**Governmentality, subjectivity, and the neoliberal form of life**

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In this article, I address the issue of the form that contemporary capitalism gives to our lives through a critical discussion of Michel Foucault’s work on neoliberalism and of the growing scholarly literature on this topic. More precisely, I explore the main features of Foucault’s definition of neoliberalism as a peculiar art of governing human beings focusing on three points: neoliberalism as a set of technologies structuring the milieu of individuals in order to obtain specific effects upon their behavior; neoliberalism as a rationality of government transforming individual freedom in the very instrument through which individuals are directed; neoliberalism as a political strategy aiming to constitute a specific (and eminently governable) form of subjectivity. I conclude by highlighting the critical value that Foucault’s work on neoliberalism as well as on the ancient “ethics of the self” still possesses for us today.

**Keywords:** critique; Foucault; governmentality; neoliberalism; subjectivity

**Introduction**

What form does contemporary capitalism give to our lives? I will address this question through a critical discussion of Michel Foucault’s work on neoliberalism and of the growing (polemical) literature on this theme. However, such a perspective might seem wrong, or at least misleading, from the start. Isn’t neoliberalism precisely a kind of political and economic action aiming to give individuals an unprecedented opportunity to exercise their freedom far and wide, without imposing on them any specific form of life but, on the contrary, allowing them to choose their job, their hobbies, their partner(s), in short, to shape in a *personal* way their *own* form of life? This line of argument is deeply connected with one of the main controversial issues in contemporary debates on neoliberalism (debates in which Foucault’s work is widely quoted and used in different and sometimes even opposed ways), that is, the issue of the emancipatory *or* oppressive nature of neoliberalism itself. In this article, I will show that Foucault’s analyses allow us to perceive that this very dichotomy – emancipation *versus* oppression – fails to grasp the singularity and complexity of this specific form of governmentality called “neoliberalism.”

But how exactly are we to define neoliberalism, especially in its relationship to contemporary capitalism? In *The new way of the world*, Pierre Dardot and Christian Laval argue that Marxist approaches are incapable of grasping neoliberalism in its singularity, since they tend to reduce it to the logic of capitalism or of capital accumulation (Dardot & Laval, 2013). More than thirty years before, in his lectures at the Collège de France on *The birth of biopolitics*, Foucault made a very similar point, radically putting into question the ideas that “from the economic point of view neoliberalism is no more than the reactivation of old, secondhand economic theories,” that “from the sociological point of view it is just a way of establishing strictly market relations in society,” and that “from a political point of view [it] is no more than a cover for a generalized administrative intervention by the state.” These ideas, according to Foucault, ultimately make neoliberalism out to be “nothing at all,” thus failing to grasp its singularity (Foucault, 2008, p. 130). Indeed, neoliberalism cannot and should not be simply “reduced” to classical liberalism or to market society. So, what is neoliberalism?

Foucault’s well-known answer is that neoliberalism is first and foremost a specific *rationality* or *art of government*. Seen from this point of view, it constitutes at the same time a prolongation *and* a rupture vis-à-vis classical liberalism, or better, it pushes classical liberalism to its limits. In fact, according to Foucault, if the problem for Adam Smith was “how to cut out or contrive a free space of the market within an already given political society,” neoliberalism raises a very different issue, which is nevertheless a sort of “radicalization” of this classical one and which consists in asking “how the overall exercise of political power can be modeled on the principles of a market economy” (p. 131). Therefore, neoliberalism is not only a *laissez-faire* but also, and more importantly, a specific way of organizing social relations on the basis of a rationality dictated by the market; it is a complex set of governmental technologies whose aim is to shape the individual and collective conducts, thus constituting “subjects” in a completely new manner. This is why the question of the form neoliberalism gives to life acquires a crucial ethical and political value.

In order to explore the main features of Foucault’s definition of neoliberalism as a peculiar art of governing human beings, I will focus on three (deeply interconnected) points: the action or intervention on the environment (“*milieu*”), the question of individual freedom and critical ethos, and the constitution of a specific form of subjectivity.

