Foucault, Post-structuralism, and the Fixed "Openness of History"

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Today, it seems impossible to discuss historians' encounter with post-structuralist theory, the ensuing triumphant surge of the cultural turn, and the establishment of what scholars have recently called the postcultural historiography without the help of such paramount concepts of post-structuralist analysis as contingency, variability, instability, open-endedness, and so on. Having defined the last forty years of theoretical and methodological developments in history, these nowadays conventional tools of critique and interpretation have grown to become synonymous with the post-structuralist conceptual promise and outcome. This article questions this standard and exceptionally generous account. What if, the article asks, we start our account not with the resolute assertion of the radical contingency and variability of the post-structuralist view of history, but with something more fundamental to it—its own fixed and totalizing presuppositions? To show how an intellectual agenda opposed to fixed and totalizing reasoning can end up operating with fixed and totalizing logics of its own, the essay turns to Michel Foucault and his momentous career, to be traced from the 1960s to the 1980s.

Introduction

Today, it seems impossible to discuss historians' encounter with post-structuralist theory, the ensuing triumphant surge of the cultural turn, and the establishment of what Geoff Eley and Keith Nield have called the "postcultural" historiography without the help of such paramount concepts of post-structuralist analysis as contingency, variability, instability, fragmentation, conflict-riddenness, open-endedness, and so on.[1] In the 1980s and 1990s, when pioneers of post-structuralist historiography were busy turning post-structuralist insights into a novel practice of history and establishing the new fields of cultural and gender history, they lauded the disruptive and emancipatory potential of post-structuralist theory for understanding history and deploying historical analysis.

Indeed, according to the standard account familiar today to most graduate students in history, the post-structuralist agenda proved to be a momentous force, spearheading an upgrade of historians' conceptual apparatus. It offered the

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[1] Geoff Eley and Keith Nield, *The Future of Class in History: What's Left of the Social?* (Ann Arbor, 2007).

discipline a much-overdue impetus to break away from the follies of fixity-, totality-, universality- and synchronicity-based history writing in either its structuralist or Marxist traditions. The post-structuralist method, on the other hand, empowered scholars to see cultures, ideologies, hegemonies, discursive formations, systems of domination, subjectivities, identities, norms, values, imperatives—whatever one's research destination or analytical language might be—for what they *really* were, only *seemingly* fixed, unified, and closed up. Post-structuralism, as Julian Bourg and Ethan Kleinberg have recently written, empowered historians to look behind the facade of fixity and rediscover history pulsating with "disruptive capacity." "Against synchronic structures," they have summed up, "it asserted the irruptive, uncontrolled quality of diachronic historicity and events."[2]

One of the most promising post-structuralist propositions was, of course, that discourses, institutions, and humans themselves (imagined as subjects) were fundamentally unfixed, unstable, and variable not only across history but at any given moment of their existence.[3] The discipline of history seemed to be on the brink of making a major breakthrough, addressing one of its most basic and most problematic premises/questions as to what social scientists mean when we say that someone or something is socially constructed. Indeed, if the contingent, variable, unfixed, internally conflicted, and open-ended were now viewed as inbuilt features of the operation of any hegemonic regime, how did this insight change historians' understanding of the relationship between humans, on the one hand, and sociocultural regularities that made up their historical predicament, on the other? And what was the future of such bedrock categories of historical analysis as agency, resistance, struggle—that is, the categories that helped historians navigate the relationship between humans and their historical predicament and prescribe the imaginable, thinkable, and doable in history?

By the early twenty-first century, the answers to these fundamental questions of historical theory and methodology had been formulated. Moreover, they had been translated into a leading interpretive practice that contemporary cultural and social historians continue to actively draw on in their studies devoted to everyday struggles of the underprivileged, the oppressed, and the super-oppressed.

Thus, already by the late 1990s, to argue that history was a contingent, variable, and instable enterprise that offered historians new ways to explore the formerly overlooked emancipatory potential inside even most repressive regimes had become commonplace. The kind of emancipatory promise in question—let us draw, for

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[2]Joan W. Scott, "Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis," *American Historical Review* 91/5 (1986), 1053–75; Julian Bourg and Ethan Kleinberg, "Poststructuralism: From Deconstruction to the Genealogy of Power," in Peter E. Gordon and Warren Breckman, eds., *The Cambridge History of Modern European Thought*, vol. 2 (Cambridge, 2019), 490–516, at 491–2, 494; also Joan W. Scott, "Introduction," in Scott, *Gender and the Politics of History* (New York, 1999), 1–11; Scott, "History-Writing as Critique," in Keith Jenkins, Sue Morgan, and Alun Munslow, eds., *Manifestos for History* (Abingdon, 2007), 19–38, at 27–8; William H. Sewell, "Concept(s) of Culture," in Gabrielle M. Spiegel, ed., *Practicing History: New Directions in Historical Writing after the Linguistic Turn* (New York, 2005), 76–95; Ronald Grigor Suny, "Back and Beyond: Reversing the Cultural Turn?", *American Historical Review* 107/5 (2002), 1476–99; Gabrielle M. Spiegel, "Introduction," in Spiegel, *Practicing History*, 1–31.

[3]Bourg and Kleinberg, "Poststructuralism," 507.

example, on Gabrielle Spiegel—was best captured in historians' newly found powers to "loosen" the grip of societal norms and regularities on their historical protagonists and to "make room for the play of human agency." Or, as Spiegel and others explained, post-structuralist insights enabled historians to approach their socially constituted and culturally mediated subjects no longer as passive "effects" of their circumstances. Into the foreground came the nowadays standard and much-in-demand protagonist of cultural and social history—the actor–resister–subverter—who meets systems of domination in one's everyday life and puts them to various uses and misuses, intentionally, competently, manipulatively, and even creatively capitalizing on their inherent instabilities and contradictions.[4]

Today, this scenario that features the historical protagonist imagined as a savvy and "emancipated" user and abuser of historical circumstances and contingencies is in no need of a special introduction, a stated allegiance to post-structuralist theory or extensive footnoting. It has long become an analytical and interpretive convention. Even in the most recent retellings of the profession's encounter with the post-structuralist school of thought, the retellings which question its consequentiality, the notion that history constitutes a contingent and open-ended process infused with infinite emancipatory opportunities, remains a critical and solid insight.[5]

In what follows I question this exceptionally generous account of the post-structuralist conceptual credo and its alleged disruptive and emancipatory impact on analytical and interpretive practices of history writing. What has been markedly absent from the story about the making of present-day cultural and social historiography is a focused and critical interrogation of fixing and totalizing conceptual

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[4]Spiegel, "Introduction," 16, 143. For key voices theorizing societal conditioning and human agency along the lines of humans' versatile "use" of structurally available and learned rules and schemas of one's historical predicament see Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (Cambridge, 1977); James C. Scott, *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance* (New Haven, 1985); Anthony Giddens, *The Constitution of Society: Outline of a Theory of Structuration* (Berkeley, 1986); Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Los Angeles, 1984); William H. Sewell, "A Theory of Structure: Duality, Agency, and Transformation" (1992), in Spiegel, *Practicing History*, 143–65; Judith R. Walkowitz, *City of Dreadful Delight: Narratives of Sexual Danger in Late-Victorian London* (Chicago, 1992); Kathleen Canning, "Feminist Theory after Linguistic Turn: Historicizing Discourse and Experience," *Signs* 19 (1994), 368–404; Richard Biernacki, "Language and the Shift from Signs to Practices in Cultural Inquiry," *History and Theory* 39/3 (2000), 289–310; David Gary Shaw, "Happy in Our Chains? Agency and Language in the Postmodern Age," *History and Theory* 40/4 (2001), 1–9; William M. Reddy, "The Logic of Action: Indeterminacy, Emotion, and Historical Narrative," *History and Theory* 40/4 (2001), 10–33; Miguel A. Cabrera, Anna Fagan, and Marie McMahon, "On Language, Culture, and Social Action," *History and Theory* 40/4 (2001), 82–100; Andreas Reckwitz, "Toward a Theory of Social Practices: A Development in Culturalist Theorizing," *European Journal of Social Theory* 5/2 (2002), 243–63; Sherry Ortner, "Power and Projects: Reflections on Agency," in Ortner, *Anthropology and Social Theory: Culture, Power, and the Acting Subject* (Durham, NC, 2006), 129–54; Lynn M. Thomas, "Historicizing Agency," *Gender and History* 28/2 (2016), 324–39.

