ontological anchoring, Foucault would have realized that real resistance does not belong to the same factic\*\* order as the power it combats, but that it is embedded in the very heart of reality (which he posits in Hegelian terms as the ‘subject’). It is only *from there* that it will possible to antagonize capitalism.<sup>29</sup> The question remains: is this objection correct? No, I do not think it is, since the assertion “where there is power, there is resistance” is already fully anchored in an *ontology*, at the core of which is the Nietzschean conception of the will to power. This assertion simply means that any kind of struggle against domination cannot remove itself from the ontological dimension of antagonism. This agonism cannot ever be “overcome” through the establishment of any type of factic power, whatever its politics may be. All resistance against power is nourished by, and cannot escape from, generalized agonism. Moreover, Foucault states that agonism is what impedes any form of domination from becoming a *totality*. There will always be a counter,

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<sup>28</sup> M. Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Volume I: An Introduction*, New York, Pantheon, 1978, pp. 95-96.

\*\* T.N. Although we are well aware that, in English-language translations of Foucault, it is more common to refer to ‘*de facto* power,’ we believe that the ontological nature of the discussion merits a translation that sticks closer to the notion of facticity.

<sup>29</sup> His critique is based on the notion that Foucault *lacks* a concept of antagonism: “It seems that such a notion of antagonism is what Foucault lacks: from the fact that every resistance is generated (‘posited’) by the Power edifice itself, from this absolute inherence of resistance to Power, he seems to draw the conclusion that resistance is co-opted in advance, that it cannot seriously undermine the system - that is, he precludes the possibility that the system itself, on account of its inherent inconsistency, may give birth to a force whose excess it is no longer able to master and which thus detonates its unity, its capacity to reproduce itself. In short, Foucault does not consider the possibility of an effect escaping, outgrowing its cause, so that although it emerges as a form of resistance to power and is as such absolutely inherent to it, it can outgrow and explode it.” S. Žižek, *The Ticklish Subject. The Absent Centre of Political Ontology*, London, Verso, 2000, p. 256.

-power that emerges to prevent factic power from becoming absolute. “Where there is power, there is resistance” thus expresses the impossibility of conceiving of society as a closed totality.

Therefore, the category of *antagonism*—which is key to understanding Foucauldian ontology and the critique herein of Žižek’s perspective—now becomes clearer. In line with Nietzsche, Foucault works with an ‘agonistic’ conception of power, according to which the confrontation of forces is *constitutive* of human experience itself, and can never be eradicated.<sup>30</sup> No matter what we do, we will have to always live *with* tragedy; our task is not to escape it, but to try to *govern* it. In one of his last texts, Foucault laid out his position in the following manner:

In effect, what defines a relationship of power is that it is a mode of action which does not act directly and immediately on others. Instead it acts upon their actions: an action upon an action, existing actions or on those which may arise in the present or the future [...] In itself, the exercise of power is not violence; nor is it a consent which, implicitly, is renewable. It is a total structure of actions brought to bear upon possible actions; it incites, it induces, it seduces, it makes easier or more difficult; in the extreme it constrains or forbids absolutely; it is nevertheless always a way of acting upon an acting subject or acting subjects by virtue of their acting or being capable of action. A set of actions upon other actions [...] The crucial problem of power is not that of voluntary servitude (how could we seek to be slaves?). At the very heart of the power relationship, and constantly provoking it, are the recalcitrance of the will and the intransigence of freedom. Rather than speaking of an essential freedom, it would be better to speak of an “agonism”—of a relationship which is at the same time reciprocal incitation and struggle; less of a face-to-face confrontation which paralyzes both sides than a permanent provocation.<sup>31</sup>

