The De-formation of Decentered Subjects: Foucault and Postmodern Public Administration

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INTRODUCTION

In Postmodern Public Administration: Toward Discourse (1995), Fox and Miller call for a postmodern discourse that can radicalize the reformist tendencies in public administration theory. They develop a postmodern public administration theory that draws on both Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology and a revision of Habermasian discourse theory, among other theoretical tools. These tools allow them to construct a version of postmodern discourse that recognizes a socially constituted and bodily self that is capable of transforming itself through discourse with others. Well on the way to forming a radical discourse, the first edition of Postmodern Public Administration neglects a powerful ally that can deepen this view of the decentered subject and illuminate some roadblocks to postmodern discourse theory, Michel Foucault. In this paper, I revisit the problem of postmodernism as a methodological strategy and distinguish it from postmodern conditions. Next, I challenge Fox and Miller’s phenomenological notion of the self as it emerges in Postmodern Public Administration and offer Foucault’s characterization of the subject as an alternative that addresses how selves are created in and through discourse. I argue that the redemption of authentic discourse that Fox and Miller desire is not possible precisely because of the nature of the subject as already constituted. However, this does not mean that rich discourse ceases. Political ethics and change are still possible for deformed and decentered subjects.

A NOTE ABOUT THE PROBLEM OF POSTMODERNISM/POSTMODERNITY

Postmodernism as strategy

Postmodernism can be best defined as a method or strategy, like Vattimo's description of Heidegger's Verwindung, a term which Vattimo claims "constitutes the essence of philosophical post-modernity itself" (Vattimo, 1988, p.172). This term "indicates a going-beyond [metaphysics] that is both an acceptance and a deepening" (p. 172). The term Verwindung suggests twisting, distorting, healing, resignation (p.172). Postmodern philosophy exemplifies the aim of this term Verwindung. First, postmodern philosophy does not fool itself into thinking that there is anything genuinely new under the sun. There is no as-yet-unthought metaphysical or epistemological system to be discovered. What is left to be potentially "discovered" or created or recalled, is other interpretations of events, both linguistic and "real". Secondly, postmodern philosophy is nothing but a dialogue with tradition, both challenging it and accepting it simultaneously. The notion of the ability for any discourse to genuinely go beyond tradition is precisely what is put into question by postmodernity. Tradition and its by-products are the only topics for philosophy once the creation of traditional metaphysics is completed, and the critique of
it has begun. Thirdly, its method is one that twists and distorts. Detractors of postmodernism criticize the flexibility with which postmodernism treats texts. However, this method is crucial for exploding the possibilities, creating new modes of discourse and critique. Furthermore, the very refusal to worship an illusory purity or the sacred is an aim of postmodernism generally. Lastly, postmodernism resigns itself to the heritage of modernity, while at the same time attempts to heal some of the wounds inflicted by the excesses of modernity, such as imperialism, patriarchy, racism, fascism, etc.

Problems with the term

However, the term “postmodernism” is problematic for a host of reasons. In Drucilla Cornell's *The Philosophy of the Limit*, she reframes the typical academic debate of the difference between modernism and postmodernism. She trades in these hackneyed terms for more useful theoretical tools. The project of theorists who were previously labeled "postmodern" is now termed to be the "philosophy of the limit". This term indicates not an historical period, but the task of seeing what is beyond a closed conceptual system. Postmodern philosophy, or a philosophy of the limit, is one that performs a certain sort of critique.

There are two reasons why Cornell and others rightly object to the term "postmodern". First, because of its prefix "post-", the term presents itself as signifying an historical period. This would imply that postmodern philosophy can only and does only occur after modern philosophy, so all we would have to do to make the distinction is to find the pivotal moment where the paradigm shifts. Attempting to define the moment where we switched from modernity to postmodernity does nothing to define the project. Second, the term "postmodern" implies a wholesale rejection of all modernist ideals, when this is not true of most postmodern philosophers. The distinction between the two projects does not lie in time or content, but in the subtle differences. "Even if one assumes that there is no rigid divide between the 'modern' and the 'postmodern' and, therefore, that the best way to challenge the rigid divide would be to somehow show the connection, this attempt still implies an acceptance of historical periodization" (Cornell, 1990, p. 10). Despite the potential commonalities between modernity and postmodernity, the difference lies in the aims of their projects and the claims made.