[5]See, for example, Sarah Maza, *Thinking about History* (Chicago, 2017), 196, 223; Lynn Hunt, "Where Have All the Theories Gone?", *Perspectives on History* 40/3 (March 2002), at www.historians.org/research-and-publications/perspectives-on-history/march-2002; Suny, "Back and Beyond," 1488; Spiegel, "Introduction." For a critical reading of the eclectic turn as a detrimental development in the discipline of history see Joan Scott, "Against Eclecticism," *differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Critique* 16/3 (2005), 114–37.

preconditions or foundational truths that undergird, circumscribe, and, yes, overdetermine its emancipatory agenda informed by post-structuralist insights.

In accordance with one such precondition, to be foregrounded here, the post-structuralist project, so outspokenly resolved to restore the "irruptive, uncontrolled quality" to history, imposes rather unforgiving and nonnegotiable limits on the human protagonist of history. This foundational premise is best captured by pioneers of post-structuralist analysis themselves when they quite correctly credit post-structuralist scholarship with empowering cultural and social historians to "loosen" the grip of societal norms, imperatives, and hierarchies on their historical actors. What is implied in this carefully formulated proposition is that *the "loosening" of the grip, by definition, does not get rid of the grip itself*. That is, it does not get rid of *unwitting*, and yet fundamental, ideological constraints (those learned and internalized, like the language, codes of intelligibility, social praxis, and power relations) that a given society imposes on its members' social and cognitive life.[6] The resultant and predominant protagonist of contemporary cultural and social history is, understandably, not in the position to disentangle from, not to mention to change, the de facto *pre-reflective* constraints of her learned societal competence even though she is quite capable of competently, manipulatively, subversively, or defiantly drawing on them and using them towards her ends in her everyday life.

Granted, in this scenario, fundamental societal codes of intelligibility, praxis, and power relations do change. However, the premise that positions those tacit codes as the founding and ideologically confining moment in the making of the human subject–actor, –resister, –subverter does not. As such, it pertains to humans indiscriminately across historical periods and social circumstances and stands, precisely, for a fixed and totalizing given at the core of the post-structuralist and cultural-history projects. This way, the post-structuralist "emancipatory potential" promised to historians turns out to be markedly de-radicalized because it invites historians to approach the "grip" as the precondition and limit of humans' agency, resistance, and struggle and deprives the latter categories of their countersystemic connotations.

The curbed and de-radicalized analytical repertoire of contemporary cultural and social history (that I explored in two earlier publications) is witness to what I propose to call here a failure of critique of core post-structuralist premises that were transplanted into the discipline of history at the turn of the century.[7] Indeed, pioneers of post-structuralist historiography did not participate in the international conversation about post-structuralist stated and unstated premises of thought that, in the last decades of the twentieth century, animated the fields

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[6]Here and throughout the article, as it will be clear, I deploy the Marxist–Gramscian concept of the ideological which, since the 1960s, has been theorized and elaborated on numerous occasions. My particular take on the concept has been worked out while reading through this impressive library, and especially Terry Eagleton, and encompasses the infinite and unwitting ways societies organize themselves socially and cognitively and power relations involved in those processes. As such, the concept of the ideological, in other words, has nothing in common with conventional understandings of the term as a belief system and/or ideological dogma. Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory: An Introduction* (Minneapolis, 2008).

[7]Anna Yu. Krylova, "Agency and History," in "The Agency Dilemma: A Forum," *American Historical Review* 128/2 (2023), 884–904; and Krylova, "Ideology, Power, and the Phantom of Agency," in ibid., 922–9.

of philosophy, political theory, Marxist geography and literary theory, and sociology. Nor did they choose to engage with criticisms that this conversation and its participants—Jürgen Habermas, Luc Ferry and Alain Renaut, Nancy Fraser, Michael Walzer, David Harvey, Fredric Jamison, Neal Brenner—generated.[8]

The later and ongoing critique of post-structuralist insights within the discipline of history itself—here, the lead was taken by Marxist feminists, intellectual and social historians, and scholars mapping out new thematic lines of inquiry such as histories of capitalism, empire, and decolonization, studies of environmental and political ecology—did not fare any better. The transplantation of post-structuralist insights into history went on notwithstanding. While the list of conceptual incongruities, contradictions, and overstatements presented to the post-structuralist and, in particular, Foucauldian traditions continued to grow to encompass the paradoxical post-structuralist rejection of all normative truth-claims except its own, the exaggerated pronouncements about the powers that impersonal societal conditioning had over humans, and what Manu Goswami has recently called the difficulties of contemporary cultural history with its post-structuralist focus on "fragmentary histories" of everyday life to "imagine a constitutionally different future."[9]

At the turn of the century and afterwards, pioneers of post-structuralist analysis for historians, soon to become cultural historians, worked with post-structuralist insights in a strikingly different manner. They explored and explained, defended and popularized, developed and deepened post-structuralist theory, countering the latter's propensity towards cultural determinism with considerations of the material and the social in the lives of historical protagonists.[10] In the process, however, they did not question post-structuralist premises such as that there invariably existed a necessary, impersonal "grip," "constraint," or "limit" to what humans do, think, or say. Instead, they embraced the grip premise in a manner appropriate to a fixed truth: as an inescapable fact of history, in need of explication but beyond

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[8]Jürgen Habermas, "Taking Aim at the Heart of the Present," in David Hoy, ed., *Foucault: A Critical Reader* (1983) (Oxford, 1986), 103–8; Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity* (Cambridge, MA, 1987); Luc Ferry and Alain Renout, *French Philosophy of the Sixties: An Essay on Antihumanism* (1985) (Amherst, 1990); Nancy Fraser, "Foucault on Modern Power: Empirical Insights and Normative Confusion," *PRAXIS International* 3 (1981), 272–87; Michael Walzer, "The Politics of Michel Foucault," in Hoy, *Foucault: A Critical Reader*, 51-68; Charles Taylor, "Foucault on Freedom and Truth," in Hoy, *Foucault: A Critical Reader*, 69–102; David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity* (Cambridge, MA, 1990); Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, the Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham, NC, 1992); Neal Brenner, "Foucault's New Functionalism," *Theory and Society* 23 (1994), 679–709.

[9]Manu Goswami, "Remembering the Future," *American Historical Review* 113/2 (2008), 417–24, at 420; also see Janaki Nair, "On the Question of Agency in Indian Feminist Historiography," *Gender and History* 6/1 (1994), 82–100; Jerrold Seigel, *The Idea of the Self: Thought and Experience in Western Europe since the Seventeenth Century* (Cambridge, 2005), 21–2, Ch. 18; Barbara Weinstein, "Developing Inequalities," *American Historical Review* 113/1 (2008), 1–18; Jeanne Boydston, "Gender as a Question of Historical Analysis," *Gender and History* 20/3 (2008), 558–83; Michael C. Behrent, "Liberalism without Humanism: Michel Foucault and the Free-Market Creed, 1976–1979," *Modern Intellectual History* 6/3 (2009), 539–68; Behrent, "Can the Critique of Capitalism Be Antihumanist?", *History and Theory* 54/3 (2015), 372–88; Anna Krylova, "Gender Binary and the Limits of Poststructuralist Method," *Gender and History* 28/2 (2016), 307–23.