Here it is very clear what the agonistic confrontation of forces means; it is not about a force imposing itself on others to dominate them, but about structuring its possible field of action, that is, by exercising *hegemony* over them. For what characterizes hegemony is not the exercise of force, but the exercise of *government*<sup>32</sup>. This is something that Žižek never understood: there is power when a will (or ensemble of wills) governs the actions of other wills, but without necessarily seeking to *submit* them by force, as this would end the agonistic play and restrict the exercise of freedom (which is the very condition of this play). Where there is servitude, there is no will to power, but *domination*, plain and simple. The exercise of

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<sup>30</sup> “For to say that there cannot be a society without power relations is not to say either that those which are established are necessary, or, in any case, that power constitutes a fatality at the heart of societies, such that it cannot be undermined. Instead I would say that the analysis, elaboration, and bringing into question of power relations and the ‘agonism’ between power relations and the intransitivity of freedom is a permanent political task inherent in all social existence.” M. Foucault, “The Subject and Power,” in H. Dreyfus & P. Rabinow (eds.), *Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1983, p. 223.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, pp 220-222

<sup>32</sup> One thing is agonism, and another very different thing is war. Agonism is not a bellicose relationship, but rather a contest between free agents. Therefore, it is not domination but rather the interconnection of contest that begins to interest Foucault from 1978 on. This is why he moves away from a model of power based on war to one based on government. See S. Castro-Gómez. *Historia de la gubernamentalidad. Razón de Estado, liberalismo y neoliberalismo en Michel Foucault*. Bogotá, Siglo del Hombre Editores, 2010.

government, on the contrary, implies allowing adversaries to act, letting them execute their strategic moves that incite and provoke. And when adversaries, by way of these moves, manage to *un-govern* themselves, to go beyond the limits imposed by hegemony, the play will then begin anew. Power is the confrontation of dissenting wills that mutually seek to achieve hegemony. This means that every governmental regime can be challenged through counter-hegemonic strategies seeking to disarticulate the established order and to impose a new hegemony.

As such, we can affirm that the key operation of counter-hegemonic practice is to intervene in the “conditions of acceptability” that the opposing hegemony has imposed on forms of conduct, behaviour and the organization of one’s bodily force.<sup>33</sup> As such, we should not forget that the basic operation of power is not the destruction of the enemy, but the submission of his or her will to certain forms of behaviour. These are forms that require *consent* on the part of the governed, that appeal to the exercise of their freedom, for otherwise this agonistic play would be impossible. We would not be able to ‘play’ if there were no rules, if we did not have ‘consensus’ (as Gramsci would say) concerning the moves we can and cannot make. If power were simply an exercise of arbitrary domination, then there would be place for *agon*. Foucault understood this quite well, as can be seen in his analyses of neoliberalism. In his 1979 lectures on *The Birth of Biopolitics*, the French philosopher showed that neoliberalism’s hegemony is founded, not only on *coercion* (the State imposing, top-down, a series of economic policies), but also on the creation of a *common sense* regarding forms of behaviour. Neoliberalism is, above all else, the governing of affects and desires. It intervenes in people’s everyday lives—over the way in which they eat, engage in entertainment, educate their children, carry out their sex life, cultivate their spiritual interests.<sup>34</sup> There is no government that does not create a *habitus*. For that very reason, the disarticulation of a hegemony, such as that of neoliberalism, will have to necessarily intervene in the common sense governing behaviour, and not only through the molar intervention in State apparatuses, as Žižek would have it.

If we accept this antagonistic model of power put forth by Nietzsche and Foucault (and my interpretation of that model via the Gramscian concept of hegemony), there are two conclusions that follow. First, no social formation will ever accomplish its *completion*. Antagonism always produces new and varied configurations of power and counterpower. The result is that it is impossible for a society to come to its own culmination. It will always be *incomplete*, as Žižek says, not because it ontologically *lacks* something, but because it always generates new folds, new and different combinations of its elements. Incompleteness is thus not anchored in a “fundamental lack” of the subject, but in the incessant multiplication of the antagonisms. If force relations are always multiple and multipliable, it is clear then that points of resistance are everywhere within a network of power, as Foucault clearly states in *The Will to*

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<sup>33</sup> Foucault asserts that, “There are two correlative operations to perform: bring out the conditions of acceptability of a system and follow the breaking points which indicate its emergence [...] The identification of the acceptability of a system cannot be dissociated from identifying what made it difficult to accept: its arbitrary nature in terms of knowledge, its violence in terms of power, in short, its energy.” M. Foucault. “What is Critique,” in *The Politics of Truth*, New York, Semiotext(e), 1997, p. 54.

