Etica-mente. L'annuario
Vol. 6, 2025, 132-152

Care of the Self and the Politics of Pleasure: Foucault, S/M, and Resistance

Cristian Gonzalez Arevalo
Universität Freiburg, Deutschland

Abstract: This study explores consensual sadomasochism (S/M) as a contemporary expression of Michel Foucault's "care of the self" (*epimeleia heautou*), Greco-Roman practices aimed at cultivating autonomy through conscious regulation of body, pleasures, and social relations. Though historically distant, S/M shares self-regulation, ethical codification, and the fusion of pleasure and discipline. Emerging in the 1980s within gay subcultures amid HIV/AIDS and growing institutional control over sexuality, it operates as a technique of subjectivation and micropolitics of resistance. Rather than merely opposing norms, S/M invents modes of life beyond institutional capture, making pleasure a formative, ethically governed dimension of existence.
Keywords: Sadomasochism, Self-Care, Resistance, Ethics, Pleasure.

Email: cristian.gonzalezarevalo@email.uni-freiburg.de
ISSN 2724-3745

DOI: 10.17605/OSF.IO/W4CT6
etica-mente.net

1. Introduction

Michel Foucault's later work marks a significant turn from his earlier analyses of power and knowledge toward questions of ethics and the constitution of the subject. In The Care of the Self (1986), he revives the Greco-Roman notion of *epimeleia heautou*, or "care of the self," understood as a network of practices—physical training, regulation of pleasures, medical attention, and philosophical reflection—designed to cultivate autonomy and ethical responsibility. These practices did not merely aim at health but sought to integrate the body, desire, and social life into a reflective mode of existence.

This framework offers a valuable lens for examining contemporary phenomena that reconfigure the relationship between body and pleasure beyond traditional moral or medical models. The key question guiding this research is whether certain marginal or countercultural sexual practices share structural continuities with ancient "care of the self" techniques. Specifically, this study turns to consensual sadomasochism (S/M), as it developed in the 1980s within urban subcultures and gay communities. Despite vast historical and cultural differences, a Foucauldian perspective reveals parallels in self-regulation, codification of relationships, conscious use of bodily experience, and the integration of pleasure with discipline. The political context is equally relevant. The HIV/AIDS crisis of the 1980s intensified state and medical regulation of sexuality through discourses of safety and control. In response, some collectives devised autonomous strategies that combined harm reduction with the creation of new forms of pleasure. Within this tension between institutional control and community self-determination, consensual S/M emerges as a

practice defined by protocols, negotiation, knowledge of the self and the partner, and an ethical commitment to consent. Pain and power dynamics here become elements in a creative, meaningful experience governed entirely by the participants.

From this standpoint, the connection between "care of the self" and consensual S/M is not incidental. Like Greco-Roman practices, it demands a deliberate engagement with the body, a shared ethical code, and a life project in which pleasure is formative rather than disruptive. In Foucault's terms, it realises an "aesthetics of existence," shaping life, sensations, and relations according to self-imposed design. The central hypothesis of this work is that consensual S/M can be understood as a contemporary form of "care of the self" in the Foucauldian sense. It operates simultaneously as a technique of subjectivation and as a micropolitics of resistance to institutional norms regulating the body and sexuality. Pleasure and discipline here are not opposites but coordinated within an autonomous ethical system, producing forms of resistance grounded not in direct opposition to power, but in the invention of modes of life beyond the reach of normative control.

2. Michel Foucault and the 1980s focus on Ethics

Foucault's work in the 1970s—especially *Discipline and Punish* (Foucault, 1995) and the first volume of *The History of Sexuality* (1978)—marked a decisive shift away from the traditional juridical and repressive models of power, which viewed power primarily as a negative force exercised through law, prohibition, and coercion. His "analytics of power" emphasised the productive, pervasive, and capillary nature of modern power relations, focusing on how institutions, norms, and disci-

plinary practices constitute subjects and organise social life. Rather than locating power in a sovereign or centralised authority, Foucault analysed its dispersed, relational, and microphysical forms, embedded in everyday practices and knowledge systems. To put it briefly, in *Discipline and Punish*, he analysed the shift from sovereign power to disciplinary power, based on surveillance and norms; then in *The History of Sexuality I*, he introduced the idea of biopower to describe political technologies aimed at managing life. Overall, during the 1970s, emphasis was placed on institutional mechanisms—such as prisons, hospitals, and schools—and on how these can direct conduct without a visible central authority.