[10]For a detailed discussion of the limits of critique and the terms of engagement with the post-structuralist tradition see Krylova, "Agency and History."

critique. Not surprisingly, the standard account of the post-structuralist intellectual credo that has dominated the fields of cultural and social history since the 1980s is oddly imbalanced. Today, it continues to instruct historians to privilege and celebrate the contingency and open-endedness of post-structuralist insights at the expense of a critique of their fixed and totalizing assumptions about the human predicament. The curbing and de-radicalizing effect of those insights on present-day categories and modes of historical analysis remains unexplored.[11]

In what follows I undertake to fill in the crucial missing step in our standard story of the making of contemporary cultural and social history and offer a long-overdue critique of how and why the contingency-embracing and emancipatory agenda of the post-structuralist tradition turns itself in the hands of historians into its opposite. My critique of the state-of-the-field analytics starts with a plot reversal in the way we tell the story of historians' encounter with post-structuralist theory. What if, I ask, we start our account not with the resolute assertion of radical contingency, variability, instability, and indeterminacy of the post-structuralist view of history but with something more fundamental to it—its own fixed and totalizing presuppositions?

Turning the story on its head, so to speak, allows me to explain why, on account of people's fate in history, the post-structuralist project cannot offer us anything more than the loosening-the-grip thesis, on the one hand, and, on the other, the human protagonist–agent, stuck "playing" within unwitting, fundamental, and ideological constraints that her society imposes on her social and cognitive life. What arguably has been a priori excluded from the post-structuralist and, by default, contemporary cultural-history agenda is a query into historical conditions under which the oppressed and the disadvantaged do not simply "play" with but disengage from the "grip" of their social and cognitive predicament and the power relations that it involves.

Now to the how-to of the critique. To show how an intellectual agenda calling for a radical rethinking of history as a contingent and open-ended process can end up operating with fixed and totalizing logics of its own and have a curbing and de-radicalizing effect on categories and modes of historical analysis, I turn to Michel Foucault and his momentous career, to be traced from the 1960s to the 1980s. The long shadow that Foucault's scholarship has cast over American history departments makes the scholar a logical and even paramount starting point of the critique, the first step towards a critical reassessment of the impact that post-structuralism has had on history's epistemologies.

Foucault, of course, was at the epicenter of the turn-of-the-century debates about the analytical and political purchase of post-structuralist insights.[12] But we cannot

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[11]Scott, "History-Writing," 29; Bourg and Kleinberg, "Poststructuralism," 493; Spiegel, "Introduction," 13; also, within the fields of history and cultural anthropology, see Scott, *Weapons of the Weak*; Sewell, "A Theory of Structure"; Walkowitz, *City of Dreadful Delight*; Canning, "Feminist Theory"; Shaw, "Happy in Our Chains?"; Reddy, "The Logic of Action"; Ortner, "Power and Projects." For foundational publications that exemplify the limit to standard assessments of the post-structuralist intellectual project see Lynn Hunt and Victoria Bonnell, eds., *The New Cultural History* (Berkeley, 1989); Jan Goldstein, ed., *Foucault and the Writing of History* (Cambridge, MA, 1994); Lynn Hunt and Victoria Bonnell, eds., *Beyond the Cultural Turn: New Direction in the Study of Culture and Society* (Berkeley, 1999).
[12]See note 8.

simply go back to those debates and find answers to the questions I am positing here. Addressing specific disciplinary concerns, those debates did not approach the fixing propensities at the core of Foucault's project from the grounds of historical inquiry. Nor were they preoccupied with the guiding problematic that I examine here through Foucault's scholarship; that is, the way the post-structuralist intellectual project theorized the relationship between the social universe and the human being and imposed rather unforgiving limits on what humans can and cannot do in history.

A few notes on my own interpretive strategy. The guiding question that organizes the article presupposes that I am as interested in declared and interrogated subject matters of Foucault's research as in what Foucault does not interrogate; that is, what he takes for granted or names in passing. My mode of inquiry thus aims at foregrounding and critiquing fundamental and fixed elements of Foucault's intellectual agenda that, as I show here, permeate his entire corpus of work, cutting across its many topics, stages, and shifts. On account of the human protagonist, the "living openness of history" that Foucault insisted on and pursued in his studies was, I argue, never meant to be unconditional. It rested, as we will see, on fixed fundamentals that firmly outlined the parameters within which humans "were made subjects" and enacted themselves as subjects–agents in history. Historians who, drawing on Foucault, turned this at once empowered, emancipated, delimited, and deradicalized subject–agent of history into the familiar protagonist of present-day cultural and social historiography did not get Foucault wrong. They got him right. They just forgot to critique him.[13]

Beneath the surface of things

Foucault's lasting impact on the practice of history writing and historical theory is perhaps best captured by the ease with which one can move from contemporary accounts of the post-structuralist takeaway for historians to Foucault himself. Indeed, we would hardly need to adjust any of our present-day analytics in order to engage the scholar. Even metaphors we use today to describe history and ascribe it its defining characteristics—irruptive, uncontrolled, variable, mutable, open-ended—are in harmonious agreement with Foucault's own metaphoric choices, some nearly sixty years old.

Thus one of the key and tirelessly restated goals that Foucault pursued throughout his career—one can draw on his 1969 *The Archeology of Knowledge*, for example—was to introduce unnamed traditional historians to a radically different kind of history. This new kind of history had zero tolerance for stories tracing "great continuities" and "lasting foundations," constructing "vast unities" and "cultural totalities" "like 'periods' or 'centuries'," celebrating the "almost uninterrupted emergence of truth and pure reason."[14]

Instead, Foucault called upon historians to redirect their attention "*beneath*" those seeming and, as far as he was concerned, existent-only-on-paper totalities

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[13]Michel Foucault, *The Archeology of Knowledge* (1972) (New York, 2012), 13; Foucault, "The Subject and Power," *Critical Inquiry* 8/4 (1982), 777–795, at 777.
[14]Foucault, *The Archeology of Knowledge*, 4–5, 15; Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things* (1970) (New York, 1994), ix.

and continuities. The proposed new platform was predicated on a critical analytical move that urged historians to penetrate the "beneath": the "deepest strata" of history and culture. Should they do so, they would discover there, Foucault promised, a breath of fresh air: the "living, fragile, pulsating history" punctuated with "mutations," "contradictions," "breaches," "shifts," "shocks," "ruptures," and "great discontinuities." At his most radical, Foucault pronounced his project to be about giving history back its "living openness."[15]

This signature commitment to going in one's research "beneath" the surface of things throws into sharp relief one of Foucault's own fundamental premises, definitely not of his making: his *stratified* view of history in which the "hidden," "unsaid," and "unconscious" layers of cultural production and domination play a paramount and, to use his vocabulary again, "primary" role. Indeed, from the 1960s on and for the next two decades, he stressed and painstakingly explained the critical importance, for his intellectual project, of the hidden over the apparent, the unsaid over the said, the unconscious over the conscious. Or, as Foucault himself reflected on his indebtedness to nineteenth- and twentieth-century intellectual traditions, he saw elements of his approach in structural linguists' preoccupations with hidden rules of language, in ethnographers' studies of unspoken societal practices, and in psychoanalysts' focus on unconscious structures of the human psyche and desire.[16]

Given the paramount role that the stratified concept of history plays in Foucault's research, I propose to take a deep dive, together with Foucault, into it. Let us examine the work that the "deepest-strata" premise, for example, performs in Foucault's analysis and the limits it imposes on his reconceptualization of history as a "living, fragile, pulsating," and open-ended process. History in his scenario, I argue, turns out to be, after all, neither unconditionally open-ended nor unconditionally unfixed. It at once "pulsates" with "mutations," "contradictions," "ruptures," and "breaks" and, in its deepest layers, is home for "well-defined regularities" and "limits" that delineate and perpetuate what, in *The Order of Things*, Foucault proposed to call a given society's "positive unconsciousness."[17] On account of human protagonists, in particular, as Foucault explained on many occasions, those deepest—positively unconscious—strata imposed insurmountable limitations on the ways humans, undoubtedly intentional and spontaneous, manipulative and resisting, defying and subverting beings in their everyday activities, organized their cognitive and social life and constitute themselves as social beings.