<sup>34</sup> See my reading of this seminar in S. Castro-Gómez. *Historia de la gubernamentalidad. Razón de Estado, liberalismo y neoliberalismo en Michel Foucault*, cit.

*Knowledge*. Foucault positions himself far from the idea that there exists an omnipresent power (Capitalism) that generates its own, sole antagonist: the working class (or *Lumpenproletariat* in Žižek's version). However, my point here is that Foucault's developments are much closer to Žižek's than the latter was able to perceive. One example is his thesis positing that antagonism acts as an intrinsically *negative* power in all social formations—as a negativity that could never be absorbed by factic power structures, but that actually has the potential to subvert them. This is precisely what he means in the proposition “where there is power, there is resistance,” which Žižek overlooked; no social positivity will ever be able to eliminate the negative element intrinsic to every power relation.

The second conclusion that we could draw from this agonistic model is that freedom is only possible through the *absence of ground*. Here we once again move closer to Žižek and his interpretation of Schelling. If a ground were to exist, that is; if all human actions were to stem from a positivity that acted as a guarantee, then freedom would not be possible. Quite the contrary; we are free *because* we always have to make a decision (*Entscheidung*), a radical break, a move whose success can by no means be guaranteed (because otherwise it would not be a “move”). In other words, if our decisions were backed up by ultimate rational criteria, they would not be decisions.<sup>35</sup> For what characterizes a decision is that it is made at a crossroads; one has to take one road or the other, without knowing beforehand where it will lead, without being able to turn back (this is the sense of the German word *Ent-Scheidung*). We are free because our decisions are made in the *void*, because without this constitutive negativity it would be impossible to ground any kind of positivity.<sup>36</sup> Therefore, there is no way to eliminate *decisionism*—such as Habermas attempts to do, for example—since this would suppose the very negation of freedom. On the contrary, the absence of “markers of certainty” in politics (as we shall later see) is what constitutes a democracy that acknowledges freedom.

All of this helps us to understand Foucault's critiques of the Marxist model of analysis that posits society as a closed totality. There is no such thing as “society,” if by society we mean a self-contained element that can explicate the totality of all possible relations. The reason is clear: the antagonism of forces prevents the emergence of a sense *prior* to a set of relations (that would amount to the ‘Aristotelian model’, which we previously mentioned); on the contrary, all sense is differentially generated by the combination of antagonistic forces that enter into a relationship with one another. All sense is *immanent*, which means that it does not stem from an origin (*Ursprung*) located *outside* the system of antagonist relations that would allow for its complete intelligibility. “Society,” understood in those terms, is something impossible for Foucault, because *the social has no essence*: it is a permanent, open and decentered flux of

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<sup>35</sup> This is the basis of the concept of *constituent power (potentia)*, which we will examine in detail in the next chapter.

<sup>36</sup> Foucault writes: “Power is exercised only over free subjects, and only insofar as they are free. By this we mean individual or collective subjects who are faced with a field of possibilities in which several ways of behaving, several reactions and diverse comportments may be realized [...] In this game freedom may well appear as the condition for the exercise of power (at the same time its precondition, since freedom must exist for power to be exerted, and also its permanent support, since without the possibility of recalcitrance, power would be equivalent to a physical determination).” “The Subject and Power,” cit., p. 221

relations.<sup>37</sup> Therefore, we should abandon Žižek's thesis according to which Capitalism (with a capital C) has colonized *all* social spaces and, consequently, class struggle has priority over *all* other political struggles. It is abundantly clear; Nietzsche and Foucault's agonistic model excludes from the outset any aprioristic necessity in social order or any kind of totalization. There is no room in this model to postulate a *principled* centrality of the *economy* over all the other forms of identification, or of the *State* over all other forms of domination. And neither is there room to think about "Capitalism" as a totalizing entity that functions independently of the specific practices that make it possible. I will come back to this point later.