**“Environmental” action and the issue of normativity**

The first important point to emphasize is that, according to Foucault, neoliberal governmentality mainly consists in an “environmental” action, that is, in a set of mechanisms and technologies structuring the milieu of individuals in order to obtain specific effects upon their behavior.[[2]](#footnote-2) In *The birth of biopolitics*, Foucault insists on a crucial difference between classical liberalism and neoliberalism, referring in particular to Gary Becker’s works: while in the eighteenth century *homo oeconomicus* “basically functions as what could be called an intangible element with regard to the exercise of power,” since sheis conceived as a person who must be let alone, as “the subject or object of *laissez-faire*,” in Becker’s view *homo oeconomicus* becomes a person “who responds systematically to modifications in the variables of the environment.” Therefore, she “appears as someone manageable, someone who responds systematically to systematic modifications artificially introduced into the environment.” In other words, the neoliberal subject is “someone who is eminently governable”: she is no more the “intangible partner of *laissez-faire*” but “the correlate of a governmentality which will act on the environment and systematically modify its variables” (Foucault, 2008, pp. 270–271).

In German ordoliberalism, and more precisely in the works of the Freiburg School, the action on the milieu was conceived of as a way of artificially organizing a certain number of social and political conditions in order to allow competition to produce its effects (pp. 146–147). Indeed, German Ordoliberals elaborated a social philosophy whose objective is not to intervene directly on market processes but rather to give form to the “environment” within which such processes function (Taylan, 2013, p. 82), that is, the “social environment,” “*die Soziale Umwelt*” of the economic actors (Foucault, 2008, p. 146). And while the interventionism advocated by Walter Eucken was limited to the juridical framework of the market, the *Vitalpolitik* developed by Alexander Rüstow was on the contrary a heavy socio-institutional interventionism aimed at producing its effects upon the “worker’s whole vital situation, his real, concrete situation, from morning to night and from night to morning” (Foucault, 2008, p. 167, n. 62), in order to better integrate the worker’s material and social life within the logic of the market. Hence, Foucault argues that German ordoliberalism is an art of government that intervenes “on society as such, in its fabric and depth” – that is, on the urban space, on education, on working conditions, etc. –, “so that competitive mechanisms can play a regulatory role at every moment and every point in society”: it is not (only) an “economic government” but “a government of society” as such (pp. 145–146).

The kind of action on the milieu that we find in American neoliberalism, and more precisely in the works of the Chicago School, is different. As I have already mentioned, Foucault refers in particular to Becker’s definition of economics as “the science of systematic nature of responses to environmental variables” (p. 269). This definition, according to Foucault, entails a profound transformation of the notion of *homo oeconomicus*, who from being the subject and object of *laissez-faire* becomes the subject and object of a peculiar form of governmentality. Indeed, while respecting the autonomy of the market processes, the neoliberal art of government heavily intervenes on the social field in order to shape the conducts of individuals, inciting them to act in a specific way or modifying their environment so that their behavior would change too. However, Foucault makes it clear that classical liberalism was itself already an art of government, since the subject of interest was never *really* left alone: if it were the case, that is, if market economy could function exclusively through the pursuit of individual interests, it would not have been necessary to elaborate *neoliberal* technologies of government (Taylan, 2013, pp. 85–86).

In recent years, several scholars have argued that Foucault was somehow *personally* fascinated by neoliberalism to the point that, in *The birth of biopolitics*, he offered a sort of apology of it (Behrent, 2009; Lagasnerie, 2012; Zamora, 2014). François Ewald, in a seminar held at the University of Chicago where he conversed with Gary Becker himself, claimed that Foucault saw Becker’s work “as creating the possibility to promote, to envision new kinds of liberty,” since Becker’s theory of regulation “makes it possible to conduct the behavior of the other without coercion, by incitation.” Therefore, according to Ewald, Becker’s redefinition of *homo oeconomicus* is “very close to what Foucault searched for with his theory of the subject and of subjectivity” in the last years of his life (Ewald in Becker, Ewald & Harcourt, 2012, pp. 6–7). This very idea has been and still is widely used in order to praise or criticize Foucault’s work of the 1980s on the ethics of the care of the self, on truth-telling, and so on. I will come back to this issue at the end of my article. What I want to discuss here is rather the thesis according to which Foucault considered Becker’s analyses as (potentially) promoting “new kinds of liberty,” since neoliberal governmentality conducts the individuals’ behavior by incitation and not by coercion.