Foucault spent much time—in fact, his entire career—explicating the historical phenomena that he strove to capture when he talked about the "deepest strata" of history. He tirelessly tried out different terms and metaphors, attempting to turn them into working analytics only to start anew in the next book project. In his 1963 *The Birth of the Clinic*, for example, Foucault told the reader that his primary research site in the book comprised "silent" configurations that, as he also

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[15]Foucault, *The Archeology of Knowledge*, 4, 8, 11, 13, 15; also see Foucault, *The Order of Things*, xx, xxii, xxiv; Michel Foucault, *The Birth of the Clinic* (1973) (New York, 1994), xviii–xix.
[16]Foucault, *The Archeology of Knowledge*, 13; Foucault, *The Order of Things*, xx.
[17]Foucault, *The Archeology of Knowledge*, 11; Foucault, *The Order of Things*, ix, xi.

explained, reliably, necessarily, and for extended periods of time undergirded the production of medical–psychiatric knowledge and praxis in Europe in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. His analysis, as a result, was specifically aimed beyond the "thematic content" of medical knowledge; that is, beyond what researchers and doctors could themselves relate about their medical expertise and procedures, and the rationales behind them. The focus was, rather, on what Foucault called "unsaid" and "explicitly unsignified" discursive mechanisms—the very possibility of a discourse—that enabled researchers and doctors to make sense of the human body, its ailments and diseases, while being largely ignorant about the fact that their professional mode of operation was part and parcel of a larger discursive formation.[18]

Three years later, in *The Order of Things*, Foucault already works with a revised analytical apparatus. The language of "fundamental codes of culture," "primary codes," "ordering codes," and "preliminary criterion" points to the phenomena that would have been familiar to any careful reader from *The Birth of the Clinic*. This is how in *The Order of Things* Foucault explains what the "fundamental codes of culture" stand for in the book. According to Foucault, they do not simply undergird and permeate the "surface appearance[s]" of a given culture. They "govern" it: "its language, its schemas of perception, its exchanges, its techniques, its values, the hierarchy of its practices." And, as such, they also provide humans with "codes" of their social constitution, pre-reflective and operating beyond the reach of their consciousness.[19]

Seventeenth-century naturalists, grammarians, and economists—Foucault's key protagonists in the study—would undoubtedly have been shocked to learn that their "widely differing theories, concepts, and objects of study" were "silently" predicated on "well-defined regularities" of thought about which they were not aware. Moreover, to elaborate further his vision of what discourses and discursive formations do behind the backs of historical protagonists, Foucault writes that his historical protagonists actively but "unknown to themselves" "employed" the "same rules" of thought when it came to "defining the objects proper to their study, to form their concepts, to build their theories."[20]

In his analysis, Foucault, in other words, once again distinguished and moved between the two "levels" of social and cognitive phenomena which in *The Order of Things* he began to call the "archeological level" or the level of "positive unconsciousness" and the "epistemological level" or the level of "scientific consciousness." The latter domain, Foucault rightfully assumed, would be familiar to most historians. Here, Foucault had no difficulties asserting, protagonists were active, purposeful, resourceful, creative, and even competitive. Or, as the final quote in the paragraph above states, they defined proper objects of their study, formed concepts, theorized, and speculated. Moreover, Foucault kept detailing what his protagonists could do in history: they formulated problems, designed experiments, clashed in controversy, and made mistakes and discoveries.[21]

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[18]Foucault, *The Birth of the Clinic*, xi, xix.
[19]Foucault, *The Order of Things*, xx–xxi, xxii.
[20]Ibid., ix, xi.
[21]Ibid., xi, xiii.

Being primarily preoccupied with the study of scientific forms of knowledge and their archeological depths, Foucault did not negate the reality of what he would later call the "active" subject of history. But he did presuppose that the "deepest strata of culture," a vast and manifold web of tacit codes, orders, rules of thought and praxis, played a "primary"—"determining" and "overwhelming"—role in the constitution of humans as social beings. They formed the "condition of possibility"—at once confining and productive—of his protagonists' scientific theorizations, speculations, experiments, and controversies. The active, purposeful, resourceful, creative subject, in other words, was never meant to be unconditionally free-floating, defying social and cognitive conditions of its making. Far from it. "Fundamental codes of culture," Foucault explained to avoid any misunderstanding, established "for every man, from the very first, the empirical orders with which he will be dealing and within which he will be at home."[22]

Foucault's theory of the constitution of humans into social beings—or, to use his vocabulary, the theory of subjectivization—was thus very broadly cast. According to him, the study of human protagonists in history should begin not with their conscious and spontaneous activities, not even with ideas, concepts, systems of values, norms, imperatives that people learn, internalize, and end up taking for granted. The starting point lies even deeper. It takes the historian to those layers of cultural apparatus that historical protagonists internalize, "unknown to themselves"; that is, without making any effort and, consequently, without being in the position to subject them to a critical examination. This is why Foucault called those layers "silent," "unsaid," "unsignified"—namely "silent," "unsaid," "unsignified," as far as humans were concerned.

And this is why, for Foucault, the language analogy was such a useful metaphor and tool of explanation. He compared the human protagonist of history with the language user whose infinite ingenuity with self-expression in language is always predicated on the language's impersonal rules that the user learned inadvertently and could not change. In *The Archeology of Knowledge* Foucault extends this metaphor beyond language when he provides yet another emphatic explication of his intervention; that is, that since "man himself could not account for his sexuality and his unconsciousness, the systematic forms of his language … the regularities of his fiction," or "the rules of his action," the historian must be tasked with including those latent and overlooked social–cultural strata—systematic, regular, and rules-propelled—into their research agendas.[23] In *The Archeology of Knowledge*, this cornerstone premise did not interfere with Foucault's specific agenda in the book to foreground and analyze the permutating, adapting, fracturing, and contradictory dynamics—the actual day-to-day—in the operation and self-perpetuation of discursive formations. The deep regularities of thought and social practice were, in other words, in no way incompatible with but rather constitutive and confining of discourses' otherwise dynamic lives.

In *Discipline and Punish*, arguably Foucault's most influential work, which came out in 1975, the scholar also did not feel the need to revise, not to mention part with, the fundamentals of his outlook of history as a stratified enterprise of

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[22]Ibid., xiv, xx.
[23]Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, 13.

which humans had a characteristically surface knowledge. Having decisively extended the scope of his analysis beyond the cultural–discursive domain into the material, bodily, and institutional realms of society, Foucault added more layers of complexity and contingency to his study of the past and the present, but he did not change either his signature assumptions or his basic interpretive moves. The genealogical method, developed here, turned out to be perfectly compatible with the fundamentals of Foucault's earlier publications.

According to Foucault, the subject matter of the book and even the expansion of his scope of analysis to include the "body and material things" were suggested to him by the "present"—the many "prison revolts" that "in recent years … have occurred throughout the world." Thus Foucault turned the present-day revolt site, the prison, into his entrance point into its history. The resultant study was a history of the present. He focused on the reformation of penal institutions in nineteenth-century France. Their story, Foucault proposed, had to be told by venturing beyond existing academic accounts that interpreted the move away from early modern, torture-defined penal procedures as a triumph of "increasingly lenient protocols" of modernity. Attributing this transformation to general "process[es] of humanization" and the ascent of "moral ideals," such studies, argued Foucault, stayed at the very surface of history.[24]

To counter the "humanization" thesis, Foucault reached "beneath the increasing leniency of punishment" in the manner characteristic of his overall intellectual agenda. He proposed to approach the novel protocols of punishment that discontinued the public torture, dismemberment, branding of the condemned as "effects" of much "deeper changes." There, underneath the "effects," Foucault uncovered and painstakingly analyzed deep logics in accordance with which novel punitive protocols made a novel use of the body of the condemned. Instead of torturing and dismembering the body, the punitive system now utilized the body as an instrument of social engineering, aiming at modeling human conduct and individuality, inscribing one's body and mind into power relations, and ultimately aspiring to produce "docile and capable" subjects of modernity.[25]

The discovered system of subjectivization and subjugation, as a result, had very little to do with "processes of humanization" or with improved morals. The actual, working logics underneath modern forms of punishment, Foucault explained, were difficult to grasp because these were "rarely formulated in continuous, systematic discourse" but they were not deprived of systematicities that a scholar could analyze. As such, they constituted an unspoken mode of operation—positive unconsciousness, though this term was not used in *Discipline and Punish*—that undergirded the production of legal and scientific knowledge as well as informing what Foucault began to call "practices," "technologies," and "mechanisms" of power that, in their turn, operated in a dispersed and largely invisible manner.[26]

Starting with *Discipline and Punish*, knowledge and power, to use Foucault's shorthand interpretive language, would form in his work an entangled partnership.