For now, let us be clear that 'antagonism' does mean *the same* as 'contradiction.' In the Marxist model, it is generally said that society become 'self-contradictory' when capital and labour collide. Capital seeks to subsume labour into its own mercantile logic, which implies that the working class situates itself in a relationship of objective contradiction with the social totality that has produced it. Capitalist relations generate a kind of domination of man by man, and, in that sense, 'society' enters into 'contradiction' with itself. Now, in Nietzsche and Foucault's agonistic model, *social* relations never appear as a conditioning element, but rather as always conditioned, due to the fact that the agonism of forces is ontologically *prior* to empirical power relations. *This* is why antagonism and contradiction are not the same.<sup>38</sup> While the Marxist model situates the capitalist economy as a formation that *conditions* all antagonisms, Nietzsche and Foucault demonstrate that no empirical social formation could ever actually condition, but rather is always conditioned. The agonism of forces does not *depend* on the contents of social struggles, or on their actors, but is the condition of their (im)possibility. This means, in the language of Žižek, that the agonism of forces is the condition of possibility for social power relations (there would not be power struggles without the ontological experience of negativity—that is, the absence of plenitude); but it functions, at the same time, as the condition of impossibility of "society" as a totalizing unity. Agonism makes empirical power relations possible and simultaneously impedes any one of them from ever totalizing itself and, thus, shutting down the very system of relations.

All of this is very clear to Žižek when he posits that antagonism does not *depend* on social relations, but on the subject's inherent 'gap.' He agrees with the agonist model when he states that antagonism is a fundamental negativity that impedes the total positivization of the social; but he departs from this model when he says that such negativity is anchored in the Lacanian notion of subject. For Žižek, antagonism is grounded in the 'failure' of the subject, on the internal limit that prevents the full realization of its personality. Nietzsche and Foucault, to

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<sup>37</sup> This does not mean that there are no "nodal points" that form in this bundle of relations, generating great concentrations of power. Foucault calls them *Dispositifs*, which can be understood as ensembles of techniques, discourses and procedures that operate, at certain specific moments, as the *a priori* of practices. However, we should see these concentrations as an *effect* of the set of multiple relations of force, and not an element that overdetermines the field of relationships themselves.

<sup>38</sup> I am not going to get into the old discussion here as to whether a contradiction is something that can be attributed to social relations themselves or only to concepts. For example, Popper scoffed at the absurdity of the idea that a social relation can be "contradictory." We can say here that notion of social contradiction is acceptable if and when one can identify 1) its dependence on the agonism of forces as a fundamental negativity, and 2) the impossibility of "dialectically resolving" the contradiction.

the contrary, anchor antagonism in the *void* left by the perpetual combat of forces that constitute existence. The absence of ground is certainly an ontological trait, constitutive of experience; but it does not stem from a transcendental subject that overdeterminates the sense of that reality, as Žižek would have it with his interpretation of Hegel. There is no original *Spaltung*, or fundamental alienation of the subject, because identification is always contingent and will depend on the manner in which the subject positions itself within the network of antagonistic relationship that constitute it. If it is possible to affirm, by way of Lacan, that the subject is always a subject of lack, this should not be understood as a phenomenon *constitutive* of subjectivity itself, but as an effect of the subject's incapacity to withdraw itself from the open-endedness of antagonism and achieve a "fixed" identity once and for all. Let us recall the basic principle of the agonistic model: in any empirical situation there are no elements that could be defined in abstraction from the relations of force established between them. No element, not even the subject (by no means!) has priority over these relations.