In the 1980s, without abandoning his concern with power (Nealon, 2008, p. 5), Foucault shifted towards questions of ethics and the constitution of the subject. Drawing inspiration from Greek, Roman, and Hellenistic culture, Foucault explored the "care of the self" (*epimeleia heautou*) as a daily, deliberate practice through which individuals actively shape their existence in a reflective, ethical, and aesthetic manner. This approach implied engaging in spiritual and philosophical exercises—such as self-examination, meditation, dialogue, and controlled conduct—that cultivated an ongoing attentiveness to one's thoughts and actions. In this perspective, life could be envisioned as a work of art whose form and beauty emerge from conscious self-fashioning rather than from passive conformity to imposed norms. Such techniques were not confined to normative obedience or moral discipline; rather, they opened a space for the invention of singular and creative ways of living, enabling individuals to construct distinctive modes of subjectivity guided by freedom, intentionality, and aesthetic sensibility. In this way, the care of the self functioned as both an ethical commitment and a transformative practice, linking self-knowledge to the art of living (Foucault, 1985, pp. 29-30).

It was also in this context, particularly following his immersion in the gay community of San Francisco, that he began to refer to S/M not as a practice of violence but as a space for exploration and the creation of new forms of pleasure and relationships (cf. Bersani in Caillat, 2014, p. 108; Foucault, 1996, pp. 383-388).

Some thinkers hold that Michel Foucault's thought is marked by profound breaks, dividing his work into almost disconnected stages. Under this view, a first archaeological phase is clearly distinguished, focused on the analysis of knowledge and discourse; a second genealogical phase, oriented towards the study of power relations; and a third ethical phase, dedicated to practices of the self and governmentality. Those who defend this perspective argue that at each transition, Foucault abandons conceptual and methodological frameworks in favour of entirely new ones. In particular, the transition from the 1970s to the 1980s in Foucault's thought attracted significant criticism, shaping his interpretations. From Marxist positions, he was criticised for his apparent depoliticisation and his refusal to identify a revolutionary subject (Holloway, 2002; Kellner & Pierce, 2011; Žižek, 2000). Others, from feminism (Hartsock, 1990) and critical theory (Fraser, 1981; Habermas, 1987), questioned whether his analysis of power offered clear normative criteria for resistance, or, since in Foucault "the political has no end", we should "forget" him (Baudrillard, 2007, p. 31). In the academic sphere, his distancing from totalising discourse theory and his appeal to ethical practices were seen by some as a retreat from politics into aestheticised individualism (Lagasnerie, 2012; Zamora, 2014; Zamora & Behrent, 2016).

One might concede that Foucault himself acknowledged having not made sufficient progress in thinking about how to integrate the fig-

ure of the ethical subject within a broader political horizon (Foucault, 1996, p. 443). Actually, some thinkers have argued that the texts in which Michel Foucault addressed the link between power and freedom in the last period of his life are marked by ambiguity, which is not only because the work was left unfinished, but also relates to the complex conceptual tensions in his thinking at that stage (Cadahia, 2014, p. 34). Ultimately, this ambiguity could have led to the emergence of two dominant and separate interpretive traditions. On one hand, the biopolitical line (Agamben, 1998; Esposito, 2008; Hardt & Negri, 2000; Lemke, 2016; Mbembe, 2003), focuses on the ways in which life itself becomes an object of power. This reading tends to emphasise the totalising nature of power and can risk portraying it as an overwhelming, deterministic force with little room for genuine freedom or resistance. And, on the other hand, interpretations associated with the ethics or aesthetics of existence (Hadot, 1995; Schmid, 2000), focus on practices of self-realisation and resistance—often highlighting aesthetic or moral self-stylisation, but at the same time depoliticising freedom, treating it as an individual or private matter separated from broader social and political struggles.