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[24]Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (1975) (New York, 1995), 30, 7, 8, 25, 238, 240.

[25]Ibid., 8, 22, 23, 294.

[26]Ibid., 26.

Implicit in his work from the very beginning and formulated only in 1975, this partnership personified what to Foucault was an obvious fact of history, namely that the stratified cultural operation under his interrogation, from the depths of its fundamental codes to its dynamic surface layers, always and necessarily came with techniques of social control and domination. In his analysis, thus, an interplay of discursive and material practices that a society has at its disposal to subjugate cognitively and socially its unaware subjects is relentlessly ideological. So are, by definition, the deep and not so deep codes of humans' social constitution.[27]

And yet it would be wrong to say that the concept of the human subject in *Discipline and Punish* could be grasped by appealing to Foucault's notion of the "docile body." Docility, Foucault would be the first to point out, was something that the power–knowledge system under his examination undoubtedly aspired towards. But it never fully succeeded. In fact, the introduction of the concept of power allowed Foucault to further stress confrontations, instabilities, conflicts, and struggles inherent to social and cognitive processes of domination and subjugation. Thus he hurried to assure his reader already in the introduction that the kind of relations of power he had in mind were by no means "univocal." Humans, caught up in infinite labyrinths of power–knowledge systems, could and did fight back and resist, take advantage of "innumerable points of confrontation" and "focuses of instability," and sometimes even "invert," albeit temporarily, power relations.[28]

And, of course, given his overall theoretical framework, Foucault could not help but predictably curb the scope of human activities in history. Historical subjects, according to him, can indeed very well "resist the grip" that systems of subjectivization have on them. However, here again comes the signature caveat of Foucault's analytics which we have already seen: "resisting the grip" is not tantamount to getting rid of the "grip." What people cannot do, according to Foucault and us, is to disengage from the "fundamental codes of culture" or, to use Foucault's *Discipline and Punish* interpretive language, power–knowledge systems that tacitly inform and propel discursive and material operations of their society and their social constitution. The Foucauldian protagonist, in other words, not unlike the present-day protagonist of social and cultural history, is recognized for her ability to fight back, resist, subvert —but always within the confines of the relentlessly ideological grip which deep regularities and modes of operation hide from her consciousness.[29]

Foucault made no exceptions to this rule of thumb—no historical periods, circumstances, or actors were excused. The "grip," as a result, performs in Foucault's scholarship the unmistakable role of a totalizing prerequisite of human subjectivity, of the very possibility of being a social being. In Foucault's theoretical framework, traced so far into the mid-1970s, no straw is offered to a historian to clutch at in order to imagine a human protagonist disengaging from relentlessly ideological codes of her social and cognitive constitution, not to mention offering an alternative to her historical predicament. In fact, humans' capacity to resist in this account is considered, by definition, within the confines of the

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[27]Ibid., 22–3, 27.
[28]Ibid., 27.
[29]Ibid., 27.

unspoken ways in which a society organizes its social and cognitive life.[30] The concept of countersystemic resistance, as a result, becomes an oxymoron in this approach. The Foucauldian subject always resists in an infinite number of ways but always on the terms of deep codes and power arrangements not of one's making.

Before I take my analysis of these fixed and totalizing prerequisites in Foucault's theory of subjectivity into the 1980s, let us consider a pressing issue that must have been on the reader's mind for some time. What happens to Foucault's fixed premises at the time of radical transformations, or, as Foucault would have put it, of radical discontinuity when the "deepest strata of culture" and power–knowledge regimes undergo a fundamental remaking? Indeed, what happens to humans and their dependencies on their culture amid such interludes? A short answer to this question is "not much" since historical protagonists, as we will see, were not included in Foucault's analysis of social and cognitive routines undergoing a radical remaking.

Radical discontinuity

In contemporary social theory and social sciences, Foucault seems to be a paramount starting point for anyone who wants to talk about the making of the concept of radical discontinuity. The 2010 *Oxford Dictionary of Critical Theory*, for example, features the "work of Michel Foucault which has done the most to demonstrate the importance of this concept" and de facto equates the former with the latter.[31] In fact, Foucault's reputation as a "historian of discontinuity" appears to have been well established already by the 1980s, and for very good reason.[32]

For nearly twenty years, from the early 1960s to the late 1970s, Foucault invariably plotted out his major interventions as stories unfolding at times of radical discontinuity in the "deepest strata" and fabrics of social life. Foucault's 1960s publications, *Madness and Civilization* (1961), *The Birth of the Clinic* (1963), and *The Order of Things* (1966), were all situated in the middle of what in his account became radical eighteenth- and nineteenth-century transformations and ruptures in psychiatric, medical, political, linguistic, and economic forms of knowledge in the West. In the following decade he again picked an episode of radical discontinuity as a research site, first for *Discipline and Punish* (1975) and then for *History of Sexuality* (1976), unearthing this time a deep shift between early modern and modern discursive, institutional, and intimate practices of ordering and disciplining humans and turning them into subjects.

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[30]This is why, Neil Brenner argued as early as 1994, Foucault de facto deprives the concept of human resistance of meaning when he invites his readers and followers to think of it as being built into a system of domination itself, namely the "operations of a given form of power." Brenner, "Foucault's New Functionalism," 699, 700, 702. For the development of Foucault's notion of resistance as being "never in the position of exteriority in relation to power" see Michel Foucault, *History of Sexuality*, vol. 1 (New York, 1978); 95; also see Thomas R. Flynn, *Sartre, Foucault, and Historical Reason*, vol. 1, *Toward an Existentialist Theory of History* (Chicago, 1997); Moishe Postone, *Time, Labor and Social Domination* (Cambridge, 1993).

[31]The dictionary uses the concept of epistemic break, which it defines along the lines of Foucault's concept of radical discontinuity. Ian Buchanan, ed., *Oxford Dictionary of Critical Theory* (Oxford, 2010), 153.

[32]Jeffrey Weeks, "Foucault for Historians," *History Workshop* 14 (1982), 106–19, at 109.

The "deepest strata" in Foucault's analysis led life in stark contrast to the surface layers of discursive formations and power–knowledge regimes. On a regular day in history, the surface layers were sustained by their relentless permutations and adaptations, and by humans' intentional and spontaneous use of their societal competence in dispersed and often conflict-ridden localities. The deepest, archeological layers, on the other hand, were the opposite of that permutating, adapting, and spontaneous mode of history. Completely out of humans' reach (akin to the way the rules of language evaded the language user's conscious reflection), they are best described as lethargic. They kept a cultural life of a given society, with all its conflict-ridden reproduction, permutations, and changes, within certain ideological parameters. Transformations in the deep layers of history were infrequent, but when they did take place they were epoch-making—or radically discontinuous.

The lethargic layers were, in other words, not without a history of their own. Transformations unfolded with various speeds. In *The Order of Things*, the radical transformation under investigation ascended "suddenly," sometime at the end of the eighteenth century, as Foucault's story goes. It was described by Foucault as a "profound breach," "alteration," "mutation," "reorganization" within "deepest strata of Western culture." The rapidly emerging system of knowing the social and natural universe of the nineteenth century, Foucault wrote, "eclipsed" earlier forms of knowledge.[33]

The "great transformation of the years of 1760–1840" around which Foucault built his *Discipline and Punish* took a different route. The "transformation" proceeded gradually and unevenly across the geopolitical body of Europe. "Throughout the eighteenth century," according to Foucault's synopsis, "inside and outside the legal apparatus, in both everyday penal practices and the criticism of institutions, one sees the emergence of a new strategy for the exercise of the power to punish." Extending into the nineteenth century, the transformation, as Foucault added more texture to the story, was afflicted with temporal reversals and setbacks. Old penal strategies embodied in public executions took time to "die out," "flickering momentarily into life here and there."[34]

The centrality of the radical-discontinuity problematic to Foucault's intellectual agenda is hardly in need of more examples, even though the conversation can be easily extended beyond the works mentioned above. What is in need of an explanation is the following question, which is also my argument: why did Foucault's work on radical discontinuity, encompassing a wealth of research sites and involving numerous actors, have no bearing on the fixed and totalizing assumptions in his "grip" theory of subjectivity?