With that being said, is Žižek right to say that for Foucault there is no *a priori* that goes beyond factic history? Is Foucault the father of "postmodern historicism", which has taken over academia and functions as an "ideology of late capitalism"? For Žižek, who follows Heidegger on this point, *historicity* is the ontological terrain that sustains the historical play of inclusions and exclusions. The position of the historicist (of which Foucault is accused) is centered on the empirical analysis of the forms that this play acquires at a specific moment and place, in a given historical situation, circumventing the ontological framework that makes the game itself possible. But, is it *this* what Foucault does in his genealogical examinations of the prison, hospital, school and factory? Definitely not. According to the agonistic model (which Foucault calls "Nietzsche's hypothesis"), one must distinguish between two levels of analysis. On the one hand, there is the properly ontological level of power, which is the struggle of forces that constitutes our experience of reality and manifests itself in the *body*. On the other hand, there is the multiplicity of empirical contents that historical power relations acquire, which must be studied in each specific case, just as the genealogical method proposes. In the studies Foucault undertook between 1971 and 1976, both levels of analysis are mutually intertwined.

It is true, however, that although Foucault never dismissed the relevance of the first level, he focused his investigative efforts on the second. In this two-headed play, the historian managed to overcome the philosopher. However, the research he conducted in the 1960s does not affirm that power can be *reduced* to its contingent historical expressions, nor that there is no 'ahistorical' terrain in which the very rules of the genealogical procedure are defined. This is precisely the problem addressed in his famous essay *Nietzsche, Genealogy, History*. A genealogical undertaking always *presupposes* the ontological dimension of power, from which it cannot withdraw; it has to assume the need to position itself (*Entscheidung*) on the battlefield, in the agonist struggle for the hegemony of meaning:

The forces operating in history are not controlled by destiny or regulative mechanisms, but respond to haphazard conflicts. They do not manifest the successive forms of a primordial intention and their attraction is not that of a conclusion, for they always appear through the singular randomness of events. The inverse of the Christian world, spun entirely by a divine spider, and different from the world of the

Greeks, divided between the realm of will and the great cosmic folly, the world of effective history knows only one kingdom, without providence or final cause, where there is only lithe iron hand of necessity shaking the dice-box of chance." Chance is not simply the drawing of lots, but raising the stakes in every attempt to master chance through the *will to power*, and giving rise to the risk of an even greater chance.<sup>39</sup>

In this passage, Foucault states that history lacks finality (*telos*), for there is no metaphysical principle (God, in the Christian world; *Logos*, in the Greek world) that aprioristically provides sense to historical becoming. Sense is always the *result* of random forces clashing with one another; but this randomness should not be seen as a "simple lottery," as Foucault points out, but as a product of the will to power. In other words, although history does not derive from *metaphysics* (which is why the genealogist strives to dispel the "chimera of origin"), it does stem from an *ontology* of forces.<sup>40</sup> This is why—while the inquiry into origins (*Ursprung*) must be expelled from the genealogical exercise—the inquiry into descent (*Herkunft*) and emergence (*Entstehung*) is key. The genealogist presupposes an aspect that, in itself, *is not historical, but ontological*: "Emergence is thus the entry of forces; it is their eruption, the leap from the wings to [the] center stage" of history.<sup>41</sup> This is precisely what differentiates "effective history" (*wirkliche Historie*) from the "historians history."<sup>42</sup>

