



Resisting Foucauldian Ethics: Associative Politics and the Limits of the Care of the Self

Ella Myers

Department of Political Science, University of Utah, 260 South Central Campus Drive, Room 252, Salt Lake City, UT 84112, USA.

E-mail: ella.myers@utah.edu

This paper examines one strand of the ‘turn to ethics’ in recent political theory by engaging with Michel Foucault’s late work on ‘the care of the self.’ For contemporary thinkers interested in how democratic politics might be guided, informed, or vivified by particular ethical orientations, Foucault’s inquiry into ancient ethics has proved intriguing. Might concentrated ‘work on the self’ contribute to efforts to resist and remake present-day power relations? This paper endeavors to raise doubts about the Foucauldian inspired view, which regards a reflexive relation of the self to itself as a privileged site for critically engaging with existing configurations of power. To do so, I offer a close reading of Foucault’s scholarship that examines his work on ethics together with his well-known theory of power. I demonstrate that Foucault’s distinctive theory of power, if read carefully, alerts us to the limits of the care of the self as a strategy for making power relations more equitable, open, and responsive to democratic constituencies. As I show, disciplinary power and biopower target collectivities by ‘individualizing’ and ‘massifying,’ respectively, and thereby diminishing the potential ‘counter-power’ generated by pluralistic association. If this dimension of Foucault’s thought is appreciated, the ‘care of the self’ appears as a very limited resource for challenging these de-politicizing effects. Yet this paper also draws on Foucault’s thought in order to stress the importance of re-orienting debates concerning the relationship between ethics and politics toward *associative* rather than reflexive practices of freedom.

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Introduction

Recent democratic theory is marked by a striking ‘turn to ethics.’ Theorists working within a variety of traditions and driven by competing concerns display a surprising degree of unanimity when it comes to the indispensability of ‘ethics’ for contemporary political thought and practice. Notwithstanding competing visions of political life and equally diverse conceptions of what a



proper ethics entails, efforts to unite the political with the ethical are prominent. Although Habermasian approaches that center on ‘discourse ethics’ as a guide that can direct political deliberation toward a universally valid outcome may seem to have little in common with work inspired by the thinking of Emmanuel Levinas and his conception of infinite responsibility for the Other, the tendency to position ‘ethics’ as a much-needed supplement to ‘politics’ is widely shared.

This paper examines one particular strand of the contemporary turn to ethics, by considering the late work of Michel Foucault, which has been a source of considerable fascination for political theorists. Foucault’s books, essays, and interviews from this period are focused on ancient Greco-Roman ethical life (as evidenced in texts ranging from the first Platonic dialogues to the major texts of late Stoicism), which Foucault characterizes in terms of the ‘care of the self’ — an aesthetic and ascetic project of self-elaboration. This work has captured the attention of readers for several reasons. First, it seems to respond to a perceived lack in Foucault’s earlier writings, which were frequently criticized for being insufficiently normative (Habermas, 1987; Fraser, 1989), because his orientation toward the ethics of the care of the self seems clearly affirmative. As Thomas Osborne notes, the ‘aesthetics of existence’ that Foucault explored in his writings, lectures, and interviews on ethics has captured attention because it is regarded as ‘one of the few things that Foucault is unavowedly in favor of’ (1999, 46). In addition, the ‘care of the self’ captivates because it is presented by Foucault as a ‘practice of freedom.’ From a thinker regularly charged with having produced an ultimately deterministic account of power (Alcoff, 1990; Hartsock, 1990), the emphasis on ‘freedom’ has understandably sparked interest. If Foucault’s previous work focused on the ways in which subjects are *constituted*, might his foray into ethics be understood as a hopeful attempt to consider the *constituting* capacities of subjects?¹

Equally important, Foucault’s late work has been taken up as a resource by those seeking to elaborate an ethical practice suited to liberal democratic politics in the present. That is, Foucault’s work on ethics matters not only because it enriches and complicates his own oeuvre, but because it speaks to the widespread conviction that the transformation of existing political relations is in some sense bound up with the question of ethics. More specifically, the emphasis on *self-cultivation* that emerges from Foucault’s final scholarship has been embraced as a particularly promising perspective from which to consider the ethics–politics nexus. Might concentrated ‘work on the self’ have an important role to play in fostering sensibilities and dispositions that support democratic engagement? Does the ‘democratic ethos’ regularly called for today involve the crafting of a particular relationship with oneself?²

Following Foucault’s own suggestion that ancient practices of the ‘care of the self’ could serve to enrich our present-day understanding of ethics (1997c,



255–6; 1996, 49), several theorists, most notably William Connolly, have argued for the contemporary importance of ‘arts of the self as an ethical strategy’ (1999). Connolly contends that Foucauldian-inspired ‘self-artistry’ can foster forms of subjectivity well suited to the challenges of democratic life. Thoughtful and careful work on the self, it is argued, can make one ‘more open to responsive engagement with alternative faiths, sensualities, gender practices, ethnicities, and so on’ (1999, 145–146). The key suggestion here is that deliberate practices of self-care have an important preparatory role to play in democratic culture.

Heeding Foucault’s own suggestion that care for the self, figured as ‘a practice of freedom,’ should be understood as ‘a way of controlling and limiting power’ — both for the Greco-Romans and even more significantly, for us today (1997b, 288, 298) — the reflexive relationship of the self to itself is regularly presented as an essential element in political resistance.³ Connolly, for example, argues that ‘self-artistry’ is integral to forming a political subject capable of challenging persistent violences and exclusions committed by present-day liberal democracies. As Jon Simons puts it, ‘Perhaps there is no more pressing political need than arts of the self through which people detach themselves from current subjectivities’ (1994, 123). And Thomas Dumm declares that Foucault provides us with a ‘new political theory of freedom’ which ‘redefines politics as an activity of self-constitution’ (1996, 3).

This essay seeks to raise doubts about the Foucauldian strain of the turn to ethics in contemporary political thought. Generally speaking, I hope to call into question the tendency to treat the self’s relationship to itself as a privileged site for resisting and remaking existing configurations of power. The intention is not to deny the insights of Foucault’s late work, but rather to foster scepticism toward views that hold out the care of the self as a particularly promising strategy for re-shaping the power relations Foucault so deftly theorized.