To explain this paradoxical incongruity at the heart of Foucault's project, one needs to confront yet another paradoxical quandary, namely that one of the most influential theoretical voices in the conversation about radical discontinuity happens to say relatively little about radical discontinuity as an episode partaking in the lives of historical protagonists and as a research site in its own right. The radically discontinuous in history, I argue as a result, had no bearing on Foucault's theory of subjectivity because Foucault did not consider his historical

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[33]Foucault, *The Order of Things*, xii, xxiv, xxii, 217, 303.
[34]Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 8, 15, 81–2.

protagonists in relation to actually unfolding radical transformations. In his accounts, radical restructuring of societal systems of intelligibility and know-how takes place as if behind the backs of historical protagonists.

A seemingly counterintuitive thesis, it loses much of its counterintuitive overtone once we extend the examination of Foucault's approach past his figurative interpretive language, which I have so far used uncritically. There, behind the metaphors that call on the reader to visualize "breaks," "ruptures," "transformations," "emergences," "mutations," and "eclipses," one finds an analytics that restricts the scholar's and his followers' encounters with power–knowledge regimes to moments when those complexly stratified regimes have already come into being, i.e. when their deep codes and rules of thought and deed have been already learned and internalized by historical protagonists well enough to be operational. In his approach and despite the dramatism of his narrating language, Foucault thus asks his readers to accept a very narrow definition of a "break," "breach," "rupture," "transformation"—one that is trimmed down to a comparative analysis of already formed archeological–epistemic regimes.

To illustrate how the problem of radical discontinuity can at once shape a book's plot and get lost in its comparative analysis, let us go back, for example, to Foucault's *Discipline and Punish*. At the first glance, not only the book's plot but also its subplots relate stories of change, rupture, and flux. Thus the "great transformation" in the philosophy and economy of punishment that Foucault uncovers is situated by the scholar right in the midst of various concomitant transformations—social, economic, industrial, demographic—that overrun France and Europe more generally in the second half of the eighteenth century. Sketching out this well-documented episode in European history, Foucault puts a special stress on processes of the decomposition of habitual social fabrics of European societies; growing destabilization and paralysis of their political, administrative, legal, and penal institutions; persistent and variegated social conflict—all connected to or, to use Foucault's vocabulary, necessitated by the rise of commercial and industrial capitalism.[35]

Could anyone or anything escape the destabilizing effects of such a grand historical drama and, for example, make sense of the disorienting flux of history, as if unaffected by it? In Foucault's analysis of this historical episode, one domain of history—the domain of a priori cultural codes and social rules—is bestowed with exactly such super-historical powers to stand as if above history, inexplicably defiant of its disarray and flux.

Take, for example, the case of the emergent "new [and unspoken] strategy for the exercise of the power to punish," the main focus of *Discipline and Punish*. In the book, it speaks to the reader through eighteenth- and nineteenth-century reformers, lawyers, judges, magistrates, philosophers, and publicists whose speeches, legal texts, procedural manuals, institutional initiatives, and reforms unfailingly contain elements of the new code. In fact, every time Foucault gives his subjects or sources a "voice," they dependably and unwittingly deliver another example of a new rule in use. As such, the "new strategy," with its systematicities and regularities that Foucault explores, constitutes in the book a history-defying marvel that guides historical actors' thinking in new directions despite the unprecedented

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[35]Ibid., 75–8, 84–8.

economic restructuring, social turmoil, and political and legal disintegration around them. It is presented as always already operational in their minds and always already informing the positive collective unconsciousness of the moment. As for the break—the "great transformation" in the realm of deep rules of intelligibility and social control—it must have already taken place. As a result, the unspoken deep codes and rules of modernity seem not only to be always on top of things and people. They seem also to run ahead of modernity itself—as a supra-historical force whose self-propelling and penetrating powers were never addressed, not to mention theorized, by Foucault. Foucault's reader, as a result, never learns how the radical divide between early modern and modern strategies to punish and turn humans into subjects happened. Nor does one learn where humans were when that happened.[36]

It should come as no surprise, then, that historical actors whom Foucault features in his work are always already equipped with and well-versed in the deep and deepest rules of early modern or modern times. They also are never at a loss as to what to say. On the contrary, always speaking from within some archeological–epistemic regime whose deep codes and rules they have already internalized and are not in a position to change, they provide Foucault with well-formulated examples that capture differences in the way people of different epochs lodge their thoughts, plans, and strategies in the folds of different "fundamental codes." Foucault's failure to situate historical protagonists in the context of an actually unfolding radical transformation also explains why his particular preoccupation with radical change in history had no bearing on his fundamentally constraining theorizations of the human predicament.

In fact, it works in beautiful tandem with his general pessimistic position on historical subjects' inability to ever disengage from deep, pre-reflective, ideological codes of their time and impact them in a structurally consequential manner. Break or no break, the deep undergirding rules of humans' otherwise spontaneous thought and deed are treated as being always already there and applied by the scholar without exception. The question of humans' disengagement from their totalizing historical predicament at times of radical societal transformations and participation in the making of alternative discursive forms simply does not enter Foucault's analytical agenda. For how can one disengage from, not to mention change, something one is collectively unaware of? From here it seems logical to conclude, as Foucault did, that "fundamental codes of culture" and power–knowledge regimes come and go independently of humans' will and intentions.

The "grip"

Radical discontinuity, in other words, did not stand in the way of the totalizing concept of the "grip" that Foucault postulated on behalf of historical protagonists and around which he built his theorizations of cultural mediation and subjectivity. The "openness of history," "living, fragile, pulsating," that Foucault strove to foreground came with a serious caveat—those deep, "unspoken" codes and rules that undergirded and confined processes of humans' social constitution and, in his work,

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[36]Ibid., 73–5, 78–81, 90–93.

operated independently from humans. During the twenty-plus years over which Foucault attempted to shake up the discipline of history in France and ended up, arguably, having his most lasting impact on the US humanities and social sciences, at no point did he subject these fundamental assumptions of his own conceptual project to a critical examination. His research sites, topics, angles, analytical languages changed. His fundamental conceptual premises did not.

Fundamental continuities formed the leitmotif of Foucault's interviews in the 1980s when, together with his interviewers, he was reviewing his "work during the last twenty years." In stark contrast with his interviewers, who built their questions around "shifts" and "leaps" in Foucault's scholarship, Foucault patiently explained that, despite his varying, over the years, research destinations and interpretive vocabularies, the conceptual–theoretical fundamentals of his queries had remained the same.[37]

Namely, as he stated and restated, the hallmark problematic of his intellectual project was the social construction or, to use his vocabulary, "transformation" of human beings into social subjects. Foucault believed that, by the early 1980s, he had "created" histories of three "different modes by which, in our culture, human beings are made subjects." So far in this article, we have examined two of them. Or, as Foucault himself elaborated, he started his query with what in the 1980s he called discursive practices that claimed for themselves the "status of science" and strove to define/constitute the human subject as an "individual who talks, who works, and who lives." The second mode that Foucault studied and theorized placed on historians' agenda the question of coercive, institutionalized, and largely invisible "practices of control" that catalogued, differentiated, and engineered humans into modern subjects by assigning them identities of the "mad and the sane, the sick and the healthy, the criminals and the 'good boys.'"[38]

It went without saying that discursive practices as well as practices of control operated on multiple levels, involving humans in various knowledge–power projects of modernity or "games of truth," the terminology Foucault preferred to rely on in the 1980s. The premise that, in order to be operational, "games of truth" had to rely on a "certain number of [societal] rules of conduct or of principles" that humans—as Foucault's interviewers themselves finished one of his thoughts for him in 1984, "learned, memorized, and progressively put into practice" in an unaware manner—was as incontrovertible for Foucault in the 1980s as it had been twenty years earlier.[39]

By the mid-1970s and early 1980s, Foucault had embarked yet on another study of subject formation, the one I turn to now. This time, to the foreground came human beings themselves, who, as Foucault went ahead and explained, participated

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[37]"The Ethic of Care for the Self as a Practice of Freedom," an interview with Michel Foucault, 24 Jan. 1984, in James Bernauer and David Rasmussen, eds., *The Final Foucault* (Cambridge, MA, 1988), 1–20, at 1–2. For the ongoing rethinking of the "periodizations of Foucault's work that have dominated much Anglophone literature," although along lines different to the present project, see Stuart Elden, *Foucault's Last Decade* (Cambridge, 2016), 4. For the prevailing leaps- and stages-driven periodization of Foucault's work see, for example, Spiegel, "Introduction"; Raymond Martin and John Barresi, *The Rise and Fall of Soul and Self: An Intellectual History of Personal Identity* (New York, 2008), Ch. 7.

