

Margaret A. McLaren

Feminism, Foucault, and embodied subjectivity

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Among those who view Foucault's work more positively, seeing it as a resource for social criticism, many still consider it to have at best limited ability to articulate a coherent politics or ethics. McLaren aims to intervene in such debates by showing that the critical aspects of Foucault's work are not merely negative, but in fact possess constructive political and ethical potential.

In *Feminism, Foucault, and Embodied Subjectivity*, Margaret McLaren makes a case for the relevance of Michel Foucault's work for feminist theory and practice. As McLaren discusses in Chapter One, "the feminism and Foucault debate" has a long and varied history. Many feminists believe that Foucault dismantles concepts like subjectivity, identity, rights, and freedom and therefore reject his work as politically and ethically insignificant or even harmful. Among those who view Foucault's work more positively, seeing it as a resource for social criticism, many still consider it to have at best limited ability to articulate a coherent politics or ethics. McLaren aims to intervene in such debates by showing that the critical aspects of Foucault's work are not merely negative, but in fact possess constructive political and ethical potential. She presents Foucault as both "deeply suspicious of the dominant culture, traditional ways of thinking, and traditional politics" and as an "activist" whose critique of conventional ways of thinking and acting may function in the service of emancipatory social transformation (172). Insofar as this coupling of critique and transformation is also characteristic of feminism, McLaren believes that Foucault's work can provide feminists with new ways of "think[ing] through the complexity of experience with the aim of a politics of anti-domination" (172). She identifies four "core feminist commitments" and argues that "theor[ies] or theorist[s]" that support or reflect them may be considered supportive of feminism (17). Foucault's work, according to McLaren, satisfies the criteria she lays out: it offers "resources for political and social change to end the subordination of women," posits a "relationship between theory and practice," possesses relevance for lived experience, and is "accessible" (by which she seems to mean readily comprehensible or at least non-esoteric) (17). *Feminism, Foucault, and Embodied Subjectivity* is dedicated in large part to elucidating these points.

Chapters Two through Five each identify a key ethico-political issue or concept, provide a comprehensive overview of feminist treatments of the issue or concept, and then analyze Foucault's work in order to offer unique insight into how it can augment feminist theory and practice generally, and feminist and ethics and politics more specifically. As it is the latter aspect—McLaren's analysis of and unique insight into Foucault's work—that I find particularly provocative, it is on this aspect that I shall focus my attention here. McLaren begins, appropriately, by addressing the status of norms within ethics and politics. Foucault has been criticized by feminists and non-feminists alike for being unable to provide the normative foundations that ethics and politics are said to require. According to McLaren, while Foucault

does indeed subject norms to genealogical critique, he does so not in order to jettison them, but rather to promote recognition of ways in which they may function in the service of domination and thus to facilitate their reconceptualization in new, hopefully emancipatory ways. Foucault's genealogies, McLaren asserts, analyze the workings of modern power and in doing so illustrate the normalizing and therefore oppressive potential of norms. Foucault's analytics of power is, however, frequently misinterpreted by feminists (and others). McLaren thus proceeds to elucidate the productive potential of Foucauldian genealogy (her clarification of Foucault's point that power is both "intentional and intersubjective" in Chapter Two goes a long way toward clearing up the aforementioned misinterpretations) in order to show that the kinds of "reworked normative notions" that genealogical critique enables "can provide some grounding for a feminist politics" (23).

Having established that Foucault is indeed capable of articulating an ethics and a politics, McLaren proceeds to analyze three fundamental ethico-political concepts which are of particular concern to feminists: subjectivity, the body, and identity. She shows how Foucault subjects these concepts to critical interrogation and, though this interrogation, reformulates them in ways that are compatible with feminism. Noteworthy in her treatment of subjectivity is McLaren's analysis of the subject as a work of art. Her characterization of self-creation as an "actual process of artistic creation," a critical and innovative process that involves "daily work in a sustained direction," together with her argument that self-creation is neither merely individualistic nor removed from social context emphasizes its ethical dimension and political significance (71). A key point here that McLaren reiterates in her analysis of the body is that embodied subjects need not somehow break free from a context characterized by normalization in order to engage in resistance and practice freedom. In an inspired response to feminists whom she believes have misread Foucault on this point, McLaren shows that for him bodies are not "natural" in the sense that they are somehow "outside of discourse, institutions, and practices," but neither are they merely discursively *determined* (109). Given Foucault's assertion that power and freedom are not opposed to but rather implicate one another, "bodies and pleasures" provide the locus for resistance precisely because they are situated within relations of power. As such, neither of the emancipatory practices McLaren identifies—working on self-creation and developing a "different economy of bodies and pleasures"—need be distinct from or intended to release persons from their sociopolitical context (110). Rather, practices of freedom "[emerge] out of our current situation" (110).

The situation with respect to identity is a bit more complicated. Although she is careful to distinguish identity politics from essentialism, McLaren nonetheless concurs with Foucault's assertion that insofar as "identity categories are formed through exclusionary practices" their ultimate political usefulness is limited (123). As McLaren puts it, "for Foucault, strategic appeals to identity are acceptable, so long as identity does not function as a universal rule or category" (125). She analyzes hermaphroditism and bisexuality in order to illustrate the normalizing function of identity categories and, hence, their limited political efficacy given prevailing socio-political conditions and relations of power. As in her analyses of subjectivity and bodies, then, McLaren elucidates Foucault's point that emancipatory social change is possible only through persons' coming to grips with their present and working for transformation from within it.

In Chapter Six McLaren turns to a particular feminist practice, consciousness-raising, in order to illustrate the feminist political significance of Foucault's notion of practice of the self. She argues that consciousness-raising constitutes a feminist self-practice "that involves not only self-transformation but also social and political transformation" and, therefore, that it "illustrates the link between the self and ethics and politics that is crucial to both feminism and Foucault" (155). She rightly argues that the purpose of consciousness-raising is not to "valorize individual lifestyle choices as political" but rather to promote understanding and therefore generate critique of social and political institutions that are oppressive to women. While "the ultimate target of change," according to McLaren, is these institutions rather than the individual, social change may be facilitated through individuals' increased "awareness of [their] own situation[s] as the result of oppressive conditions and not personal failure" (159). McLaren provides a careful analysis of the socio-historical conditions under which consciousness-raising arose as well as of the practice itself, an analysis that includes acknowledgement of its problems and shortcomings. Still, I believe, given her recognition of the limits of identity politics, McLaren needs to more fully address the propensity of consciousness-raising to, as she puts it, "focus on the shared experience of women" at the expense of "the differences among them" (157). Doing so would undermine neither her overall claim about the political and feminist significance of self-practices, nor her more specific contention that consciousness-raising may be considered such a practice. It would, however, speak to the complexity of engaging in struggles for freedom within a normalizing context, a context in which, as Foucault famously put it, "everything"—even those practices that we associate most strongly with freedom—is "dangerous."

McLaren makes clear that she is not presenting Foucault's work as "the sole answer for feminist politics or the solution to feminist conflict" (172). Insofar as Foucault's approach of identifying, critically analyzing, and rethinking normalizing "discourses, knowledges, and practices" is compatible with and may therefore enhance feminist theory and practice, her point is that this approach and Foucault's work in general ought to be taken seriously by feminists (110). For, as McLaren emphasizes throughout *Feminism, Foucault, and Embodied Subjectivity*, "[effective] struggle against sex/gender oppression will entail not merely achieving equal rights and opportunities within this system, but undermining the whole system of sexuality" (144).

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