First of all, it is important to make a very simple point: this is just an *interpretation* of Foucault’s analyses, and even if it comes from a well-respected scholar, we should not take it as if it was Foucault who explicitly framed his thought in these terms. In fact, he did not. At least this point should be uncontroversial. However, in the last chapter of their recent book *State phobia and civil society*, Mitchell Dean and Kaspar Villadsen fail to make the difference between what Foucault actually said and the interpretation Ewald gives to his work on neoliberalism. Following Michael Behrent (2010), they argue that we should study Ewald’s intellectual and political trajectory if we want to understand Foucault’s own thought, since Ewald is “the most influential and loyal Foucauldian today” (Dean & Villadsen, 2016, p. 146). This line of argument is totally groundless from both an historical and a philosophical point of view. Indeed, if we take seriously Foucault’s *explicit* claim that (at least some) neoliberal governmental technologies aim to exert a specific “environmental” action in order to positively– even if indirectly – shape the conducts of individuals, it suddenly becomes hard to find convincing arguments in order to defend the picture of a Foucault-apologist of neoliberalism, unless we attribute to him, as Dean and Villadsen do (p. 8), the *normative* thesis according to which *this* specific modality of governing human beings (through an action on the milieu that “incites” them to behave in certain ways) is *better* than any other form of power or governmentality directly “coercing” them.

The problem with this thesis is that Foucault never suggested anything of the sort in his works. Ben Golder has recently made this point very clear, responding at the same time to the well-known objections by Jürgen Habermas and Nancy Fraser according to which “any attempt by Foucault at critique and resistance is necessarily disabled by the lack of normative grounds” (Golder, 2015, p. 17). But like it or not, in Foucault’s work, critique and resistance have no normative grounds, since power and governmentality *in themselves* are not good or bad – they are just a *fact* of human life and societies (Foucault, 1997, pp. 298–299). This is why, as Ferhat Taylan rightly argues, “it is extremely difficult to claim that Foucault conceived of neoliberalism as giving more individual autonomy to a *homo oeconomicus* whose malleability it continuously stresses,” produces, and exploits (Taylan, 2013, pp. 77–78). In other words, as I will show in the next section, what Dean and Villadsen seem to deny is the fact that, for Foucault, it is always possible, legitimate, and even necessary to raise about neoliberal technologies of government – as well as about *any* other mechanism of power – the (critical) question of their acceptability: is it acceptable to be governed like that and at that cost?

Therefore, Foucault’s analyses of neoliberalism help us to conceive of it as a specific art of government which is not good or bad in itself, but which has to be carefully studied if we want to forge the (conceptual and practical) tools allowing us to act *strategically* towards it, that is, if we want to raise the question of its acceptability for us today and, at the same time, if we want to take advantage of its lines of fragility and blind spots in order to resist to (and try to change) what we find unacceptable in it. Indeed, Foucault’s perspective on these issues is not normative but *strategic* – a perspective that avoids the great dichotomy emancipation *versus* oppression, thus opening the possibility to grasp neoliberal governmentality in its concrete functioning.

**A critical (neo)liberalism?**

I have already formulated an objection to this line of argument at the beginning of my article: isn’t neoliberalism, instead, a form of political and economic action that gives individuals the opportunity to exercise their freedoms, allowing them to choose their *own personal* way of living without coercing them? Isn’t it a kind of power leaving the maximum space for the subject’s self-creation and thus facilitating individual difference? As a consequence, doesn’t it already contain in itself a sort of *critical* force against domination, oppression, and discrimination?

In *The birth of biopolitics*, Foucault argues that liberal and neoliberal arts of government fundamentally rely on the individuals’ freedom. Instead of interpreting this claim as a proof of Foucault’s sympathy for or endorsement of neoliberalism, however, it is necessary to combine it with what I have shown so far and to remember that freedom, for Foucault, is not a metaphysical concept but an always embodied and specific set of *practices* (Foucault, 1997, pp. 282–284, 300; 2000, pp. 354–355). It does not stand for a condition of perfect and absolute autonomy, nor is it simply an illusion or an empty dream: it is rather the name of a strategic field of relationships which is never stable, which is always in movement. As Foucault makes it clear several times, the exercise of power in the form of government is

a set of actions brought to bear upon possible actions; it operates on the field of possibilities in which the behavior of the acting subjects is inscribed: it incites, it induces, it diverts, it makes easier or more difficult, it broadens or restricts, it makes more or less probable. (Foucault, 1982, p. 789)