More precisely, this essay proceeds in its doubt-raising project not by investigating appropriations of Foucault’s ethical work but by offering a close reading of Foucault’s own thought. I hope to demonstrate that Foucault’s analysis of contemporary power, if read carefully, alerts us to the limits of the care of the self as a political strategy for rendering power relations more equitable, open, and responsive to democratic constituencies. In order to make this argument, I recover a critical piece of Foucault’s account of disciplinary power and biopower that has been neglected in the vast scholarship on his work. This insight concerns the ways in which discipline and biopower exact their effects primarily on human collectivities — by individualizing and massifying, respectively. The significance of this analysis, as Foucault develops it, is that it brings into view what I call the *depoliticizing* effects of contemporary techniques of power, curiously overlooked in most secondary



commentary. Discipline and biopower, though seemingly opposed insofar as they aim to engender isolated self-regulating individuals, on the one hand, and carefully managed populations, on the other, can both be described as *depoliticizing* to the extent that they discourage associative relations among individuals and attempt to contain the ‘counter-power’ potentially generated by associational activity. Focusing attention on how disciplinary and biopolitical techniques work upon human plurality, ushering in and nurturing forms of subjectivity that diminish the likelihood of organized associative action, is important for two related reasons. First, it gives us good reason to be wary of the current academic romance with the care of the self as a strategy of resistance, by reminding us of the ‘multiplicity’ toward which both discipline and biopower are directed and out of which a contestatory ‘counter-power’ might emerge. Second, this re-reading invites us to consider the ‘counter-power’ capable of engaging with discipline and biopower precisely as a ‘practice of freedom’ — but, significantly, a practice of freedom that is collaborative and pluralistic, rather than reflexive and individual, in character.

Re-Reading Foucault: Discipline, Biopower, and De-Politicized Collectivities

In a lecture given at the Collège de France in 1976, Foucault offered the following description of disciplinary power: ‘I would say that discipline tries to rule a multiplicity of men to the extent that their multiplicity can and must be dissolved into individual bodies that can be kept under surveillance, trained, used, and if need be, punished’ (2003, 242). This statement serves as a distilled formulation of the account of disciplinary power put forth in *Discipline and Punish*. It captures succinctly an essential but often overlooked feature of Foucault’s analysis of discipline: the idea that individualization is a strategy for the dissolution of multiplicity.

Foucault’s claim in *Discipline and Punish* that disciplinary power strives to call into being an individual who ‘becomes the principle of his own subjection’ now often serves as a short-hand for that book’s dense argumentation (1977, 203). Yet focusing exclusively on this famously docile and useful subject obscures what is actually the founding gesture of discipline — the fragmentation of complex pluralities into single entities. The segmentation of space and the practices of surveillance that define the disciplinary mechanism exact their effects first and foremost on collectivities, which are thereby rendered a manageable ‘collection of separated individualities’ (1977, 201).

If discipline targets multiplicity through ‘procedures of decomposition,’ a consideration of these procedures may help to illuminate the meaning of that elusive term, ‘multiplicity’ (1977, 170). First, the partitioning tactics



exemplified by the 17th century plague town and the modern prison assure that 'each individual has his own place; and each place its individual' (1977, 143). The organization of space responds to the following directives:

Avoid distributions in groups; break up collective dispositions; analyse confused, massive or transient pluralities... One must eliminate the effects of imprecise distributions, the uncontrolled disappearance of individuals, their diffuse circulation, their unusable and dangerous coagulation... (1977, 143).

The construction of defined places and the assignment of persons to them enables the tracking of individuals, but even more significantly, partitioning 'breaks up' groups and keeps individuals apart from one another. What is sought is not only the ability to locate particular individuals, but the staving off of a threat posed by their 'circulation,' 'coagulation,' and 'concentration.' The disciplinary space that is 'always, basically, cellular' is space that enforces solitude and limits association (1977, 143).

Second, the gaze that is 'alert everywhere' reinforces the separation and isolation inaugurated by partitioning (1977, 195). Surveillance complements enclosure with exposure. The visibility that characterizes the individual under surveillance is one-sided such that he is prevented from 'coming into contact with his companions.' Possibilities for interaction are denied; the inmate is a participant in a non-reciprocal sensory relationship: 'He is seen, but he does not see; he is the object of information, never a subject in communication' (1977, 200).

In conjunction, partitioning and observation work to oppose all forms of associational life:

If the inmates are convicts, there is no danger of a plot, an attempt at collective escape, the planning of new crimes for the future, bad reciprocal influences; if they are patients, there is no danger of contagion; if they are madmen there is no risk of committing violence upon one another; if they are schoolchildren, there is no copying, no noise, no chatter, no waste of time; if they are workers, there are no disorders, no theft, no coalitions, none of those distractions that can slow down the rate of work, make it less perfect or cause accidents. The crowd, a compact mass, a locus of multiple exchanges, individualities merging together, a collective effect, is abolished and replaced by a collection of separated individualities. From the point of view of the guardian, it is replaced by a multiplicity that can be numbered and supervised; from the point of view of the inmates, by a sequestered and observed solitude (1977, 200–201).

A range of phenomena is gathered under the sign 'collective effect.' On the one hand, the 'multiplicity' that discipline aims to dissolve signifies an anarchical force — unregulated, uncontrolled interaction. This conception of



multiplicity is evident in Foucault's account of the plague-stricken town; there, disciplinary segmentation and supervision aims to 'sort out every possible confusion' (1977, 197). The plague stands as the ultimate representation of disorder — because of the illness and death it spreads as well as the disregard for prohibitions that fear and death can induce. Discipline appears as the antidote for the state of affairs celebrated in the idea of the festival, which also 'grew up around the plague.' What the festival enacts — the suspension of laws and the unregulated circulation of bodies — is exactly what discipline opposes with its strict partitioning and observation (1977, 197).

Yet the multiplicity that discipline aims to counter is not simply anarchical. In Foucault's descriptions of panoptic techniques (as exemplified by the quotations on page 5), discipline opposes not only chaos but forms of concerted collective activity. 'Plotting,' 'planning,' and 'coalition' are thwarted by a form of power that keeps individuals apart from one another and catches them in a 'trap' of visibility. Discipline limits signs of disorder such as 'noise' and 'theft,' but it also makes less likely collective organizing of any kind.