[38]Foucault, "The Subject and Power," 777; Foucault, "The Ethic of Care," 1–2.

[39]Foucault, "The Ethic of Care," 1, 5.

firsthand, actively, and intentionally in their own constitution as subjects amid complex knowledge–power regimes not of their making. He called this mode of subjectivization a "practice of the self." His exploration started in the "domain of sexuality" with a question of "how men have learned to recognize themselves as subjects of sexuality" and extended to a social self-practice which Foucault "believed to be very important in our societies since Greek and Roman times." Offering several definitions in his 1984 interview with James Bernauer and David Rasmussen, entitled "The Ethic of Care for the Self as a Practice of Freedom," Foucault stated that the "practice" he was now interested in foregrounded the "way in which the subject constitutes himself [in a society] in an active fashion," even enjoying "room for freedom" as well as a playful and transformative relationship with oneself.[40]

What exactly did Foucault mean by the active, playful, and self-transforming subject? What kind of "freedom" did Foucault manage to detect in the practice of the self? It is indeed critical to consider these questions if only to show that Foucault engaged them without overstepping the fundamental parameters of his lifelong query and its analytics. No conceptual shift or leap away from his earlier premises was necessary. In fact, the "practice-of-self" study still presupposed that historical protagonists operated necessarily within a certain knowledge–power predicament whose "truths" they had always already known because they learned them unbeknownst to themselves. The role that humans ended up playing in Foucault's scenario of history was by definition a modest one, despite being now described as active, playful, and self-transforming.

In fact, the practice of the self was not qualitatively different from the other two modes. It too, as Foucault explained, relied on deep and unspoken "rules," "regulations," "doctrines." This time Foucault considered them as tools of self-fashioning that a society made available to humans without calling their attention to the fact that they were socially and culturally constituted by those "rules," "regulations," "doctrines." In their turn, humans put those largely pre-reflective tools to practice—to "know one's self," to "improve one's self, to surpass one's self, to master the appetites that engulf you"—that is, they actively participated in "self-fashioning" themselves into social beings on the terms that they had no choice but to learn, internalize, and deploy.[41]

In an attempt to make Foucault's position crystal clear, his interviewers half-asked, half-asserted that those rules, regulations, and doctrines of self-fashioning constituted a "sort of quasi-subject that reigns supremely in you." Foucault concurred and further explicated the unconditional grip on humans that his theory of subjectivization presupposed:

> if now I am interested in fact in the way in which the subject constitutes himself in an active fashion, by practices of self, these practices are nevertheless not something that the individual invents by himself. They are patterns he finds in his culture and which are proposed, suggested and imposed on him by his culture, his society and his social group.

[40]Foucault, "The Subject and Power," 778; Foucault, "The Ethic of Care," 2, 10–11, 13.
[41]Foucault, "The Ethic of Care," 5.

In fact, those patterns must be "learned so firmly," Foucault pointed out, that they "operate in some way without you doing anything."[42] And, as a result, they penetrate deeply into humans' unconsciousness while the subject in Foucault's approach becomes a mirror image of his stratified concept of culture, encompassing deep and surface, unconscious and conscious, unsaid and said, unknown and known rules and regulations.

In a manner characteristic of post-structuralist, language-based theories of subjectivity more generally, Foucault, too, granted this complexly stratified subject the "freedom" to "play" with any given "ensemble of rules" their society made available to them. In fact, humans, according to Foucault, could and did routinely deploy those rules, intentionally as well as spontaneously, not only on themselves and others in a myriad of local situations and power relations. They could also adapt them to new situations and even reverse them. But they could neither change nor escape them. As if to underline the firmness of the last condition, Foucault told his interviewers in passing that, when worse came to worst, humans had an option of breaking free by means of suicide: by "jumping out of the window," for example.[43]

This profoundly de-radicalized and unsettling script of liberation did not seem to unsettle his interviewers. In fact, it went by them without even being noted. Nor did the interviewers, not unlike pioneers and advocates of Foucault's theoretical insights in social sciences, note the fact that the incorporation of the notions of active self-fashioning, playfulness, and self-transformation (in the sense of adapting and adopting existing societal rules/tools), as well as freedom, into Foucault's theory of subjectivity took place at a price. They suffered the fate similar to that of the resistance concept. They too were considered by Foucault within the limits of a social, cognitive, largely pre-reflective, and always ideological ensemble of "truths," "rules," and "regulations" that propelled power–knowledge regimes and served humans as the condition of their social becoming in the first place. On the bright side of things—the insight still dominates the present-day conversation about the human protagonist in history—nearly every human, as long as he/she was made by a society into a social being, could now be viewed as an active, intentional, playful, and free-to-a-degree subject simply because everyone, by definition, must learn and internalize some rules of thought and conduct and deploy them towards one's ends and to the best of one's abilities. On the not-so-bright side of things, Foucault's theory of subjectivity thus did not presuppose a scenario in which a subject could disengage ideologically from one's sociocognitive predicament. One had no choice but to "fashion" one's self, one's life, resistance, and struggle, within "certain limits" and "parameters."[44]

Conclusion

At no point during his lifelong investigation of "different modes by which, in our culture, humans are made subjects" did Foucault presuppose that complex processes

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[42]Ibid., 5–6, 11.
[43]Ibid., 10, 12.
[44]Ibid., 2.

of impersonal societal conditioning under his investigation were *unqualifiedly* open-ended, unfixed, indeterminate, variable, unstable, or uncontrolled.[45] Foucault's conceptual edifice of a "culture," encompassing, without doubt, all of the above characteristics, also, as we have seen, always encompassed what he called "fundamental codes," "rules," "regularities" of thought and praxis, using which a given society organized and perpetuated itself socially and cognitively. Ideologically encrypted, those codes were the opposite of indeterminate, variable, unstable modes of cultural operation. Foucault described them as "deep," "deepest," "unspoken," "unsignified," and, as far as humans were concerned, unconditionally there; that is, penetrating deep into collective and individual unconsciousness. According to Foucault, the deepest layers constituted the condition of social being and the constraint within which social being in all its variability, instability, and irruptiveness unfolded.

The fate of the human subject in this complexly stratified scenario of societal conditioning could be anything but simple. Most definitely, the subject did not need to "die" even though Foucault proclaimed the "death of the subject" on more than one occasion.[46] Indeed, the human subject of the Foucauldian school of historical analysis had every reason to be alive and well. It was perfectly capable, as Foucault pointed out throughout his career, of constructive thought, intentional action, resistance, contestation, subversion, self-fashioning, even self-transformation, while being largely unaware of the fact that one's societal competence rested on "fundamental codes" that were learned and internalized inadvertently.