However, there are problems whenever we try to define any term like "modern" and "postmodern". Linda Singer describes these kinds of terms as "umbrella signifiers", which connote not just one epoch or task or representative author (Singer, 1992, p. 464). These terms signify a whole diversity of ideas that do not compose a discrete whole, do not always agree, and do not always work for the same ends. “Postmodern” in many ways functions like the term “liberal”. Only true believers still embrace the term as a label for themselves, since it has been poisoned and re-defined by the opposition. Since the definition of the term and the reality that the term points to are problematic, I would like to clarify two reasons to be suspicious about postmodern discourse.

Postmodernism as a theoretical method or strategy has been conflated with the existence of postmodern conditions. Discourses about postmodernism may in some sense describe something that may not exist is such an epochal way. The story of postmodernism does not always match the reality, or what people call postmodern conditions. For example, at the same time that there is a proliferation of different
identities that challenge established notions (such as queer, transgendered, or furry), there is a resurgence of religious hegemony. Or, when theorists are discussing the importance of alternative and local narratives, globalization has taken hold in an irrevocable way, limiting the future of local economies and geographies, and establishing the universal hegemony of free market ideology. Just as Foucault (1976/1978) has documented, the narrative of the Victorian age, by its own account of itself, was one of sexual repression, but in fact was one of a proliferation of sexual discourses. All this talk about the condition of postmodernity being about a proliferation of identities and multiple truths belie the reality of homogenous thinking, consolidations of state and global power, and the continuing power of metanarratives.

Postmodernism warns that we should likewise be careful about the notion that the present is different and special than the past, since historically people in every era seem to claim that. Foucault encourages us to acknowledge that the present may not be as different from the past as we think. For example, in *Discipline and Punish* (1975/1977), Foucault shows us graphically that the story about our forms of punishment being less coercive and more humane may not really be the case. There is a connection between the drawing and quartering at the beginning and the techniques of the panopticon. Though different in assumptions about sovereign power and nature of the subject, the discourses that create each situation are expressions of power that control and create the subject of punishment in dramatic ways. As a more traditional critical theorist like Adorno might warn us, beware of what is being packaged and sold to you as the new key to liberation.

*Fox and Miller’s postmodernism*

Fox and Miller’s version of postmodernism primarily embodies what I am calling the existence of postmodern conditions. I will briefly recount their line of argument. Postmodern thought is best for explaining what happens under postmodern conditions, particularly in addressing what is wrong with discourse. Under postmodern conditions, words are detached from their referents and from meaning. This leads to a thinning of reality itself, since we can no longer give clear and accurate accounts of the real. The real and the true are contested in seemingly irresolvable ways. Such conditions undermine and defy prior theoretical approaches to public administration, such as orthodoxy, constitutionalism, and communitarianism. We need something akin to Habermas’ discourse theory to save us from postmodern conditions. This discourse theory is sustained by a phenomenological body-subject whose uncontested reality is a given and is the potential source of authentic discourse (Fox and Miller, 1995, pp. 6-9).

Fox and Miller’s perspective on postmodernism has an ambiguous status. On the one hand, they claim that postmodern thinkers best describe current conditions.

Postmodern thinkers sate back to Nietzsche (1844-1900), who told us that God was dead, and include, by our reckoning, such American pragmatists as John Dewey and now Richard Rorty, much of existential phenomenology, and most typically what is called poststructuralist French philosophy (Derrida, Lyotard, Foucault, Baudrillard, and others). They are united by their skepticism toward those typically modern claims to
what used to be called universalism or essentialism but is now gathered up under foundationalism or metanarratives (Fox and Miller, 1995, p. 44).

However, not all of these thinkers are talking about current conditions. They are the authors of the undermining of truth and reality that Fox and Miller are trying to avoid. For example, when Derrida explains the “sliding” nature of language, and how words both miss and exceed the meaning of their referents, he is not just talking about what language has become, but the nature of language as it has always been. This premise allows him to deconstruct the philosophical canon. So, for Fox and Miller, is Derrida an ally or a villain? Fox and Miller certainly use many of these postmodern thinkers as allies their solution (though not Foucault nearly enough), but it not always clear why.