'Multiplicity' — the name of discipline's other — refers, then, not only to a state of lawless unrest but to the very possibility of political association. This claim is further supported by Foucault's account of the development of disciplinary methods in response to 18th century population growth and industrialization. Discipline's appeal lay in its ability to 'reduce the inefficiency of mass phenomena: reduce what, in a multiplicity, makes it less manageable than a unity.' At first multiplicity is aligned with disorder: Discipline 'fixes; it arrests or regulates movements; it clears up confusion...' But the next sentence reveals that discipline targets not only disorder as such but a 'counter-power' born specifically of association:

[Discipline] must also master all the forces that are formed from the very constitution of an organized multiplicity; it must neutralize the effects of counter-power that spring from them and which form a resistance to the power that wishes to dominate it: agitations, revolts, spontaneous organizations, coalitions — anything that may establish horizontal conjunctions (1977, 219).

This complex statement begins with the claim that certain 'forces' are brought into existence whenever an 'organized multiplicity' is formed. Although the meaning of 'organized multiplicity' is somewhat ambiguous, Foucault is clearly not referring to an already disciplined (separated and observed) collection of individuals, but to a collective entity that discipline must try to 'master.' 'Organized multiplicity' refers to an association that generates power pluralistically, through the coordinated efforts of many people in combination. This collective 'counter-power' can find expression in agitations, revolts, spontaneous organizations, and coalitions. These forms of association, which



Foucault calls ‘horizontal conjunctions,’ are precisely what disciplinary power attempts to prevent and contain.

The power/counter-power dynamic invoked here mirrors, in different vocabulary, Foucault’s later formulation according to which ‘power’ and ‘freedom’ are agonal forces, co-participants in a struggle marking ‘every social relationship’ (2000a, 342). Both conceptualizations serve to challenge the deterministic interpretation of Foucault, which regards the ubiquity of power as a sophisticated sort of determinism. The notion of ‘counter-power’ or ‘freedom’ as mutually entangled with power, serving as both provocation and response, helps to dispel the fatalistic view while simultaneously insisting that there is no position altogether external to the field of power.

The power/counter-power relationship as depicted in *Discipline and Punish* is particularly significant and worth recovering because here Foucault highlights the degree to which both the exercise of disciplinary power and counter-power hinge on the constitution of collectivities. The disciplines aim to render human plurality a divided and observed series of individual bodies — that is, to ‘decompose multiplicity’ — in order to minimize the creation of ‘horizontal conjunctions,’ those relations of association that are potentially generative of a resistant counter-power.

It is a mistake, then, to understand discipline simply as a mechanism that orders otherwise disorderly people and things. Discipline counters not simply chaos, but the possibility of an ‘organized multiplicity’ and its pluralistically-generated power. With this insight in mind, I suggest that we understand disciplinary practices as anti-contagion mechanisms of a very general sort. If we think of contagion not only in terms of its medical signification but as a metaphor for all sorts of ‘dangerous’ interactions between individuals, then we can recognize partitioning and surveillance as techniques that aim to limit human contact and to prevent the generation of those collective ‘forces’ analyzed above. Beyond the plague town and the modern hospital, discipline functions to limit not literal contagion, but the mingling of human bodies that can facilitate the transmission of any number of things — sympathy, criticism, rage. Discipline targets contagion in order to prevent the establishment of ‘horizontal conjunctions’ and their possible resistances.

Foucault’s narrative of the historical shift from punishment as a public spectacle to a system of imprisonment illustrates the more expansive notion of contagion invoked here. The public executions at the center of penal practice up to the 18th century were eventually abandoned largely because of the ‘popular agitations’ and ‘disturbances around the scaffold’ that expressed the ‘solidarity of a whole section of the population with those we would call petty offenders’ (1977, 62, 60). Citizens who were meant to serve as witnesses and guarantors of the punishment instead ‘reject[ed]... the punitive power’ which appeared excessive and threatening. ‘Breaking up...this solidarity’ became the



goal of penal officials, who saw it as a ‘political danger.’ This led to calls for the abolition of public executions altogether, since ‘out of the ceremony of the public execution... it was this solidarity, much more than the sovereign power that was likely to emerge with redoubled strength’ (1977, 58–59).

As Foucault’s account highlights, the gathering together of many people in a public space enables the cultivation and transmission of subversive sentiments. Whether, as in Foucault’s example, it is sympathy born of ‘feeling close’ to the criminal or a sense of injustice over the severity of the penalty, such reactions are more likely to arise when the punishment is visible and are more likely to spread among citizens sharing common space. Disciplinary space responds to this potential ‘political danger.’ Cellular partitioning and monitoring attempts to prevent the circulation of individuals and the thoughts, criticisms and sentiments they bear, because contagion can foster resistance.

Such tactics abound today, evidenced by the increasing diffusion of surveillance cameras in cities around the world, justified in terms of anti-terrorism efforts and ‘homeland security.’⁴ Coupled with previously unimaginable technological innovations, such as cell phone location-tracking and face recognition technology, present-day surveillance confirms and extends Foucault’s analysis. The continued disciplinary division of public space, as in efforts by the Bush administration to limit political protest to ‘designated free speech zones,’ and subject protesters in other, undesignated locations (such as New York’s Central Park) to arrest, is a de-politicizing strategy that aims to prevent and contain the potential power generated by associational activity.

Foucault’s influential analyses of governmentality alert us to the ways in which disciplinary tactics are linked to the workings of biopower in the contemporary liberal state. This ‘new nondisciplinary power,’ whose emergence Foucault traces to the 18th century, does not supplant discipline but is instead ‘articulated’ with it and exercised over life or ‘over man insofar as he is living being.’ Whereas disciplinary power addresses itself to ‘the individual-as-body,’ biopower directs itself at a different entity, ‘the population,’ which it ushers into existence and strives to ‘regulate’ (2003, 239–252). Foucault’s studies of neoliberal governmentality trace the emergence of the population as a ‘new political subject’ that the state seeks to manage, utilizing disciplinary tactics as a ‘relay’ for achieving effects at the level of the population (2007, esp. 42–49).

Like discipline, this new technology acts on what Foucault calls ‘multiplicity’ but it configures it quite differently:

Unlike discipline, which is addressed to bodies, the new nondisciplinary power is applied not to man-as-body but to the living man, to man-as-living-being; ultimately, if you like, to man-as-species. To be more specific, I would say that discipline tries to rule a multiplicity of men to the extent that their



multiplicity can and must be dissolved into individual bodies that can be kept under surveillance, trained, used, and if need be, punished. And that this new technology that is being established is addressed to a multiplicity of men, not to the extent that they are nothing more than their individual bodies, but to the extent that they form, on the contrary, a global mass affected by overall processes characteristic of birth, death, production, illness, and so on (2003, 243).