This is why Foucault, without hesitation, granted his seventeenth-century naturalists, grammarians, and economists in *The Order of Things* eventful, productive, and, as far as they were concerned, spontaneous scientific lives: they defined "widely differing" objects of study, formed concepts, formulated problems, theorized and speculated, clashed in controversy, and made mistakes and discoveries. Or, in other words, they were active, intentional, strategic, creative, not-averse-to-controversy historical protagonists who, at the same time, had no idea that they were predicated on "determining" and "overwhelming" regularities of thought and practice and that their scientific lives consisted of creatively adapting and adopting those regularities. But their creativity had rather distinct limits. Likewise, in *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault assured his readers that humans caught up in infinite labyrinths of power–knowledge systems were perfectly capable of taking advantage of their internal contradictions, of fighting back, and "resisting [their] grip" while never being fully aware of those system's existence and modes of operation.[47] Granted, for most of his career, Foucault discussed the problem of the socially constituted protagonist of history mainly in passing, on his way

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[45]Foucault, "The Subject and Power," 777.

[46]Foucault, as should be all too clear by now, did not reject the concept of the human subject per se. The subject that deserved to die and that Foucault emphatically refused an entrance into his work was an analytical–ideological construct that he called the humanist subject. To Foucault and post-structuralist critics, the humanist subject personified the academic and popular propensity to approach humans as the unitary source of thought and knowledge about themselves and the world. For accounts that privilege Foucault's critique of the humanist subject at the expense of his early recognition and eventual theorization of the self-fashioning individual subject see, for example, Spiegel, "Introduction," 11–12; Bonnell and Hunt, *Beyond the Cultural Turn*, 22.

[47]Foucault, *The Order of Things*, ix; Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 27.

towards problematics that appeared to him more pressing. Only by the 1980s did his animated sketches of human beings as active enactors of their selves and lives on the terms of "deep," "unspoken," and ultimately unsurmountable "codes of culture" become an actual research agenda and a subject of theorization.

Foucault's lifelong preoccupation with the fundamental question of historical and social theory—what one means when one says that humans are socially and culturally constituted—thus relied on several fixed and totalizing premises. His approach is fixed in so far as humans in his conceptual, power-ridden universe have no choice but to adapt and adopt, unbeknownst to themselves, some fundamental and inescapable tenets of thought and praxis that their societies make available to them. And it is totalizing in so far as no exceptions to this scenario of social conditioning and its "grip" on humans are made. Indeed, in Foucault's stratified social universe, where the "deepest" layers of social conditioning are imagined after impersonal rules, humans' prospect of ever escaping their pre-existing and pre-reflective grip is markedly slim. In fact, the futility of an escape is taken for granted. How could humans ever disengage from sociocultural regularities that make up the deepest corners of their collective unconsciousness and confine their thoughts, deeds, acts of resistance? The only as-good-as-it-gets scenario Foucault can offer is the one in which humans participate firsthand in their own subject formation, live intentionally and purposefully, fight the power, even pursue "freedom" exclusively within deep and ideological confines not of their making. The "openness of history" that Foucault promised to the field of history, in other words, is in need of a serious qualification. Let me propose the notion of *fixed "openness of history"* which seems to characterize the Foucauldian promise to historians and their protagonists much more accurately.

Of course, Foucault never called his complexly organized, at once active and constrained subject an agent. And yet one is going to be hard-pressed to tell a difference, at the fundamental level, between the Foucauldian protagonist and the present-day protagonist–agent that has dominated much of social and cultural history and the social sciences more generally for the last thirty years.[48] Nor was the discovery of this active and constrained subject an intellectual maneuver unique to Foucault. Rather, the kind of human protagonist one finds in Foucault's scholarship was very much in the spirit of the times. Its basic outline is easily detectable in the works by Foucault's influential contemporaries and their followers in and outside the discipline of history—Pierre Bourdieu, Anthony Giddens, James Scott, Marshall Sahlins, Sherry Ortner, William Sewell, Kathleen Canning—who also attempted to enliven their disciplines with post-structuralist insights. What Foucault's scholarship captures for us, in other words, is that there are only so many—or, should one say, so few—ways to think about the human protagonist if one chooses to speak from the grounds of post-structuralist theorizations of society and subjectivity.

In her 2005 tour de force overview of leading approaches to the problems of social construction and agency in social sciences, from Bourdieu and Giddens onwards, Gabrielle Spiegel, for example, began her analysis with what, in her

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[48]For a detailed explication and critique of this protagonist and historiographies that have formulated and continue to support this intellectual construct see Krylova, "Agency and History."

view, was a well-established disposition in history, sociology, and cultural anthropology to approach the concepts of culture and structure as a "toolkit" of rules and schemas. Very much in tandem with the Foucauldian school of thought, Spiegel explains that culture nowadays denotes not so much formal or stated rules that humans must obey but impersonal rules—"parameters and schemas within and according to which all [human] thought and behavior take place" and within which scholars think about subjectivity and agency.[49]

This way, having imagined "culture" as a "set of rules," or, let us draw on Bourdieu, as an "acquired system of generative schemas," "laid down in each agent by his earliest upbringing", cultural and social historians nowadays, just like Bourdieu and Giddens before them, can argue that humans' agentic activities consist of their intentional, tactical, stragetical, playful, defiant, spontaneous uses of those tacit culture rules and culture schemas, fixed in their collective unconsciousness. This conceptual move has been celebrated as an important breakthrough in the conversation about societal conditioning and agency. Thanks to it, Spiegel explains, a way has finally been found to "loosen" culture's "totalizing and determining influence" on individuals. At the same time, culture's "grip"—the vocabulary takes us to the beginning of this article—does not go anywhere, as Spiegel also asserts. It perseveres to demarcate the fixed, deep, and ideological limit to otherwise conflict-ridden, irruptive, and unstable day-to-day life in a social collective.[50]

The "emancipatory potential" of this "loosening-the-grip" thesis is markedly modest, to say the least.[51] It starts with a well-known premise, much older than the late twentieth-century post-structuralist intervention, that, as social beings, humans are at once necessarily constrained by and dependent on deep and impersonal rules and regularities of their societal constitution. To loosen this predicament, the post-structuralist scholar also insists emphatically that humans are free to put those deep culture rules to practice in an infinite number of ways in their day-to-dayness. This empowering statement, however, as we have seen, does not cancel out the original premise, that humans become subjects and agents within social and cognitive circumstances, or, to use Foucault's middle-career vocabulary, power–knowledge regimes, neither of their making nor available to their consciousness. The premise, as a result, becomes an invariable, fixed fate of the human protagonist in history, "free" to take full advantage of one's learned social competence to the best of one's classed, raced, gendered ability but not free to change its deep, unspoken, and ideological terms.

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[49]Spiegel, "Introduction," 15, 20.

[50]Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory*, 81, 87; Spiegel, "Introduction," 16; for similar theorizations of societal conditioning and human agency along the lines of humans' "use" of structurally available, learned rules and schemas of their historical predicament see also Marshall Sahlins, *Islands of History* (Chicago, 1985); Scott, *Weapons of the Weak*; Giddens, *The Constitution of Society*; de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*; Sewell, "A Theory of Structure"; Walkowitz, *City of Dreadful Deligh*; Canning, "Feminist Theory"; Biernacki, "Language and the Shift from Signs to Practices in Cultural Inquiry"; Shaw, "Happy in Our Chains?"; Reddy, "The Logic of Action"; Cabrera, Fagan, and McMahon, "On Language, Culture, and Social Action"; Reckwitz, "Toward a Theory of Social Practices"; Ortner, "Power and Projects"; Thomas, "Historicizing Agency."

[51]Bourg and Kleinberg, "Poststructuralism," 492.

For those of us who have never doubted that humans are socially constituted and that they use their socially and, thus, ideologically constituted habits of thought and praxis to enact and unwittingly constrain their lives, the post-structuralist proposition to turn this fundamental dilemma into a fixed and totalizing foundation of social life hardly constitutes a welcome breakthrough in the conversation about human agency, resistance, and struggle. What it does instead is to cut off the critical conversation about radical—that is, ideologically and structurally consequential—forms of social being. It does it by turning the question whether and under what historical circumstances humans can disengage from unwitting and ideological constraints that their societies impose on their social and cognitive life into a conceptual nonstarter. I end this article with this question in order to put it back on the historians' agenda.