Even though postmodern thought is illuminating, it is still something threatening; postmodern conditions are dangerous. Fox and Miller critique modernist metanarratives, but do not embrace postmodernism as the solution. “Postmodernism is the return of and revenge of the different, the assertion of the random nonpattern and the unassimilable anomaly. At risk, as the monolith fractures and then is deconstructed, is the loss what western society took to be reality” (Fox and Miller, 1995, p. 45). The reader is left unclear on how to value this statement. Is the “return of the different” a bad thing, or is it the justifiable rejection of metanarratives? The main point of confusion in Fox and Miller’s postmodernism lies in what I think of as a category confusion. They associate postmodernism with post-industrial capitalism, and seem to take post-industrial capitalism as the product of postmodernism. This is like the common confusion (shared by our current administration in the U.S.) between democracy and free markets. Just because two phenomena often happen to occur together does not mean that 1) they must occur together, and 2) that one causes the other. As I see the difference, post-industrial capitalism is the product of late modernism. The hegemonic force of capitalist narratives have led us down this path; capitalism is monological. Postmodern thought serves as the counterpoint, critiquing the monological in favor of the multiple micro-narratives that are eclipsed by the fallout from postindustrial capitalism. As Boje (2001) claims, a critical version of postmodernism is possible and can be mobilized against the emptiness of meaning and injustice generated by postmodern conditions (p. 433).

In spite of this problem in Fox and Miller’s account of postmodernism, I fundamentally agree with their thesis, that we need novel public administration theory to grapple with current conditions. However, in terms of inspiration, I would not turn to the neo-modern Habermas, who is trying to revive modernist discourses that have already failed. I would turn to postmodern and poststructuralist thinkers who revive those “other” narratives. As Fox and Miller write, “[T]o declare that elites manipulate symbols does not require postmodern critique ...” (Fox and Miller, 1995, p. 64), but that is the point of their book and the point of Foucault’s philosophy. I argue that Fox and Miller are missing a powerful ally in this effort. Foucault’s works illustrates that the fundamental insights of postmodernism, how language works (or does not work) and the social/linguistic construction of reality, may always have been the case, and not only under postmodern conditions. However, postindustrial capitalism may give us an opportunity to see these truths more clearly and to see how grave the stakes are.
FOX AND MILLER’S VIEW OF THE SUBJECT AND DISCOURSE

In *Postmodern Public Administration*, Fox and Miller (1995) present a view of the self that they contrast to the liberal abstract view of the self, the communitarian view of the self, and neotribal identities. The liberal abstract view if the self is too autonomous, detached from physical reality, whole, unfettered, and self-determining. The communitarian view of the self is too ideal and overly determined. The neotribal self is deeply inauthentic. The phenomenological, situated, embodied subject is just right for resisting postmodern pitfalls, or so Fox and Miller claim.

*Anti-communitarian*

Knowing that critiques of the liberal subject are well rehearsed, Fox and Miller focus on critiquing the communitarian subject. They characterize the communitarian subject as situated, embodied, and enmeshed in community (1995, p. 33-34). Communitarians are also proponents of a view of the self as having a “teleology of virtue and character”, which includes the necessity of active citizenship. Political communities function to inculcate shared values, including that of cooperative political activity. Lastly, the communitarian subject utilizes not just abstract reason, but *phronesis* or practical wisdom, which facilitates practical action in concert with fellow citizens.

There are some aspects of the communitarian subject that Fox and Miller adopt, such as, the situatedness of such a subject and the value of active citizenship. However, they review the problems inherent in the communitarian view of the subject. On one hand, problems with the communitarian view stem from the interference of postmodern conditions. Can communities be homogenous and nurturing enough to sustain such virtuous citizens? Smaller communities are no longer an option, and where smaller culturally powerful communities exist, they tend to seem excessively coercive, if not oppressive. Such stifling communities seem actually ill-equipped to produce creative and open citizens. Or perhaps some aspects of the liberal view of the self prevail, the communitarian self is too ideal for the real conditions of what Rawls would call “inevitable pluralism” and the tendencies of citizen apathy and individual plans and goals.