This means that the notion of government refers specifically to “the way in which the conduct of individuals or of groups might be directed,” to the attempt to “structure the possible field of action of others” – their *field of freedom*. Therefore, freedom of individuals always constitutes, according to Foucault, the very “condition for the exercise of power,” or better, of this specific form of power called government: government can only be exercised on free subjects, and only as long as they remain free, that is, as long as they are faced with “a field of possibilities in which several ways of behaving [*conduites*], several reactions, and diverse comportments, may be realized” (pp. 789–790). In his lectures on *Security, territory, population*, Foucault argues that, starting from the eighteenth century with the *Économistes*[[3]](#footnote-3), freedom is inserted within governmentality “not only as the right of individuals legitimately opposed to the power, usurpations, and abuses of the sovereign or the government, but as an element that has become indispensable to governmentality itself.” In other words, “a condition of governing well is that freedom, or certain forms of freedom, are really respected. Failing to respect freedom is not only an abuse of rights with regard to the law, it is above all ignorance of how to govern properly” (Foucault, 2007, pp. 353–354). Thus, *by definition*, we speak of government (instead of constraint, domination, oppression, and so on) only insofar as the governed remains to a certain degree *free*.

What is the *specificity* of neoliberalism in this respect? I would argue that neoliberalism pushes this logic to its limits, trying to maximize the space of freedom given to (and perceived by) individuals. However, this does not imply that neoliberalism is *better* than any other form of governmentality, nor that it is *less dangerous*: Foucault has always avoided simple dichotomies such as oppression *versus* emancipation, or power *versus* freedom. It rather implies that individual freedom, within a neoliberal rationality of government, becomes *the very instrument* through which individuals are directed – and the right question to ask here is whether this form of government is *more effective* than others or not. Besides, as Miguel de Beistegui convincingly shows in his forthcoming book, *The government of desire*, this question has to be linked to the problem of desire which, in liberal and neoliberal governmentalities, is no longer an *object* of government, as it was before – an object over which the individual needed to exercise a certain control –, but an essential *instrument* or *mechanism* of governmentality itself. In other words, the individual today is no longer governed *against* her own desires, but precisely allowing them to expand and flourish within the space of the free market: “From an essentially therapeutic strategy of domination and control,” governmentality moved to “a strategy of enhancement and maximization, that is, of management” (Beistegui, 2016, p. 33). Therefore, desire is now “integrated as an instrument of government, as that without or against which men cannot be governed”: liberal and neoliberal governmentalities are “the government of desires, by desires, and for desires” (p. 81).

According to Foucault, neoliberalism governs people *through* their freedom because neoliberal governmentality is not satisfied with guaranteeing this or that specific form of freedom: it rather *produces*, *organizes*, and *consumes* freedoms. This is why freedom should not be conceived of as “a universal which is particularized in time and geography,” as “a white surface with more or less numerous black spaces here and there and from time to time.” Freedom is rather “an actual relation between governors and governed” (Foucault, 2008, p. 63). If Foucault is right, then in our contemporary neoliberal societies freedom is not (only) something that can be legitimately opposed to power, it is not (only) something that power has to respect and to preserve in order to be justified in its exercise, but (also and) more fundamentally something which is produced by power itself, or better, by neoliberal technologies of government, and which constitutes their very condition of existence and functioning. Consequently, the question should be raised as to whether claiming a series of rights and freedoms of the individual in order to protect and increase our field of “autonomy” is still, for us, in this context, an *effective* way to resist (Cremonesi, Irrera, Lorenzini & Tazzioli, 2016). Does this claim still possess, in our contemporary societies, the same *critical* value it had a few decades or centuries ago?

This issue is strictly connected with another that has been and still is at the center of contemporary controversies on Foucault’s interpretation of neoliberalism: the issue of the so-called “critical ethos” of liberalism and neoliberalism (Dean & Villadsen, 2016, p. 149). Indeed, in *The birth of biopolitics*, Foucault explicitly defines liberalism – at least in its origins – as a “critical governmental reason” which raises the problem of “how not to govern too much”: “a government is never sufficiently aware that it always risks governing too much, or, a government never knows too well how to govern just enough” (Foucault, 2008, pp. 13, 17). Therefore, the liberal art of government seems to be essentially inspired by a *critical ethos*: the principle of a “self-limitation of governmental reason” (p. 20). In the Course Summary, Foucault explains:

Liberalism […] is imbued with the principle: “One always governs too much” – or at least, one should always suspect that one governs too much. Governmentality should not be exercised without a “critique” far more radical than a test of optimization. It should not only question itself about the best (or least costly) means for achieving its effects, but also about the possibility and even legitimacy of its project for achieving effects. The question behind the suspicion that there is always the risk of governing too much is: Why, after all, is it necessary to govern? (p. 319)

Geoffroy de Lagasnerie draws from such claims his thesis according to which, in *The birth of biopolitics*, Foucault was interested in highlighting the “liberating” or “emancipatory” character of liberalism and neoliberalism. According to him, inscribed at the very heart of these forms of governmentality, there is a critical force that consists in opposing the state, or better, the *Raison d’État*, to the point that – he concludes – Foucault “perceived neoliberalism as one of the contemporary incarnations of the critical tradition” (Lagasnerie, 2013, pp. 63–64). Frédéric Gros too, although more prudently, argues that it is possible to find, in Foucault’s work, the thesis according to which, beside political and economic liberalism, there is also something like a “critical liberalism” which raises the problem of the excess of government (Gros, 2013, p. 42). Indeed, we should not downplay Foucault’s definition of liberalism as a principle of “*inquiétude*,” of critique addressed to a certain state-centered governmentality (Dean & Villadsen, 2016, p. 148); we should nevertheless be very careful and replace such a definition in a broader context. Liberalism *can* be considered, at least in its origins, as a form taken by what Foucault calls “critical attitude,” defining it as “the art of not being governed quite so much” (Foucault, 2015a, p. 37). However, when such a critical interrogation about the excess of government becomes *itself* a mechanism or an instrument or a strategy of government, in other words, when the principle of the limitation of government becomes a principle of *self*-limitation that liberal and neoliberal arts of government put at the very core of their own specific ways of governing human beings, can we legitimately argue that such an interrogation still possesses a critical force? Hasn’t it simply become an instrument of an effective art of government that it is possible, and maybe necessary, to question and criticize *in new ways* (Lorenzini, 2015, p. 71)?

As I have already explained, the freedom claimed by the liberal and neoliberal governmental projects is something different from a simple juridical status or a space of personal autonomy to be protected against external interferences. Indeed, it is also, and above all, something that has to be produced, incited, encouraged by these same governmental mechanisms through the shaping of a milieucapable of transforming the governed in a subject at the same time receptive and malleable, but without constraining *directly* her will. This form of freedom, which could seem to be the correlative of the liberal and neoliberal critical ethos, its most valuable outcome, is actually controlled, regulated, and exploited by the liberal and neoliberal arts of government themselves. Therefore, at least within the context of our contemporary neoliberal societies, it *cannot* be considered as a form taken by the critical attitude: it is rather the *instrument* of a specific form of governmentality (Gros, Lorenzini, Revel & Sforzini, 2013, p. 8).

As Foucault famously argued in 1984, we should always be suspicious of “liberation” (since processes of liberation, although sometimes necessary, can easily turn into new forms of domination) and focus instead on the invention of a series of “practices of freedom” capable of criticizing the ways in which we are ordinarily governed (Foucault, 1997, pp. 282–283). The problem with the liberal principle “One always governs too much” is precisely that it has ceased to play the role of a practice of freedom and has become itself an instrument of government: this is why, today, it is more than legitimate to raise the issue of its acceptability and of the acceptability of liberal and neoliberal governmental technologies, as well as the issue of the creation of *new* forms to give to critical attitude in our contemporary societies.

**Governable subjects**

Since liberalism and neoliberalism are specific ways of governing human beings, it is always possible – and sometimes even necessary – to oppose to them the refusal to be governed *like that*. This means that we should radically rephrase the problem of critique and resistance. In fact, if we take seriously Foucault’s analyses of liberal and neoliberal governmental technologies as well as his definition of freedom as nothing more (but nothing less) than the *actual* relation between governors and governed, it immediately becomes clear that the claim underpinning an effective practice of resistance, in our contemporary neoliberal societies, cannot be (any more) the claim for freedom, or for *more* freedom. It should rather be conceived of as the demand to be governed *differently*, that is, as the attempt to give an *other* form to one’s own “freedom” and subjectivity. In other words, the problem is not exactly how to be *more free* but how to create *alternative forms of subjectivity*, that is, alternative ways of establishing relations to oneself and the others, different from the kind of relations encouraged and constructed by the neoliberal technologies of government.