This passage makes clear that Foucault conceives of both disciplinary power and ‘biopower’ as directed at collectivities, at human beings in their plurality.⁵ Discipline works by breaking apart or ‘dissolving’ manyness into a number of individualized bodies. But biopower performs a seemingly opposite move: it configures multiplicity as an undifferentiated mass.

Biopower is concerned with a ‘new body, a multiple body, a body with so many heads that, while they may not be infinite in number, cannot necessarily be counted’ — the population (2003, 245). Among the ‘biological processes’ associated with this population that biopower attempts to regulate and control are birth and mortality rates, longevity, migration, and illness. Biopower’s interventions make use of the disciplinary training of individual bodies, but in order to ‘achieve overall states of equilibration or regularity’ within the population (2003, 246).

What is critically important to recognize is the conceptual link Foucault establishes between disciplinary power and biopower. Working in tandem in the ‘era of governmentality,’ the tactics of discipline and biopower proceed by shaping human plurality in particular ways. While discipline works in ‘an individualizing mode,’ biopower is ‘massifying, that is, directed not at man-as-body but man-as-species’ (2003, 243). Although they may seem opposed, these two modes of power are not only joined together in governmental practice but converge in their political effects.⁶ Both a ‘collection of separated individualities’ and a ‘population’ or ‘mass’ are de-politicized forms of human plurality. One addresses humans as isolated and useful bodies; the other submerges them into large-scale biological processes. Discipline atomizes; biopower amasses. Both work against forms of multiplicity that are associative in character.

The contemporary liberal state, figured as an ‘episode of governmentality’ by Foucault, marks the convergence of disciplinary efforts to create useful and docile bodies and biopower technologies aiming to regulate the processes of a living mass. Foucault states, ‘I’d like to underline the fact that the state’s power (and that’s one of the reasons for its strength) is both an individualizing and totalizing form of power’ (2000a, 332). He suggestively refers to the ‘simultaneous individualization and totalization of modern power structures’ as a ‘political double bind’ (2000a, 336). I believe this ‘double bind’ should be understood in terms of the de-politicizing effects enacted by both disciplinary



and biopower. The former segments groups of people into discrete and efficient bodies and the latter reduces humans to elements in a statistical mass. What the double bind makes very difficult are ‘horizontal conjunctions’ — collectivities whose members are both connected to and differentiated from one another, capable of acting together as co-creators of ‘counter-power.’

Ethics as the Care of the Self

Foucault’s inquiry into the care of the self is intriguing in large part because he explicitly casts it in terms of freedom. He frames his study of the technologies of the self as a reflection on the ‘practices of liberty’ or the ‘processes by which the individual acts on himself,’ that, together with ‘practices of subjection’ or ‘techniques of domination’ constitute subjects (1996, 50–51; 1993, 203). And while he cautions against seeking in his account of ancient ethical life a model for the present,⁷ Foucault’s interpretation of Greco-Roman ethical life is not simply an expression of antiquarian curiosity. In addition to presenting this work as a reflection on the problem of the subject’s freedom in a very general sense, he also argues that we ‘need’ an ethics today and suggests that an ethical orientation centered on the cultivation of an aesthetic/ascetic self-relation could have a part to play today in ‘allow[ing] us to play these games of power with as little domination as possible’ (1997b, 298).⁸ In other words, Foucault invites us to consider the care of the self, re-imagined for the present, as a ‘practice of freedom’ that could perhaps contend with contemporary techniques of power.

Describing freedom as a *practice* importantly enriches Foucault’s agonal portrait of the power/freedom relationship. Conceiving of freedom as an activity challenges the tendency to equate freedom with liberation, that is, with a static state of affairs that follows from ‘liberation from power.’⁹ Rather than envisioning freedom and power as mutually exclusive, such that freedom consists in the removal of constraints attributable to power’s exercise, Foucault pushes us to re-conceive both terms in their full activity and productivity. Freedom, no less than power, is exercised rather than possessed, and creative and generative in character. If freedom and power are not opposites but intimately bound up in a relationship of ‘mutual incitement and struggle’ (2000a, 342), then freedom is never achieved once and for all. It is neither an automatic result following from the casting off of restrictions, nor is it the birthright of man or the gift of good government. Instead, freedom is a *doing*.

In what follows I affirm Foucault’s recognition of freedom as an activity that potentially serves as a kind of ‘counter-power.’ By bringing the re-reading of discipline and biopower that I offered in the previous section into contact with Foucault’s work on the care of the self, however, I hope to expose the problems



that arise when this ‘practice of freedom’ is too closely identified with an individual’s project of self-creation. When viewed from the perspective of the ‘double bind’ created by disciplinary and biopower, the care of the self appears in a new light. An appreciation of how these forms of power function by ‘individualizing’ and ‘massifying’ human collectivities draws attention to the limits of self-care as a strategy of resistance. Although Foucault labels the activity of self-constitution a ‘practice of freedom,’ I argue that techniques of self-care are inadequate instruments for confronting the specifically *depoliticizing* effects of discipline and biopower, which concern the configuration of *plurality*.

In order to develop this claim, several elements of Foucault’s inquiry into ancient ethics must be considered. First, as already indicated, he depicts the care of the self — an interpretive term used to capture an array of ancient ascetic/aesthetic projects of self-control and self-elaboration — as an activity that is expressive of freedom. Despite variations, Greco-Roman ethical life centered on ‘an exercise of the self on the self by which one attempts to develop and transform oneself, and to attain to a certain mode of being’ — a project that, Foucault argues, was understood precisely as an enactment of one’s freedom (1997b, 282). Non-slavery to others — or a certain degree of liberation — was a necessary condition, but it was through the cultivation of an *ethos* that freedom came to assume a ‘concrete form.’ Although focused on a reflexive relationship with oneself — ‘extensive work by the self on the self’ — ancient ethics as a ‘mode of being for the subject’ also entailed ‘a certain way of acting, a way visible to others.’ A person’s *ethos*, Foucault explains, was ‘evident in his clothing, appearance, gait, the calm with which he responded to every event, and so on’ (1997b, 286). Freedom, on this view, is exercised in the development of a particular style of existence that is visible to others.