*Anti-neotribalism*

Neotribalism is the adoption of identities from readily available hyper-real categories and group memberships, as opposed to the development of authentic selves. Such categories are hyper-real in that they do not represent “real” and physically connected groups of people, but rather seeming connections of people through images. For example, we become “the Birkenstock girl” and or “the Nike guy” instead of authentic individuals or members of actual groups of people who have something in common (Fox and Miller, 1995, p. 63). The trappings of neotribalism connect us to fake communities (as opposed to real ones in communitarianism) and block our potential for authenticity and self-authorship (as in the liberal subject). In these ways, neotribalism embodies the worst of both worlds.
Neotribalism, given less systematic treatment than the liberal and communitarian views in the book, is a phenomenon that Fox and Miller seem to attribute to postmodernism. Neotribalism is postmodern in that it appeals to the hyperreal and reduces political agency. However, many of the identities cited by Fox and Miller as neotribal are the results of capitalist commodities, packaged and sold as identities. As such, these represent metanarratives emanating from corporations. Though they may result from postmodern conditions, but are not really decentered postmodern identities. Rather, these are the fiction of a unified self writ large.

Fox and Miller also connect neotribalism to identity politics. Neotribalism is connected to identity politics because on creates non-traditional communities stretched across time and space that tend to overdetermine the self. Fox and Miller worry that, “[t]he potential result of neotribalism is that the micropolitics of identity affirmation replaces more generalized national and international will formation” (1995, p. 63). Though it is true that Nike guy may be more concerned with his image than global politics and economic, neotribalism framed as identity politics does not seem to pose the same threat. Identity politics have taken the form of liberation movements, based on identity categories that were previously invisible. For example, you may have previously been a persecuted homosexual (characterized without your choice), but identity politics allows for the choice of a gay or lesbian identity from which you have a political voice, and are distantly connected with current and past people who share the identity. This seems to be different from hyper-real neotribalism. Identity politics is designed to illuminate and liberate previously invisible identities (really creating a new identities) and seems to echo the kind of creative, but anchored, self that Fox and Miller are after.

Pro-phenomenological

In opposition to the neotribal version of the self, Fox and Miller propose a theory of the self that is thick enough to create itself, though they acknowledge that self-creation takes place within situation. “Discourse is possible, neotribalism need not, in principle, prevail because of this [body-subject] concrete universal” (Fox and Miller, 1995, p. 84). This thick subject is meaningfully individual, like the liberal subject, by virtue of being embodied. The body sets the boundaries of the subject in an impermeable way, in such a way that communities or hyperreal images cannot control. The body-subject directs itself by way of intentionality, a directing of the self towards its chosen projects. Subjects choose such projects from within a specific situation (conditioned in part by the body’s character and historical and social location) and from their positions in communities (like the communitarian subject). Such a subject can issue genuine discourse in concert with others to create change, particularly change of postmodern conditions themselves. A critique of this subject follows in the next section.

FOUCAULT’S SUBJECT AS AN ALTERNATIVE

There are three problems with Fox and Miller’s phenomenological view of the self which I think that Foucault’s thought can address. First, the self (or subject) is not a natural kind, but there are preconditions for the creation of subjects. Subjects are never
givens, but are permeable and changeable by virtue of experience, and as Foucault would say, subjection to certain disciplinary regimes. Second, subjects are created (through discourse and action) and not given; we will have to revise our notions of what constitutes authentic discourse. A return to a modernist/liberal self-authoring subject who can unproblematically enter into dialogical democratic discourse with others to achieve consensus is misguided. The ideal speech conditions never existed or will exist, given the nature of the subject and power. As Fox and Miller claim, nostalgia for the modern will not equip us to deal with what they call postmodern conditions. Thirdly, though Fox and Miller acknowledge that their version of subject is socially constructed, they insist on an underlying reality that exists prior to this subject, that of the “body subject”. I think that some of Foucault’s historical and genealogical analyses undermine this notion of a body as unworked substance that undergirds the social construction of the self. With Foucault, I argue that the body is conditioned from the outset by practices and discourses that for Foucault constitute disciplinary power.

