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**SUBJECTIVITY, FREEDOM AND HISTORY**

*Michel Foucault's Contribution to Critical Thought*

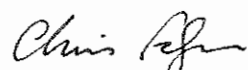
by

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*Declaration*

This thesis is my own work. All sources used have been acknowledged.



Christopher Anthony Falzon

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## *Abstract*

This thesis aims to defend Foucault, who pursues an 'anti-humanistic' critique of the subject, from the charge that he thereby falls into political pessimism, irrationalism and uncritical objectivism. Habermas in particular makes these criticisms. I argue that these criticisms depend on reading Foucault in terms of the very humanism that he rejects - more specifically, in terms of a 'humanistic subject-object framework', in which human beings are either free, autonomous subjects or determined, unfree objects. By questioning the subject in terms of history, Foucault seems to represent the latter alternative, and is criticised accordingly. But this situation can be turned around. In terms of this framework, it is not possible to give a historical account of the subject without destroying it, but by the same token, the autonomous subject lacks any historical context or any plausible account of its emergence. The freedom it represents turns out to be abstract and unworldly. Existentialism is discussed in this connection.

I then argue that the subject-object framework of thinking is itself the outcome of a subordination of the notion of history to a metaphysical First Philosophy, in the form of a foundational subjectivism. From the standpoint of the humanist subject, historical contextualisation appears only as the objectivistic dissolution of the subject, critique and freedom. And as long as thought proceeds in these terms, it is unable to take history seriously or use it to comprehend and interrogate the subject. On the contrary, thought is impelled by the threat of a reductive objectivism to affirm a historically transcendent standpoint. The Frankfurt School, or 'Critical Theory', provides an illustration of the difficulties thought experiences in doing justice to history when it proceeds in terms of the subject-object framework. Horkheimer and Habermas seek to save the subject and the possibility of social critique from what they see as their eclipse through an oppressive process of social objectification. In the process, however, they are unable to avoid assuming a transhistorical perspective as the basis of critique, flying in the face of their own historical awareness. This allows Habermas's criticisms of Foucault to be put into perspective. A form of thought that is unable to do justice to history is unable to properly grasp Foucault's historicising strategy.

Finally, I argue that Foucault does not represent an objectivistic denial of critique and freedom. He goes beyond the humanistic alternatives of autonomous subject

versus reductive objectivism, freeing historical reflection for this constraining framework in order to pursue the project of a historical critique of metaphysics. That is, he presents a historical analysis of the subject that is taken by humanism to be given, foundational, absolute, and capable of explaining society and history. What he thereby undermines is not critique and freedom per se but only their specifically humanist forms. Critique for Foucault no longer presupposes an essential subjectivity that has been historically distorted or denied, and freedom is no longer a matter of living in accordance with this subjectivity. It involves revealing the historical contingency in what we take for granted as essential and eternal in our existence, freeing us from the limitations on what we think and do engendered by these presuppositions, and opening up the possibility of rethinking our forms of thought and action. In developing this approach, Foucault gives expression to the historico-critical awareness that is also present in the Frankfurt School, and contributes to the activity of critical thought understood as a confrontation with metaphysics.

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## INTRODUCTION

Michel Foucault's work has excited a good deal of controversy and criticism, much of which is centred around the anxiety that, by calling into question the autonomous, rational subject, he undermines the possibility of social critique and human freedom. For such criticism, Foucault appears as an extreme representative of irrationalist, counter-enlightenment tendencies in contemporary culture. His position is seemingly self-destructive, for by debunking the central values and ideals of modernist culture, particularly the aspiration to rational self-determination, Foucault no longer seems to have any normative standpoint which might justify critical activity. He thus condemns human beings to subordination to social structures, and presents a reactionary politics of pessimism and resignation. We need to preserve the notion of the autonomous subject if there is to be any possibility of resistance and freedom. A key exponent of such criticism has been Jürgen Habermas, the contemporary representative of the German school of Critical Theory, whose work represents the major alternative to Foucault's in contemporary European thought.

It seems to me that this criticism presupposes a certain framework of thinking, which I will refer to as the 'subject-object framework'. In this context it is supposed that human beings are either autonomous, initiating subjects or determined, unfree objects. The existentialist celebration of the subject, the conflict between 'Hegelian' and 'Scientific' Marxism or between hermeneutics and structuralism, the efforts of critical theory to 'save the subject' in the face of an oppressive process of objectification - all of these are couched in the vocabulary of subject and object. And in these terms, Foucault's questioning of the subject inevitably appears as pointing towards an uncritical objectivism. But must he be read in this terms? To do so, I would suggest, is to entirely miss the novelty of his position. It seems to me that Foucault in fact explores the possibility of going beyond both these alternatives, of breaking from both the notion of an initiating subject *and* that of reductive objectivism; or at least, if we approach Foucault in this way, a lot of what he is saying falls into place.