Aligning ancient ethics with freedom enables Foucault to establish a key distinction between morality and ethics. Whereas morality centers on a set of values and rules of action prescribed to individuals, ‘ethics’ is oriented toward ‘subjectivation’ or the manner in which one forms oneself as an ethical subject. Recognizing that command morality and the ethics of ‘subjectivation’ are typologies that in practice coexist, Foucault nonetheless distinguishes those orientations in which ‘the main emphasis is placed on the code, on its systematicity, its richness, its capacity to adjust to every possible case and to embrace every area of behavior,’ from others in which ‘the strong and dynamic element is to be found in the forms of subjectivation and practices of the self,’ identifying Christian morality with the former and Greco-Roman ethics with the latter (1985, 25–32).

It is because ‘moral conceptions in Greek and Greco-Roman antiquity were much more oriented toward practices of the self and the questions of *askesis* than toward codifications of conducts and the strict definition of what is



permitted and what is forbidden' that Foucault suggests we might have something to learn from the inquiry into ancient ethics (1985, 30).¹⁰ Whether this is so because we are already in a post-moral era, having left behind the aspiration for a universalizable code of rules (1996, 49) or because we are still beholden to a morality that privileges rule-following and is in need of questioning (1997a, 228) — Foucault suggests both — the exploration of ethics as practice of self-cultivation seems to resonate with contemporary conditions. Regardless of the degree to which we understand the present to be caught up in a Christian-influenced moral paradigm or somehow 'beyond' it, Foucault's inquiry into ancient ethics is clearly an investigation of the possibilities that inhere in an ethics of reflexive self-creation and transformation, understood in contrast to traditional morality's stress on obedience to universal, external laws.

The 'care of the self,' understood as a practice of freedom, is both an aesthetic and ascetic undertaking. First, the phrase 'care of the self' refers not to the nurturing of an already constituted self but to the very processes by which the self is brought into existence as a distinctive entity to be recognized by others. The 'arts of existence' refers to 'intentional and voluntary actions by which men not only set themselves rules of conduct, but also seek to transform themselves, to change themselves in their singular being, and to make their life an *oeuvre* that carries certain aesthetic values and meets certain stylistic criteria' (1985, 11). Importantly, treating one's life as a work of art is a freely chosen pursuit directed at the cultivation of a 'singular being.' Sharpening the distinction between Christian-influenced morality and ethics, Foucault describes the aesthetic ethics of self-creation as a matter of 'personal choice' and creative elaboration that is detached from 'an authoritarian system' involving a 'pattern of behavior for everyone.' Moreover, he laments the fact that in 'our society' we think of art as a specialized activity that concerns material objects: 'But couldn't everyone's life become a work of art? Why should the lamp or the house be an art object but not our life?' (1994c, 260–261).

Aesthetic self-formation was a matter of 'constant practice' and 'regulated occupation' for the ancients, involving the establishment of a relationship with oneself characterized by 'domination,' 'mastery,' '*arkhe*,' and 'command' (1997d, 94–95; 1997b, 286–287). Developed largely through mental tests directed at developing 'control over representations' and physical exercises involving 'abstinence, privation, and physical resistance' (1985, 91), the 'dynamics of domination of oneself by oneself,' or *enkrateia*, required the constitution of part of oneself as a 'vigilant adversary' who confronts and subdues the 'inferior appetites' that threaten to overtake the self. On Foucault's telling, 'victory' was not imagined as the complete expulsion of desires, but instead as the 'setting up of a solid and stable state of rule of the self over the



self' (1985, 68–69). The desires and pleasures did not need to disappear; what was required was that one 'construct a relationship with the self that is of the "domination-submission," "command-obedience," "mastery-docility" type' (1985, 70). This relationship of mastery over oneself is, in early Greek culture, frequently likened to political rule. According to this analogy, well-known to us from Plato's *Republic*, the best parts of the individual must rule over the inferior elements in a relation that is a microcosm of the city's ideal authority structure (1985, 71–72).

The linking of ascetic self-rule to political rule is significant because it figures the care of the self not as a solitary exercise, but as an activity that bears on intersubjective relations. Foucault notes that for the Greeks care of the self was not simply an individual project testifying to one's status as a free person but 'also a way of caring for others' (1997b, 287). More specifically, self-mastery was regarded as a 'precondition' for the effective rule of others. Dominion over himself 'qualified a man to exercise his mastery over others. The most kingly man was king over himself' (1985, 73). While the figure of the tyrant exemplifies precisely the man who is 'incapable of mastering his own passions,' the ideal political ruler is one whose 'self-rule moderated his rule over others' (1985, 80–81). Foucault's explanation, 'I think the postulate of this whole morality was that a person who took proper care of himself would, by the same token, be able to conduct himself properly in relation to others and for others' is crucial because it suggests that the care of the self can be understood as a socially and perhaps politically significant activity, and not simply as an exercise in solipsism (1997b, 287). This would seem to answer the worry that the 'care of the self' — even if radically reworked for the present — is ultimately self-indulgent.

The Greek interpretation of the social and political significance of the reflexive relation is troubled, however, by the fact that this connection is conceptualized, on Foucault's account, through the category of rule, so that it is rule over oneself that prepares one to rule others well. This formulation of the link between self-mastery and intersubjective relations is not particularly promising for those who, like Foucault, are interested in the contemporary problem of 'how to play these games of power with as little domination as possible' (1997b, 298).

It is for this reason that Richard Flathman (2003) argues that Foucault's late work displays a subtle but important preference for Roman over Greek ethics. Foucault describes a significant shift between Greek and Roman practices of self-care, according to which concern for the self became a 'universal principle' that was 'independent of political life' (1997a, 235). While Plato consistently presented self-rule as a requirement for rule of the city, 'taking care of yourself for its own sake' emerges with the Epicureans, Foucault tells us, and 'becomes something very general with Seneca, Pliny, and so on: everybody has to take



care of himself' (1997c, 260). As Foucault constructs it, when mastery over oneself becomes 'something that is not primarily related to power over others,' the 'relation to the other' that this supposes is 'much less non-reciprocal than before' (1997c, 267). While the Greeks conceived of self-mastery as necessary in order to rule others well (a view that implies a 'dissymmetrical relation to others'), the Romans effected 'a dissociation...between power over oneself and power over others' (1997c, 267; 1986, 95). Although Foucault never directly says so, Flathman argues that this 'dissociation' informs an implicit endorsement of Roman, as compared to Greek, ethics (2003, 22–24).