Critique of and resistance to neoliberal governmentality cannot be disconnected from an analysis of the concrete forms of subjectivity that such a governmental technology constantly tries to produce through an action on the milieu of life of individuals and relying on their field of freedom itself. Indeed, Foucault never ceased to insist on the fact that power is not only or essentially repressive: on the contrary, it is productive – and productive of *subjects* (Foucault, 1978, p. 94; 1991, p. 194). The *governmental* mechanisms of power, in particular, shape deeply and in detail the individual’s relations to herself and to the others. In neoliberal governmentality, this process takes the form of the constitution of an entirely new kind of subjectivity: the neoliberal subject is an “entrepreneur of herself” who tries to manage fruitfully her natural talents and acquired skills within a space of freedom which seems unlimited – this is why it is so difficult for her to perceive that this very space of freedom, together with her own subjectivity, are profoundly shaped by neoliberal governmental technologies.

The society regulated by reference to the market that the Neoliberals are thinking about is a society in which the regulatory principle should not be so much the exchange of commodities as the mechanisms of competition. It is these mechanisms that should have the greatest possible surface and depth and should also occupy the greatest possible volume in society. This means that what is sought is not a society subject to the commodity effect, but a society subject to the dynamic of competition. Not a supermarket society, but an enterprise society. The *homo oeconomicus* sought after is not the man of exchange or man the consumer; he is the man of enterprise and production. (Foucault, 2008, p. 147)

The neoliberal art of government creates habits and expectations, shaping behaviors, subjectivities, and ways of living. The form neoliberalism aims to give to subjectivity (or, more precisely, to the subjectivity of individuals who are not marginalized and excluded from the beginning) is not simply that of a subject-consumer, but also and critically that of a subject-entrepreneur who is incited to maximize her own “capital” (consisting in competences and skills as well as, for instance, in one’s own genetic inheritance and cultural background) in order to be able to compete on the global market place (p. 226). The more successful the individual is in doing that, the more malleable and easier to be efficiently governed she is. Thus, the concept of human capital allows Foucault to explore the neoliberal constitution of the relations of oneself with oneself and the others. The processes of “internalization” by the subject of the mechanisms of the market redefine – to a certain extent – the stakes of neoliberal governmentality itself, whose purpose becomes to extend the economic rationality beyond its traditional field of application, in order to transform the market not only in a principle of limitation for the state, but also in a mechanism of intelligibility for the whole social field of personal relations (Beistegui, 2016, pp. 109–117).

According to Gary Becker and the American Neoliberals, as Luca Paltrinieri notes, the theory of the human capital is a *new humanism*: to “put people at the heart of economics” means to conceive of economics no longer as a theory of the formation of value but as an analysis of the rationality of individuals who are free to behave and choose “as they wish.” This is why, starting from the 1990s, the investments in human capital have become a central element in a discourse “for the sake of human beings” aiming to reconcile economic performance, social progress, and individual well-being. However, it is not possible to ignore that this new humanistic *élan* is promoted by the idea that investing on human capital increases the enterprise’s performances and competitiveness. In other words, human beings are here conceived of an end, for sure, but also and more fundamentally as a means (Paltrinieri, 2013, pp. 102–103). Besides, the definition of human capital as a stock of competences, modeled on the definition of “material” capital, is misleading. Competences, in fact, are never fully acquired, but consists essentially in future possibilities: they have a *virtual* nature and always stand in need of actualization, since their value cannot be defined in relation to the past or the present situation, but only in relation to the flux of revenues they are capable of producing in the future. Consequently, the neoliberal subject is a *schizophrenic* subject, and this schizophrenic condition is precisely that which makes her life precarious and eminently governable: she has to evaluate herself and her stock of competences *here and now*, but such an evaluation can only concern *future* realizations of those competences (pp. 105–106). Therefore, the neoliberal subject can enjoy her human capital only in the form of an endless, precarizing *self-evaluation* that should be considered as one of the main instruments of contemporary neoliberal governmentality.

Neoliberal rationality demands self-sufficiency as a moral ideal at the same time that neoliberal forms of power work to destroy that very possibility at an economic level, establishing every member of the population as potentially or actually precarious, even using the ever-present threat of precarity to justify its heightened regulation of public space and its deregulation of market expansion. (Butler, 2015, p. 14)

Foucault never ceased to criticize the humanistic discourse as a strategy used in order to produce economic effectiveness. His analyses in *The birth of biopolitics* aren’t but another form taken by this critique insofar as they aim to show that the “free” individual described by the theory of human capital is not a natural, given entity (Golder, 2015, p. 9) but a subject *constituted* by neoliberal technologies of government themselves – she is an eminently governable subject. And if we want to speak of a “critical ethos” in relation to Foucault’s work on neoliberalism, such an ethos – I would argue – is essentially connected to his attempt to study and *make visible* the concrete processes of constitution of subjectivity that neoliberalism fosters.