In making such a break, Foucault departs from a picture that is problematic even in



its own terms. If we suppose that the only alternative to the founding subject is a reductive objectivism, it is also the case that a free subject which eludes concrete determinations in order to act autonomously is itself strangely abstract, unworldly, ethereal. It lacks any informing historical context or any real account of its historical emergence. In Chapter One I will discuss this strangely abstract subject, which is introduced by Kant, in its existentialist form, with reference to the work of Stuart Hampshire and Jean-Paul Sartre. Sartre in particular pushes the notion of subjective autonomy to its limit, and the bizarre vision of *Being and Nothingness* is the result. It must not be thought, however, that self-conscious autonomy is any less abstract if it is seen not as the immediate possession of an existentialist subject, which stands apart from all being, but as a reflective achievement, in a Hegelian manner. By escaping objective determination through the appropriation of all being to itself, the Hegelian-style subject continues to suffer from the lack of a concrete historical context.

If the humanist notion of subjectivity is problematically abstract, this has serious consequences for the notions of critique, freedom and enlightenment to the extent that they are supposed to be dependent upon it. By detaching these notions from the humanist subject, Foucault in fact represents the possibility of preserving them. He goes beyond the humanist subject not to celebrate uncritical subordination to objective determination but to free the notions of critique, freedom and enlightenment from their humanist formulation. More positively, he seeks to give expression to a historico-critical awareness that he takes to be central to our enlightened modernity. In the second chapter I will suggest that in modern thought - in Kant, Hegel and Marxism - this modernist sense of the historical has been persistently subordinated to a metaphysical First Philosophy, in the form of humanism's transhistorical, foundational conception of subjectivity. The subject-object framework can be seen as the consequence of this metaphysical subjectivism. It is for the subject conceived as a metaphysical absolute that history appears as the threat of a reductive objectivism, which in turn invokes the need to restore the subject that we have never really left. By freeing modernity's historico-critical awareness from the grip of the transcendental subject *and* its correlative objectivism, Foucault continues the tradition of enlightened critique as a historical critique of metaphysics, in the form of a historical interrogation of the humanist subject.

At the same time, as long as modern thought is dominated by humanist metaphysics, it is unable to do justice to its own historical awareness. To the extent that history appears as the threat of a reductive objectivism, the subject cannot be located in a concrete historical context, and thought cannot avoid affirming a transhistorical standpoint. In order to illustrate this I will discuss the work of the Frankfurt School of critical theory in Chapters Three and Four. My emphasis will be on Max Horkheimer's work, and to a lesser extent that of Theodor Adorno. I will argue that critical theory is in the first instance an attempt to restore the claims of the subject and the possibility of human freedom in the face of an objectivistic 'Scientific Marxism'. In this restoration of the subject, critical theory's distinctive incorporation of Freudian concepts into Marxism plays an important role. But I also want to suggest that critical theory has an acute awareness of the historical, which places it in opposition to all transhistorical, metaphysical perspectives. To the extent, however, that it proceeds in terms of the humanistic subject-object framework, historical immersion seems to raise the threat of falling into an uncritical, reductive objectivism; but in seeking to 'save the subject' critical theory is unable to avoid affirming a transhistorical perspective which in other contexts it rejects in a historicist spirit.

In Chapter Four I will also examine what can be called humanist criticisms of critical theory. That is, those criticisms which see the major problem in the Frankfurt School not as the tendency to return to a metaphysical, subjectivist standpoint despite the awareness of history, but rather as a tendency to undermine the subject and the possibility of critique and freedom through an implicit reductivism. By not adequately distinguishing the subjective realm from that of objective material determinations, critical theory participates in the very reductive objectivism that it should be opposing. Such criticism, conducted in terms of the humanistic subject-object framework, is both correct and incorrect. It is incorrect because it misses what is interesting and important in critical theory, its historico-critical awareness and the critique of metaphysical absolutes. But it also has some force insofar as critical theory itself proceeds in terms of the subject-object framework, in the context of which its historicism appears in the form of a reductive objectivism. To that extent, Horkheimer and Adorno do indeed undermine their own hopes for freedom, understood as the overcoming of objective determinations and the realisation of autonomy. Two alternatives present themselves here. We can radicalise historical critique so as to escape from the

constraints of the subject-object framework altogether, a move which points towards Foucault. Or we can remain within the humanist framework and reaffirm the claims of the founding subject in the face of all threats of objectivism. This points us to the contemporary form of critical theory, and in particular to Habermas.