If Flathman is correct, and Foucault finds the Roman divorce of self-mastery from mastery over others in some sense appealing, this does not so much resolve the question of the connection between the reflexive relation and self/other relations as deepen it. For on Foucault's telling, the Roman version of care of the self understood that pursuit as something 'done for its own sake,' an undertaking relatively detached from one's relations with others. While this way of imagining the care of the self may have the merit of detaching the rule of oneself from rule over others, it does not offer an alternative framework for understanding how the relationship one constructs with oneself can guide, transform or otherwise impact one's relationships with other selves. Foucault never provides his own argument for how an ethics of self-care might bear on interpersonal, social, or political life, even as he suggests that such an ethics has a part to play in the transformation of power relations in the present. For this reason, as Flathman admits, '*Souci de soi* has a self-referential, introspective, possibly narcissistic quality or character' (2003, 25). Surprisingly declarative statements by Foucault such as this one: 'Care for others should not be put before care of oneself. The care of the self is ethically prior in that the relationship with oneself is ontologically prior,' suggest that the specter of solipsism remains close at hand (1997b, 287).

Beyond the Self: Horizontal Conjunctions and Associative Politics

Still, approaching the self as an object of intensive and ongoing work by which one attempts to achieve an 'ethos that is good, beautiful, honorable, estimable, memorable and exemplary' may seem a promising intervention into the effects of disciplinary power and biopower (1997b, 286). Might the establishment of a reflexive relationship in which the self is taken as the object of a careful, artistic elaboration challenge the effects of power that works by surveying and normalizing?¹¹ Similarly, couldn't the cultivation of a singular self act as a valuable counter to biopower's tendency to efface distinction in favor of ever greater generality?



The problem with embracing the care of the self as a strategy for challenging discipline and biopower in the present is that it overlooks the extent to which both forms of power produce effects on human plurality, simultaneously bringing into being a series of isolated subjects and a mass subject, the population — configurations of multiplicity that are anti-associative in character. Looking to Foucault's late work on ethics for resources that might support critical engagement with such power is limited by the fact that freedom as an activity and mode of resistance is here identified exclusively with the individual and her ethical project of self-making. Certainly Foucault does not forward an atomistic conception of the individual; his work as a whole, along with his remarks about techniques of the self as culturally embedded, reflect an understanding of human subjects as deeply situated.¹² Nonetheless, while the individual is located within a particular social context that cannot be abstracted away, the practice of freedom as Foucault theorizes it in these late texts is identified with a reflexive relationship of that situated self to itself. There is little sense of freedom as a collaborative practice undertaken with others. Other subjects figure as the 'culture,' 'society' or 'social group' that serve as the backdrop for the subject's fashioning of himself (1997b, 291). They do not appear as fellow actors or partners in resistance.

One possible response to this challenge is to assert that such a line of thought is beyond the scope of the project Foucault set for himself, since he framed his scholarship as an effort to 'create a history of the mode by which, in our culture, human beings are made subjects' (2000a, 326). Within that framework, the inquiry into ancient ethics is part of an attempt to consider 'how the subject is constituted' through 'practices of liberty' in addition to 'practices of subjection' (1996, 50–51). Perhaps looking to Foucault for a more cooperative or collective account of freedom is to impose on him a task that is not his own.

But as this essay has shown, Foucault's *own analysis* of power renders his individualized account of freedom as the care of the self-problematic. The aesthetic/ascetic project of self-creation and transformation that Foucault identifies with the practice of freedom in his work on ethics is not an adequate basis for struggling with disciplinary power or biopower, because both produce effects primarily upon *collectivities*. It is not the single individual that is the target of these modes of power so much as it is the possibility of 'horizontal conjunctions.' Disciplinary power and biopower, in their distinct but complementary ways, domesticate and contain the potential that resides in human multiplicity.

Although taking oneself as the object of an aesthetic elaboration may seem like an important intervention into the mechanisms of discipline that aim to produce a useful and docile subject, a project of ascetic self-transformation, in the absence of efforts to forge alliances among plural selves, is too readily available for capture by disciplinary power. Treating the self's relationship to



itself as ‘ontologically prior’ to all other relations and as the privileged site of freedom’s practice runs too high a risk of supporting atomization and isolation. And even if reflexive ethical practice does not become the handmaiden of disciplinary power’s de-politicizing project, there is nothing in the ethics of self-care that is addressed to the question of how to alternatively organize multiplicity, so that it is something other than a series of individuals or an aggregate mass.

A similar problem re-appears concerning biopower. In some ways, the creation of a singular self may be a valuable counter to power that effaces all individual distinction in favor of ever greater generality. Doesn’t the creation of oneself as a work of art seem like an important way of resisting massification? Perhaps. But an ethics of self-care does not offer insight into how plurality itself might be re-shaped. (At the most, it suggests that many individuals engaged in self-making will additively amount to a transformed collectivity.) While the attempt to work on oneself in order to display an exemplary ethos may be admirable, it is not an activity that can adequately address the effects enacted by discipline and biopower upon human multiplicity. Those effects require something more than an individualized practice of freedom, focused on the self as a work of art. They call for a democratic practice of freedom that is collaborative in character.

Indeed, Foucault’s insight into the ‘individualizing’ and ‘massifying’ mechanisms that foster manageable collectivities, when coupled with his important characterization of freedom as a practice or activity rather than a static condition, invites us to explore *associative practices of freedom* that might resist the de-politicization of multiplicity. Such an exploration can find sustenance from elements of Foucault’s own thinking, namely in his recognition of the indispensability of relations of solidarity and his appreciation of the creative, constructive dimensions of collective action.

For example, in the brief but suggestive document ‘Confronting Governments: Human Rights,’ written and delivered by Foucault in 1981 at an international conference concerning the situation of Vietnamese refugees, Foucault defends the importance of transnational political projects undertaken by organizations such as Airplane for El Salvador, Doctors without Borders, *Terre de Hommes*, and Amnesty International (2000b).¹³ He declares, ‘There exists an international citizenship that has its rights and its duties, and that obliges one to speak out against every abuse of power, whoever the author, whoever its victims. After all, we are all members of the community of the governed, and thereby obliged to show mutual solidarity.’ The statement recognizes that solidarity, when expressed in collective initiatives like those listed above, is able to produce effects that would not be possible for individuals acting independently of one another. It is by ‘speaking together’ that ordinary citizens are capable of struggling with existing



governments and intervening in international policy (2000b, 474). This depiction of the potential that resides in relations of association echoes the claim found in *Discipline and Punish* concerning the counter-power generated out of ‘organized multiplicity.’