Foucault presents us with a less optimistic, and perhaps more accurate, view of the subject than Merleau-Ponty does. Merleau-Ponty’s subject, though nuanced and tempered by a recognition of social situatedness, remains a modern subject, whole, self-created, and free. Rather than the socially situated intentionality that projects its freedom (even if conditioned) toward certain ends, Foucault’s subject is radically subjected to a set of circumstances that is not merely a backdrop of social meanings, but that constitute the very terms of the creation and continued existence of that subject. Subjects emerge through discourse, and do not exist prior to it. For example, at the end of The History of Sexuality, Volume 1, Foucault claims that there may exist bodies and pleasures at the root of sexuality, but that even these are not made “real” until made intelligible through discourse (Foucault, 1978, p. 157-159). Foucault’s emphasis on the subject’s relative lack of agency denaturalizes human nature and behavior. “Let us not, therefore, ask why certain people want to dominate, what they seek, what is their overall strategy. Let us ask, instead, how things work at the level of on-going subjugation, at the level of those continuous and uninterrupted processes which subject our bodies, govern our gestures, dictate our behaviors, etc.” (Foucault, 1976, p. 97).

Subjects do not just happen; they are constructed and created through discourses of which they are not author. There is no there there until the subject or self is unified by a discourse. This point is a difficult one to prove, in part, because of how discourses function. Discourses in fact create individuals; they make individuals with certain unified conceptions of themselves possible. For example, in modernist political discourses, individuals are constructed as rights-bearing individuals, and perceive themselves in this way. In order to make themselves intelligible and meaningful in such a context, we need to appeal to rights discourse. We are invented by and deploy the discourse that allows us to speak the truth. “We are subjected to the production of truth through power and we cannot exercise power except through the production of truth” (Foucault, 1976, p. 93). Rights-bearing individuals and appeals to rights by such individuals are dependent on a discourse that posits these as true. I do not perceive myself as created in this way, but I really am just this rights-bearing individual that can make claims for myself. In one sense, I am precisely right about this. But, what I take myself to “really be” is contingent on being situated within a discourse that allows me to appear to myself and others as such an individual. This does not deny the existence of
freedom and agency; it just describes the parameters conditioning them. This is the descriptive basis of what becomes Foucault’s ethics, though it is an uncomfortable starting place.

The phenomenological body-subject would seem to be a more comfortable baseline for the beginning of the subject, its original origin, but even this is problematic. The body-subject, as Fox and Miller would call it, though a material substrate, is lent social and cultural meanings in advance of its real existence. Bodies are variably made visible and invisible by virtue of discourse. We cannot simply be or perceive simple, material bodies. We see socially sanctioned, raced and sexed ones. Even in looking at one’s own body, one does not necessarily see the material reflection of ourselves, but see through the socially scripted lens. As Foucault writes, “… far from the body having to be effaced, what is needed is to make it visible through an analysis in which the biological and the historical are not consecutive to one another, … but are bound together in an increasingly complex fashion in accordance with the development of the modern technologies of power that take life as their objective” (Foucault, 1978, p. 152). For example, many feminists have pointed out (Bordo 1995, Bartky 1990), women have persisted in seeing themselves through the critical gaze of patriarchal expectations about weight and beauty. Women with eating disorders really are not able to see what is there in the mirror. Similarly, we do not perceive all others as equal, and not all others as fully human, as evidenced by the persistence of the practices of wartime atrocities and ethnic cleansing. Our perception of our own and others physically is already mediated by discourses in advance.

A central problem for Fox and Miller in Postmodern Public Administration is that of identifying and creating authentic discourse. From where might such authentic discourse issue? Presumably, discourse comes from subjects. But, what is the relationship between a subject and discourse, and how might such a subject come to know and speak (or write) the truth? These are profound problems that challenge Fox’s and Miller’s notion of the subject. Ultimately, Foucault provides perspectives that would contribute to what Fox and Miller would like to accomplish without a return to a form of modernity that cannot reach through to postmodern conditions. First, Foucault retrieves an agonistic view of power that creates a form of resistance to both sovereign and disciplinary forces, rather than the kind of political relativism that Fox and Miller bemoan. Secondly, such resistance is aimed both at the knowledge of elites, but also at the general lack of truth. This was a persistent question for Foucault, as dictated to Veyne in a conversation, “… the question is how is it that there is so little truth in truth?” (Veyne, 1997, p. 231, footnote).