**Conclusion**

In an article published in 2011 and widely quoted, Andrew Dilts argues that it was thanks to his work on neoliberalism that Foucault became interested in the processes of constitution of the subject, an interest that would eventually lead him to the study of the ancient forms of the care of the self (Dilts, 2011). The recent publication of the lectures given by Foucault in 1980 at the Collège de France and at Dartmouth College (Foucault, 2014; 2015b) importantly contributed to show that, from a strictly “philological” point of view, this thesis is highly questionable (Lorenzini, 2013). However, it has the merit of highlighting the crucial contribution that Foucault’s work on neoliberalism can make to the project of retracing the genealogy of our contemporary form(s) of subjectivity, against the thesis according to which Foucault’s analyses of the (ancient) care of the self aren’t but a way to “reinforce” contemporary neoliberal processes of constitution of an eminently governable subject. Indeed, if it is undeniable that Foucault’s work on “ethics” has been and still is well cited and widely used in the fields of management and organizational studies (Dean & Villadsen, 2016, p. 6), it is only at the price of a radical de-contextualization and banalization that transform Foucault’s *genealogical* approach in a kind of ready-made manual for the (entrepreneurial) improvement of oneself. Nothing is farther from Foucault’s original intentions and objectives.

Indeed, Foucault’s work of the 1980s on the relationships between subjectivity and truth – a work that took many shapes, from the analysis of early Christian confession and constitution of subjectivity to the exploration of Greco-Roman “sexual” practices (*aphrodisia*), from the study of the ancient principle of the care of the self to the interest in *parrēsia* – possesses a critical value that it is important to highlight. Far from being a ready-made “solution” for the problems of our time, Foucault’s genealogical analyses of these themes and experiences aim to show that our contemporary form(s) of subjectivity are historically, politically, and socially constructed, and therefore that they constitute one of the main “fields of struggle” within which it is possible to fight against neoliberal technologies of government. Foucault’s insistence, in his analyses of the ancient care of the self, on a series of *technai tou biou* that were used by individuals in order to shape their subjectivity in accordance with principles and objectives which are radically different from those inscribed at the heart of neoliberal rationality, is not a way to suggest that we should “reactivate” such techniques but an attempt to show that it has been historically possible to shape the individual’s relations with herself and the others in an *other* way – and thus that it is always possible to create new forms of subjectivity (Davidson, 2013). In other words, the notion of an “ethics of the self” does not define, for Foucault, a normative ideal but an embodied and contingent set of practices whose political meaning and value have to be appreciated *in context*.

The critical value that Foucault’s work on neoliberalism as well as on the ancient forms of the relationship between subjectivity and truth still possesses for us today is thus twofold: on the one hand, this work provokes us to reflect on contemporary neoliberal form(s) of subjectivity and of life and to ask the question of their acceptability or dangerousness on the basis of a sharp awareness that they are not “natural” nor given once and for all; on the other hand, it incites us to consider our form(s) of subjectivity and of life as a crucial ethico-political stake, that is, as something which is profoundly shaped by neoliberal technologies of government but which could also be shaped *differently*, through a creative work playing the role of a strategic practice of freedom.

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1. \* Email: [d.lorenzini@email.com](mailto:d.lorenzini@email.com) [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. “[The milieu] is what is needed to account for action at a distance of one body on another. It is therefore the medium of an action and the element in which it circulates. […] The milieu is a certain number of combined, overall effects bearing on all who live in it. It is an element in which a circular link is produced between effects and causes, since an effect from one point of view will be a cause from another. […] Finally, the milieu appears as a field of intervention in which, instead of affecting individuals as a set of legal subjects capable of voluntary actions – which would be the case of sovereignty – and instead of affecting them as a multiplicity of organisms, of bodies capable of performances, and of required performances – as in discipline – one tries to affect, precisely, a population” (Foucault, 2007, pp. 20–21). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. But this is also true, at least in part, for more ancient forms of pastoral governmentality (Lorenzini, 2016, pp. 15–17). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)