Foucault also invites us, particularly in his reflections on gay politics, to recognize relations of association as creative and generative. Collaborative efforts among citizens, even if focused on refusing or opposing some dimension of the present order, always bring new things — relationships, habits, institutions — into the world. Counter-power, no less than power, is productive. The practice of associative freedom differs from the freedom that Foucault locates in the self’s relation to itself not only because it is pluralistic in character, but because it is oriented toward a different object. It is less concerned with the elaboration of a self or selves than with the construction of a common world.¹⁴

Foucault’s conceptualization of gay politics emphasizes this world-building dimension. Like Michael Warner (1999) after him, Foucault imagines gay politics in terms of ongoing and shared efforts to construct counter-cultures rather than as a strategy for gaining recognition within existing norms: ‘It is not only a matter of integrating this strange little practice of making love with someone of the same sex into preexisting cultures; it’s a matter of constructing cultural forms’ (1997e, 157). It is the invention of ‘other ways of life’ rather than the pursuit of legal rights or the constitution of the self that is the central task (1997e, 159–160; 1997g, 138). If ‘to be gay’ means to ‘try to define and develop a way of life’ (1997g, 138), this way of life is both ‘shared’ and ‘invented’; it is an inventive and collaborative production that affirms gays not simply ‘as an identity’ but as a ‘creative force’ (1997f, 164). What makes homosexuality ‘disturbing’ is the potential for ‘new alliances and the tying together of unseen lines of force,’ more so than ‘the sexual act itself’ (1997g, 136). It is through the collective, creative strategies that Foucault regularly identifies with gay politics — the construction of new alliances and the elaboration of shared modes of life — I argue, that the de-politicizing effects of contemporary power can best be challenged.

The strains of Foucault’s work that are oriented toward collaborative world-making rather than self-constitution ought to be affirmed and pursued. They point toward an understanding of freedom as a fundamentally associative activity, capable of generating a ‘creative force’ or ‘counter-power’ that can begin to re-shape shared conditions. This understanding is significant because the practice of freedom that can contend with disciplinary and biopower is necessarily one that strives to re-constitute multiplicity in politically promising ways — in the form of alliances and ‘horizontal conjunctions’ — and which takes the transformation of common conditions rather than the transformation of any individual self as its guiding aspiration.



Without proposing that a clear boundary divides the individual practice of self-care from collective practices of world-making, such that they are wholly distinct undertakings, I want to insist that there is a significant difference between an account of freedom that takes the self's reflexive relation as its starting point and one which begins from relations of association between individuals. Readers of Foucault's ethics, especially William Connolly (1993, 1999), have explored the ways in which ethical tactics of self-cultivation might be importantly related to, and enabling of, radical democratic politics. Connolly's creative appropriation of Foucault is important and suggestive, in part because he directs the 'care of the self' toward specifically democratic virtues, such as generosity and forbearance, a move which endows reflexive ethics with a stronger and perhaps more politically promising aim than it carries in Foucault's texts. Yet even though Connolly states that the reflexive relation of the self to itself is dialogically connected to associative relations among individuals, such that each acts reciprocally on the other, his writings nonetheless position the self's reflexive relationship as the privileged starting point for engaging in collective world-making projects.¹⁵ This tendency is perhaps understandable — our culture, after all, is inclined to find the notion that one begins to change the world by changing oneself intuitively appealing — but it is one that needs to be challenged. The unstated assumption of other interpreters such as Dumm and Simons who find in the ethics of self-care a fully 'political' account of resistance is that work upon oneself will lead, almost automatically, to the transformation of our relations with others and to collective existence more broadly. We ought not to accept this idea too readily. If Foucault's astute analysis of disciplinary power and biopower convinces, then it orients us toward a particular and pressing problem — that of depoliticized collectivities — which cannot be adequately addressed by even the most refined and demanding acts of self-constitution. Instead, we need to consider the *associative* strategies that might disrupt patterns of individualization and massification.¹⁶

This does not, of course, settle the larger, related question of how 'ethics' — of one kind or another — can or should inform political activity. Rather than issuing a verdict on that matter, the reading of Foucault offered here suggests instead that the ongoing conversation concerning the relationship between ethics and democratic politics would be improved if 'ethics' were envisioned not primarily in terms of a relationship carried on with oneself — Foucault's *rappor a soi* — but in terms of relations of association crafted between and among plural subjects. How such a solidaristic ethics might be theorized — and more importantly, perhaps, enacted — remains to be seen. What is paramount, however, is that we begin to approach the ethics/politics relation from the vantage point of cooperative, rather than reflexive, practices of freedom.



It is true that the reach of discipline and biopower into evermore domains of human life poses serious obstacles to associative endeavors. The increasing privatization of public space, the ubiquity of surveillance technologies, and the intensification of all sorts of massifying mechanisms (whether ‘public opinion,’ the ‘consumer index’ or ‘red states’)¹⁷ weigh heavily on the ability of individuals to establish lines of solidarity or undertake cooperative resistance efforts. Nonetheless, these forms of power, brought so vividly to light by Foucault, exert their primary effects on multiplicity; they work by de-politicizing human plurality, and they can only be seriously challenged within those terms. We need to de-partition disciplinary space, to cultivate certain kinds of political ‘contagion,’ to refuse membership in masses by presenting ourselves as speaking and acting, and not merely biological, beings. To struggle with discipline and biopower is to engage in associative practices of freedom.