CAN DISCOURSE BE REDEEMED?

Fox and Miller (1995) are seeking a way of collaborating on the truth that will serve as a form of resistance to the pitfalls of the postmodern condition. They develop a revised version of Habermas’ discourse theory that incorporates four essential elements; sincerity, a sensitivity to context (“situation-regarding intentionality”), willing attention, and substantive contribution (pp. 121-126). However, Fox and Miller make it clear that their discourse theory is pragmatic rather than deontological (p.118). They do not claim
that there are any self-evident truths that emanate from the discursive setting, nor are there any absolute truths in place from the outset of discourse. Fox and Miller’s discourse theory also differs from Habermas’ because they do not seek consensus or “harmony” as the end result of discourse (p. 118). Instead, they propose an agonistic model of discourse, like Arendt’s, that allows for pluralism. Though their model addresses some of the problems in Habermas’ discourse theory, the Fox and Miller model still has two major problems to solve. First, pluralism is a part of the process of discourse; there will be a variety of voices and positions. From a postmodern perspective this is preferable to monological discourse. However, if the subject is constructed within a complex network of discourses and practices, then how can we evaluate the discourse without an author or a source? If the subjects in the discursive network are not categorically rational, free, and autonomous consciousnesses authoring their statements, then how can we value their contributions? Second, if discourse is agonistic, then some voices are likely to win out and silence over voices. Ideally, this happens because one view is truer and/ or works better than another. However, some voices are privileged over others at the start of the discourse; we do not enter into discursive arenas as equals. How can Fox and Miller’s notion of discourse account for the ways that some voices are discounted and silenced? Again, I argue that Foucault’s account of the way discourse works in a complex relationship within the formation of the subject can be illuminating to postmodern public administration theory.

Foucault discusses discourse in two senses throughout his works. Foucault claims in *The Archeology of Knowledge* (1972) that discourse is a rule-governed system, that it is self-referring and autonomous. The discourse itself determines what can be though or said within any particular regime or knowledge. Dreyfus and Rabinow claim that this account of discourse fails for two reasons, 1) because it focuses on the “causal power” of the rules of discourses alone rather than the influence of social institutions and practices, and 2) archeology as an end in itself is empty and descriptive (1982, pp. xxiv-xxv, 83-103). In his early work, Foucault claims that discourses wholly determine what is true. However, as Foucault develops his notion of discourse in his later work, adding the notions of disciplinary practices and power/ knowledge regimes, the notion of discourse becomes less predictable and the possibility for change and the transformation of discourses and practices becomes possible. Discourse is not only structural, but also personal, taken up in everyday practices and in the everyday operations that constitute the subject.

For Foucault, discourses create reality rather than describing it, as they claim to do. By naming certain things rather than others, and by emphasizing the importance of one account of reality or one kind of knowledge over another, discourses act as self-fulfilling prophesies. The story of what constitutes reality then becomes that reality. Discourses are ultimately put into practice and shape materiality. However, there are multiple discourses (and therefore multiple accounts of “the real”) operating at the same time, contradicting each other, and often belying the practices that tend to be produced by them. Different kinds of discourses become dominant at different times (*epistemés*). However, there is no one discourse that can account for the whole of reality.