It seems clear that Foucault is not the type of "postmodern historicist" that Žižek made him out to be. Foucault is aware that, although every sociopolitical formation must be studied in its historical specificity, the forces that enter into the scene do not depend on that formation. No historical power can *exhaust* the antagonism of forces. This antagonism, as Nietzsche rightly observed, does not dissolve away into its ontic manifestations, be they political, sociological or psychological. As such, genealogy *presupposes* the confrontation of material forces constituting the ontological basis of power, which does not mean that said antagonism constitutes a ground (*Grund*). On the contrary: the incessant agonism of forces *impedes* historical power relations from emanating from a ground. Foucault is clear when he states that *wirkliche Historie* is a history "without constants"; "nothing in man—not even his body—is sufficiently stable to serve as the basis for self-recognition or for understanding other men."<sup>43</sup> He also adds that, "the true historical sense confirms our existence among countless lost events, without a landmark or a point of reference."<sup>44</sup> Here, again, we find an interesting proximity to Žižek's thought: the 'will to truth' is nothing but a futile attempt to avoid the traumatic encounter with *nothingness*, with the abyss (*Abgrund*) upon which the existence of man was built. Genealogy strives to situate this

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<sup>39</sup> ... *Truth and Method*...pp. 88-89. We have maintained the same emphasis where Santiago Castro-Gómez added it in his citing of the Spanish-language translation.

<sup>40</sup> Is it necessary, at this point, to clarify that the *ontology* in question does not emanate from anything situated in "the beyond," and that placing antagonism on an ontological plane does not imply the reintroduction of human essence as a negative anthropology (mankind is, by nature, conflictual, aggressive, bellicose, incapable or resolving conflicts, etc.)?

<sup>41</sup> M. Foucault, "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History," cit., p. 84.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 87.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 87-88.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 89.



*absence of ground* in the center of its reflections, showing the contingency of all our historical constructions. This is why, for Foucault, *eventualization* is the genealogical operation *par excellence*.

However, despite all the theoretical potential contained in this agonistic model of analysis for thinking about politics, Foucault never took this fundamental step forward. Instead of continuing his examination of the State, which he began in his 1977-1978 lectures, he chose to dedicate himself to thinking about the problem of governmentality within the domain of ethics. In the centre of Foucault's preoccupations emerged the problem of how it is possible to bring about an 'interruption'—in subjectivity itself, in the governmental techniques that produce subjects within the framework of pastoral power, State reason, liberalism and neoliberalism. This led him to explore techniques for the government of the self in Greek, Roman and Christian antiquity—a matter that would occupy him throughout his last five seminars. It would seem as if the potential of the concept of antagonism would now be neutralized by the positing of a model of subjectivity in which antagonisms could be "harmonized" via self-government; in this model, the generalized war of the will to power may be interrupted by means of an "aesthetics of existence." This is, at least, the reading of Foucault's later work that Žižek puts forth:

With Foucault, we have a turn against that universalist ethics [espoused by Habermas], which results in a kind of aestheticization of ethics: each subject must, without any support from universal rules, build his own mode of self-mastery; he must harmonize the antagonism of the powers within himself—invent himself, so to speak, produce himself as subject, find his own particular art of living. This is why Foucault was so fascinated by marginal lifestyles constructing their particular mode of subjectivity (the sadomasochistic homosexual universe).

It is not very difficult to detect how this Foucauldian notion of subject enters the humanist-elitist tradition: its closest realization would be the Renaissance ideal of the 'all-round personality' mastering the passions within himself and making out of his own life a work of art. Foucault's notion of the subject is, rather, a classical one: subject as the power of self-mediation and harmonizing the antagonistic forces, as a way of mastering the 'use of pleasures' through a restoration of the image of self.<sup>45</sup>

Against this reading, I would say that it is not true that Foucault was searching in Classical Antiquity for a "humanist-elitist" model of subject that would be capable of confronting modern techniques of government. Foucault's purpose is rather to emphasize the *active* character of the subject within the play of antagonisms. The subject is no longer seen as totally 'subjected' by power relations (which is ambiguous in his studies prior to 1978), but as an actor capable of playing strategically in the midst of an agonistic field of forces.<sup>46</sup> In any case,

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<sup>45</sup> S. Žižek, *The Sublime Object of ideology*, London, Verso, 2008, p. xxiv.