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Notes

- 1 One possible way of conceptualizing Foucault’s turn to ethics, then, is to think of it as corresponding to one side of the ambivalent structure of subjectification, as theorized by Butler (1997) according to which power both initiates the subject and constitutes the subject’s agency such that the subject is ‘neither fully determined by power nor fully determining of power (but significantly and partially both)’ (17).
- 2 Inquiries into ‘democratic ethos’ partly serve to challenge theories that forward a strongly rationalist understanding of political life. Chantal Mouffe, for example, suggests that the ‘creation of a democratic ethos’ is significant for advancing the pluralist democracy she favors. Identification with democratic values and practices cannot be secured by appealing to rational universality and instead requires that ‘passions’ be ‘mobilized’ for ‘democratic designs’ (1997). Similarly, Connolly suggests that a pluralist political culture is one that focuses not simply on institutional design, but on ‘intercultural virtues that enliven and inform institutional life’ (1999, 153).
- 3 It is with reference to ‘government’ in its broadest sense, borrowed from its 16th century usage, that Foucault links the ‘techniques of domination’ he studied in much of his writings to the ‘techniques of the self’ that figure prominently in his later work. He explained in a 1980 lecture that any ‘genealogy of the subject’ must consider how techniques of domination ‘interact’ with techniques of the self, defined as ‘techniques which permit individuals to effect, by their own means, a certain number of operations on their own bodies, on their own souls, on their own thoughts, on their own conduct, and this in a manner so as to transform themselves, modify themselves...’ The ‘contact point’ between efforts to direct the conduct of others and the way in which subjects ‘conduct themselves’ is what Foucault calls ‘government’ (1993, 203).
- 4 For example, Chicago now boasts the most advanced surveillance system of any city in the US. The system is notable not only for its breadth (2,500 cameras throughout the city) but for its ‘smart’ computers, which alert police whenever a particularly threatening activity is caught by a camera — for example, anytime someone ‘lingers outside a public building.’ See ‘Chicago Moving to “Smart” Surveillance Cameras,’ *New York Times*, September 21, 2004.



- 5 In Foucault (1976) 'biopower' is an umbrella term that refers to both 'disciplinary' power directed at individual bodies and 'regulatory' power directed at the population at large. The era of 'biopower' is defined by 'two poles': 'the disciplines of the body and the regulation of the population' (138–139). In later work, 'biopower' becomes the name Foucault uses to describe this second, 'nondisciplinary power' (2003, 239–263).
- 6 As Foucault explains, 'Managing the population does not mean just managing the collective mass of phenomena or managing them simply at the level of their overall results; managing the population means managing it in depth, in all its fine points and details' (2007, 107).
- 7 Foucault insists that his investigation into ancient ethics is not a quest for lost foundations — a serious misunderstanding of his genealogical approach — and he repeatedly emphasized that although contact with the past may 'produce something... it must be emphasized that it would be something new' (1997b, 294–295).
- 8 In his work from the 1980s, Foucault distinguishes between power relations which are 'mobile, reversible, and unstable' and what he calls 'states of domination in which power relations, instead of being mobile... remain blocked, frozen.' Domination refers to power relations that are 'fixed in such a way that they are perpetually asymmetrical.' Foucault's entire approach to the question of power insists that we cannot get 'outside' power relations altogether and directs attention to a different aim: how to 'play these games of power with as little domination as possible' (1997b).
- 9 Charles Taylor (1984) argues that Foucault's understanding of power 'does not make sense without at least the idea of liberation.' See Patton (1989) for an illuminating reading that demonstrates the extent to which Taylor retains a view of power as 'imposition,' which sets negative limits to freedom.
- 10 Foucault (1985) also contrasts the central imperative of ancient ethics, 'Take care of yourself' with the later Christian focus on renunciation of the self as the means to salvation. Part of what fascinates Foucault about ancient ethics seems to be its treatment of the self as an object of development and transformation rather than disavowal.
- 11 For a discussion of the difficulties posed by this suggestion, see Grimshaw (1993). Grimshaw notes that Foucault suggests that practices of self-discipline may serve to counter the effects wrought by power in disciplinary society, yet he gives us no reason to believe this distinction between 'good' and 'bad' discipline can hold, since one of the characteristic features of disciplinary power is that it is 'taken up' and internalized by the subject. In other words, Foucault's work poses, without answering, the following question: When is ascetic self-care a practice of freedom and when is it the quiet, light operation of disciplinary power?
- 12 Foucault (1997b) explains, 'If I am now interested in how the subject constitutes itself in an active fashion through practices of the self, these practices are nevertheless not something invented by the individual himself. They are models that he finds in his culture and are proposed, suggested, imposed upon him by his culture, society, and his social group' (291).
- 13 For a discussion of Foucault's statement and the political events that occasioned it, see Keenan (1997), which offers an elegant reading of this text as the source of a 'radical theory of rights,' in which 'intervention creates the right to intervene, enacts the right to act, initiates the right to initiate' (171, 160).
- 14 This understanding of cooperative political action as world-building is influenced by the work of Hannah Arendt. She also famously distinguishes politics from morality in part by claiming that politics is oriented toward the world which we share whereas morality is concerned primarily with the individual self's relation to itself, in the form of conscience.
- 15 This is especially evident when Connolly offers an example meant to illustrate the relevance that 'working on yourself' has for democratic engagement. In one scenario concerning euthanasia that he returns to often — 'you' allow 'one part of your subjectivity... to work on other parts' in such a way that what was previously 'nonnegotiable' — a belief in death as purely religious or



natural — is called into question. Connolly uses this lengthy example to make the point that ‘tactics of the self’ can produce changes that in turn influence the politics in which one participates. Yet his example willfully conceals the extent to which the personal transformation he delineates is made possible by democratic world-building activities. That is, according to his own account, the self in this example who engages in reflexive struggle concerning end-of-life issues was prompted to do so by political activity that made public a claim — the right to die — that was not previously legible. In other words, Connolly’s example reveals the extent to which purportedly individual ‘arts of the self’ are parasitic on the world-building activities of democratic life (1999, 146–147).

- 16 Moreover, even if, as Foucault argues, one of our tasks today is the development of ‘new forms of subjectivity,’ (2000a, 336) because it is also the case that the ‘subject can constitute itself in an active fashion’ only in accordance with ‘models’ available in ‘his culture, society, and his social group,’ (1997b, 291) then the creation of these subjectivities cannot occur absent collective supports that challenge dominant forms of behavior. In other words, even if the elaboration of new subjectivities is an important aim, might it be pursued not through focused ascetic practices of the self, but somewhat indirectly — through efforts to collaboratively create the shared conditions and common cultures that could nurture the emergence of these new subjectivities?
- 17 In his 1978 lectures on the development of the modern state, Foucault notes that the idea of ‘the public’ emerges together with that of the population in the 18th century: ‘The public, which is a crucial notion in the eighteenth century, is the population seen under the aspect of its opinions, ways of doing things, forms of behavior, customs, fears, prejudices, and requirements; it is what one gets a hold on through education, campaigns, and convictions’ (2007, 75).

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