Because discourses are multiple, and also personal and local, there is hope for redeeming discourse through Foucault’s thought, though perhaps not in the wholly authentic way that Fox and Miller would want. Discourses are already out there,
available and shaping us, so there is no wholly original form of discourse that we could issue. However, the way that subjects can take up already available discourses does transform them and the subject is meaningful and new ways. ii Foucault writes, “By ‘thought’ I mean what establishes, in a variety of possible forms, the play of true and false, and consequently what constitutes the human being as a knowing subject [sujet de connaissance]; in other words it is the basis for accepting or refusing rules, and constitutes human beings as social and juridical subjects; it is what establishes the relation with oneself and with others, and constitutes the human being as ethical subject” (Foucault, 1994a, p. 200). Thought takes place at the level of individual subject and its local practices, but it also reflects on, takes up, and changes what’s already out there in discourse. The play of the true and the false, what one holds or refuses, makes it possible to choose from within a certain situation. This choice makes ethics, in a more modest sense, possible. Being constructed through thought is a precondition for becoming an ethical subject; you have to be created as something before you can work on yourself. The opening up of possibilities within a field of preformed discourse also makes new discourse possible.

For an example of how subjects shape themselves through discourse, I turn to Foucault’s essay “Self Writing” (1994b). This essay explores a particular instance of how people shape their relation to themselves and others, through writing journals and letters. What does writing about the self do? According to Foucault, it “palliates the dangers of solitude”, creates oneself as visible, and makes oneself accountable to others (p. 207). Writing is a form of askēsis, or “training of the self by oneself” (p. 208). These hupomnēmata were personal notebooks that created a material record of discourse intended to be revisited by the author. The object was to gather the thoughts and arguments of others, and make them a part of oneself. “Such is the aim of the hupomnēmata: to make one’s recollection of the fragmentary logos, transmitted through teaching, listening, or reading, a means of establishing a relationship of oneself with oneself, a relationship as adequate and accomplished as possible” (p. 211). This form of self writing reflects the tension between citing others and self-creation, while acknowledging that subjects are constituted through both. The notebooks encouraged the use of others’ ideas to form a relationship with oneself, but not through an unequivocal taking of one whole narrative, but through “a regular and deliberate practice of the disparate” (p. 212). These collected truths, though disparate and contradicting each other, are unified in and by the subject. The self emerges from the choices of what to include in the notebook, the collection of what’s already there.

When replying to a question about whether his philosophical program precludes any progressive politics, Foucault could have been addressing Fox and Miller: “I know how unpleasing it must be to reveal the limits and necessities of a practice, in places where it has been customary to see the play of genius and freedom unfolding in their pure transparency. I know how provoking it is to treat as a bundle of transformations this history of discourses which, until now, was animated by the reassuring metamorphoses of life or the intentional continuity of lived experience” (Foucault, 1991, p. 71).

Postmodern skepticism regarding the nature of the subject is difficult to sustain. What matters to modernist modes of thinking is a discourse that emanates from an authentic subject, even if we uncover such a subject as counterfactual and the discourse as a rehearsal of tradition. However, Fox and Miller may have a point about the lived body-
subject being the site of resistance to postmodern conditions. The body, through disciplines, administrative knowledge, self-training is the site that knowledge is now focused on. Deleuze claims that for Foucault, “[l]ife becomes resistance to power when power takes life as its object” (Deleuze, 1988, p. 92). The living body-subject is the site of new possible discourses and practices. There is a bodily subject that strives and makes choices from within its setting; however, that subject is already deeply imbedded within discourses that pre-shape its possibilities for further discourse. However, it is the being within discourse already and being an ethical subject in relation to others that spurs the subject to engage in further discourse.

TOWARD A POLITICAL ETHICS FOR DEFORMED AND DECENTERED SELVES

Though Foucault is often criticized for undermining the possibility of freedom, he gives us the ultimate constructivist theory. Subjects, particularly the most abjectly constructed ones, are constructed prior to their power to construct anything. The nature of pervasive power is such that we are subjected prior to becoming subjects. Foucault’s popularity with marginalized groups may be a testament to the fact that many come to experience themselves are constituted by discourse, rather than as free participants in it. However, this same picture allows for the art of existence that Foucault develops in his last writings and interviews. Foucault suggests in his interview “The Subject and Power”, “Maybe the target nowadays is not to discover what we are, but to refuse what we are. We have to imagine and to build up what we could be to get rid of this kind of political ‘double bind,’ which is the simultaneous individualization and totalization of modern power structures” (Foucault, 1983b, p. 216). Foucault’s ethical injunction to us rests in resisting disciplinary regimes that stem from institutions like the prison and the clinic, as well as those forces that we adopt in our own governance.