<sup>46</sup> It is curious that Žižek interprets this activity of the subject as a consequence of the move to a *previously lacking* (!) Nietzschean ontology of power: "When, in his later interviews, Foucault speaks about power and counter-power, he imperceptibly changes the terrain and moves to a kind of Nietzschean general ontology of power: power is everywhere and everything; it is the very air we breathe, the very stuff of our lives. This general ontology of power also involves a different notion of subject as the 'fold' of power; this subject is no longer the Self which,

however, Žižek is somewhat right when he accuses Foucault, in his later work, of falling into an aestheticism that diminishes the potential power of his previous war-based model for *thinking politics*. Why is this? Because Foucault is still trapped in a radical lack of confidence vis-à-vis the State and representative institutions. In Foucault there is a latent sort *anarchism* that hinders the possibility to think about the manner in which the *State* is *also* a battlefield of antagonist forces.<sup>47</sup> As later will be the case with Hardt and Negri, Foucault thinks of the State as something from which one must flee, and that disobedience vis-à-vis forms of government should be directed against the State. It should not be surprising, then, when he posits that, “the political, ethical, social, philosophical problem of our days is not to try to liberate the individual from the state, and from the state’s institutions, but to liberate us both from the state and from the type of individualization which is linked to the state.”<sup>48</sup>

To conclude, it can be said that the analysis of the conditions in which individuals can govern themselves and relate ethically to one another certainly merits philosophy interest. However, in all truth, there is no serious attempt in Foucault’s work to think about acts of political subjectivation *as such*.<sup>49</sup> Instead of taking advantage of the general ontology of power relations to think politics, Foucault preferred to dedicate himself to the study of techniques of the self, on an ethical and aesthetic level. By doing so, he missed the opportunity to construct a *theory of politics* based on the model of antagonism—a matter that will serve as a starting point for philosophers such as Lefort, Mouffe and Laclau.

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while waiting to be liberated from the repressive power, is effectively constituted by it.” S. Žižek, *The Ticklish Subject*, cit., p. 306 [note 3]. It seems that, on this point in particular, Žižek is simply, but evidently, *confused*.

<sup>47</sup> There is a great deal of anarchism in Foucault, which he himself acknowledged on several occasions. One only need recall the lecture “What is Critique,” in which Foucault laid out one of the first efforts of his governmental turn. In it he shows that his interest is geared towards the “the art of voluntary inservitude,” “the art of not being governed *like that*.” M. Foucault. “What is Critique,” *cit.*, pp. 29-32. When asked, during the question and answer session following the lecture, about the radicality of his assertion regarding “the will not to be governed,” Foucault responded that he was not referring to a kind of “fundamental anarchism,” but that he did not absolutely dismiss it either. *Ibid.*, pp. 72-73. Perhaps his sympathies with anarchism also explain Foucault’s interest in neoliberalism. Geoffroy de Lagasnerie is not mistaken when affirming that Foucault did not see neoliberalism as a conservative or reactionary ideology, but rather as an embodiment of critical thought. He was interested in the techniques of ‘de-statization’ that it entailed—the art of not being governed *quite so much*. The neoliberal utopia of a “Stateless society” was something that very much piqued Foucault’s interest. See G. de Lagasnerie, *A última Lição de Michel Foucault*, São Paulo, Três estrelas, 2013. T.N. We slightly edited the translation cited of Foucault’s “What is Critique,” rendering “voluntary insubordination” as “voluntary inservitude” as in other English translations.

<sup>48</sup> M. Foucault, “The Subject and Power,” *cit.*, p. 216.

<sup>49</sup> This was rightly pointed out by Rancière, who stated that not even the Foucault of the mid-seventies was interested in the problem of politics. His analyses of disciplinary techniques and the management of populations belong to what Rancière calls the sphere of the *police*, rather than the sphere of *politics*. Cf. J. Rancière, “La política no es coextensiva ni a la vida ni al Estado”, Barcelona, Herder, 2011, p. 134.