In Chapters Five and Six, I will examine the way in which Habermas reformulates critical theory in order to unequivocally affirm the claims of the subject in the face of objectivism, including that which seems to have entered into critical theory itself. In this context, I will discuss the sharp distinction Habermas makes between 'linguistic interaction' and 'work', as well as the use he makes of Freud in articulating the distinct realm of intersubjectivity. Once again, however, there is the question of history to be considered. Like the earlier critical theorists, Habermas also expresses an awareness of the historical and calls into question transcending metaphysical standpoints. But the overriding framework of interaction and work, a further version of the subject-object framework, prevents him from following through this historical awareness. In the process of saving the subject from a one-sided, reductive objectivism, his thought returns to a transcending, metaphysical standpoint. In Chapter Six we will see how the later phase of Habermas's thought does not resolve this situation, but on the contrary exacerbates it. The historicist side of his thought is further suppressed, and his transcendental turn becomes more emphatic. The notion of the 'ideal speech situation' takes us back to an extreme Kantian foundationalism, securing a normative standpoint for critique but leaving history far behind.

This brings us to Foucault, and it is now possible to see Habermas's criticisms of Foucault in perspective. Thought that is dominated by the humanistic subject-object framework, and for that reason is unable to do justice to history, is unable to properly comprehend Foucault's historicist investigations. In Chapter Seven, I will seek to distinguish Foucault from his Habermasian portrayal as the reductive objectivist who lacks any basis for critique and freedom. On the contrary, Foucault frees historical reflection from the constraints of the subject-object framework, in order to give expression to the historical awareness that Habermas is unable to fully pursue. And where Habermas falls back into an ahistorical metaphysics, Foucault is able to pursue the project of a historical critique of metaphysics, specifically of the foundational subject of humanist

metaphysics. In so doing, he does not destroy the possibility of critique, freedom or enlightenment. Rather, he takes up the notion of enlightenment as thought's historically self-conscious break from metaphysical absolutism, in the form of a history of the subject that we have come to take as given, the indispensable foundation of our existence.

In these terms it will be possible to properly understand Foucault's concrete historical analyses of the formation of modern subjectivity. In particular it will be possible to understand his notion of a positive, productive form of power, which 'really and materially' constitutes human beings as subjects, as part of a historical and political analysis that critically reveals hitherto unnoticed forms of constraint. The subject that we seek to free is already the product of forms of subjection. And those humanistic forms of critique that see power as objectifying, denying or repressing our true subjectivity, and which seek to champion the claims of that subject in the face of repressive power, themselves participate in these positive forms of subjection. The Frankfurt School and Habermas employ this understanding of power and critique, and incorporate Freud into their picture in this connection. In departing from this picture, Foucault similarly sees psychoanalysis as a key expression of the modern notion of subjectivity, but he is able to grasp it as a central avenue for the operation of contemporary relations of power.

In the final chapter, I will examine the ethico-philosophical dimension of Foucault's historico-critical work, which is explicitly articulated in his later texts. It stands in direct opposition to the humanistic picture, which seeks to anchor thought and action, and the process of critique, in a normative conception of foundational subjectivity. The task there is to grasp and to live in accordance with one's true self, to be ourselves, in the face of all that distorts, represses or objectifies our selfhood. For Foucault in contrast, the ethical and philosophical task is to constantly 'break away from ourselves', to break free from the subjective identity that has been historically imposed on us, through a reflection on the historical processes that make us 'what we are'. To the extent that what we are is revealed to be historically contingent, the possibility is opened up of inventing different ways of thinking and acting. It is this willingness to question constraining self-images, to experiment with different forms of life, that Foucault sees as most characteristic of our modernity, as creatures of the Enlightenment.

To sum up, my contention is that Foucault's anti-humanism is not adequately grasped when it is interpreted as an uncritical, reductive objectivism, i.e., in terms of the alternatives of subject and object. I argue firstly that the subject-object framework is itself the outcome of the subordination of the notion of history to a metaphysics, to a subjectivist foundationalism; and secondly, as a corollary, that to the extent that thought proceeds in terms of the subject-object framework, it is unable to do justice to history. Finally, I argue that Foucault goes beyond these alternatives, freeing historical awareness from the subject-object framework in order to pursue a historical critique of humanist metaphysics.

One proviso needs to be made. I am not suggesting that any of the authors here can be exhaustively summed up in terms of the interpretive framework I have applied. A perspective broad enough to touch them all necessarily fails to do justice to the richness of the material they present. Their work always overflows easy categorisations, and could be approached from many other perspectives. The worth of my reading lies in the extent to which, if the material is approached in this way, a certain misreading of Foucault can be avoided. Foucault's work need not fall into the place so readily allotted to it by his humanist critics, and by Habermas in particular. In historically questioning the foundational subject, Foucault does not represent the end of critical thought and enlightened freedom, but rather the very exercise of critical thinking and free thought that keeps them alive. And whilst departing significantly from the work of the Frankfurt School and Habermas, Foucault also in a certain sense continues their work. What he rejects is the humanist metaphysics that constrains their historico-critical awareness. He thus makes a positive contribution to the activity of critical thought and to the modern struggle for enlightenment.