Judith Butler claims that the ethical subject that Foucault arrives at in his later works is a subject that can refuse or disavow its own construction. If the subject defines herself through available norms, then she is determined by discursive practices and institutions. However, “this means that to question the norm, to call for new norms, is to detach oneself from oneself, and so not only to cease to become self-identical but to perform a certain operation on one’s passionate attachment to oneself” (Butler, 2004, p. 191). This is what is happening in the operation of critique, though it comes from within the site of the already worked on subjectivity and body constituted by a certain situation within networks of power. Farmer (1995) claims that critique is the process by which public administration theory can open itself to new possibilities by renouncing any constraint or previous territory or structure that limits our capacity to rethink bureaucratic processes, domains or procedures (p. 224). Perhaps we cannot act and think completely beyond the strictures of tradition, but we can take up the standpoint of being against it.

Because of his emphasis on the prefabricated nature of the subject, some readers of Foucault jump to the conclusion that Foucault is a determinist, and finding this unsatisfying, do not reach the conclusion about the workings of power that constitute the subject and hold out new possibilities. “The individual is not to be conceived as a sort of elementary nucleus, a primitive atom, a multiple and inert material on which power comes to fasten or against which it happens to strike, and in so doing subdues or crushes
individuals. In fact, it is already one of the prime effects of power that certain bodies, certain gestures, certain discourses, certain desires, some to be identified and constituted as individuals … The individual which power has constituted is at the same time its vehicle” (Foucault, 1976, p. 98). This means that though the individual is created through discourses at the outset, but becomes an actor and participator in power relationships once constituted. This means that the self not only comes into relationships of power with others, but also into relation with the self. The self has to figure out what to do with itself. This self creates narratives about its own experience, variably rehearses and resists what has been pre-given in the constitution of the self thus far. This is not so much an intellectual exercise, but the activity of “the self working on the self” (Veyne, 1997, p. 226). In this way, the self has agency, but agency within certain socially given parameters.

As Ladelle McWhorter claims about her own experience of reading Foucault, maybe Foucault’s analysis fails by the standards or rational ideas “I, for one, could see the political power of Foucault’s texts as long as I read them in the context of my concrete history and corporeal experience” (McWhorter, 1999, p. 72). She argues that Foucault’s ideas about the constitution of the subject and how to resist it may fail at the level of theory, but may work at the level of practice. She writes, “[m]ight we not need to practice, rather than to reason our way out of whatever it is that causes us debilitating pain?” (McWhorter, 1999, p. 72). Perhaps Foucault’s theory is primarily one for those who are oppressed, or perhaps it is those in oppressed groups who recognize that his theory speaks to their experience of being overly constituted from outside of themselves. Theoretical knowledge and experience may yield disparate truths. In spite of his certainty in his own theoretical knowledge, Foucault states, “[b]ut if I refer to my own personal experience I have the feeling that knowledge can’t do anything for us and that political power may destroy us” (Foucault, 1988, p. 14). This leads us to be suspicious of both knowledge of all sorts (including our own that we so certain of) and of political power (our own and others”).

CONCLUSION

Through his contribution to postmodern public administration theory, Foucault can help further the radicalization of public administration theory and practice by making theorists and administrators even more suspicious of the nature of the subjects, the truths we posit about the subject, and the practices that we tend to naturalize and take for granted. The Foucaultian subject is a more accurate picture of how political subjects (citizens and administrators alike) are formed, and de-formed, under so-called postmodern conditions. The object of this study and of Fox and Miller’s is ultimately a liberation of sorts, where wholesale liberation as we once conceived of it is no longer possible. Liberation of this imperfect sort happens at the level of the individual, even prior to entering into the field of political discourse. It is a matter of governing ourselves such that we practice a modest kind of liberation in our everyday actions.

REFERENCES


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1 I use the terms “self” and “subject” interchangeably here (though not unproblematically). With Foucault, both are the created, worked over creations. Neither designate whatever we might call a natural given.

2 This is analogous to the Foucaultian argument that Judith Butler makes about gender in *Gender Trouble* (1990). The transformation of gender happens from within gendered subjects them themselves, shaping and refashioning what it already out there.