While I agree with Cadahia that the polarised readings of Foucault might have obscured the interdependence between power and freedom—since each of them isolates only one dimension of Foucault's late thought and ignores the complex, mutually constitutive relationship between power and freedom that he was trying to develop in his final period—I approach this diagnosis from a slightly different angle. Cadahia views the problem primarily as a failure to bridge biopolitical and ethical analyses within Foucault's framework (Cadahia, 2011, p. 166); I, instead, argue that although Foucault's references to S/M occupy a marginal place in his work, they can be understood as the crystallisation of a theoretical con-

cern that accompanied him from the 1970s: to investigate how freedom is exercised at the very heart of power relations. From his early studies on disciplinary techniques and biopolitics, Foucault questioned the view of the subject as a mere passive recipient of domination, emphasising that wherever power is exercised, margins of resistance, escape, and reinvention also emerge.

Starting from Michel Foucault's observation about the transition from sovereign power — characterised by the ceremonial spectacle of submission as a central mechanism to produce obedience — to biopower — where such spectacularity diminishes although it does not disappear — I suggest that his conception of power was never totalising. The key to this openness lies in the semantic ambivalence of the French term *soumission*, which designates both obedience imposed by force and voluntary acceptance of norms. This double meaning reveals that power (*pouvoir*) is not limited to external coercion, but constitutes a network of relations in which the subject, even in a subordinate position, actively participates in the production and reproduction of forms of domination.

If this participation manifests as voluntary submission, it opens a margin of action that surpasses negative resistance, making possible a creative activity within the historically given conditions. Hence, the subsequent introduction by Foucault in the 1980s of the notion of 'governing oneself and others' refines this issue: governing involves both the external guidance of others' behaviours and self-governance, extending the ambivalence present in submission. Domination and self-formation thus intertwine in the constitution of subjectivity. From this perspective, the well-known Foucauldian invitation to 'create oneself as a work of art' takes on a precise meaning: in the interstices of power that allow for

voluntary submission, freedom is conceived as the capacity to reflectively style existence, beyond mere compliance with universal norms. These margins are not residual spaces but active zones of subjective production and political invention, where the subject engages in deliberate practices of self-direction and self-formation.

In this context, Foucault's references to sadomasochism during the 1980s illuminate a key aspect: even the strictest form of submission can contain the possibility of reorganising subordinate relationships. Sadomasochism, conceived as a consensual practice and a paradigmatic model of power, functions as a creative laboratory (*entreprise créatrice*) in which bonds are tested that do not reproduce the unilateral nature of coercion, but rather involve the active co-production of all participants. In its aesthetic-performative dimension, sadomasochism shifts the body from its condition as a passive, disciplined object to a surface of aesthetic and political inscription. Within this framework, elements such as pain, physical limitation, or positional asymmetry cease to signify solely as imposition and become raw material for creation under agreed-upon and conscious conditions. This process produces a partial fracture of normative forms of subjectivity and bonds: the public and aesthetic explicitisation of these scenes challenges the boundaries of acceptability and reveals that power is a relational field that can be reorganised from its own mechanisms.

Consequently, bodily performances that operate through logics of consensual domination not only stylise life but also critically intervene in the political and symbolic landscape of biopower. By transforming relational experience into a work of art, these practices embody, in Foucauldian terms, one of the most radical forms of exercising freedom in contexts where power seems to saturate what is possible, demonstrating that even

from within their historical constraints, it is feasible to invent new ways of being and relating.

3. The care of the self as the seed for resistance

In Michel Foucault's later work, the concept of 'care of the self' occupies a central place, especially in the third volume of *The History of Sexuality*, titled *The Care of the Self*. There, Foucault distances himself from the initial view centred on 'repression' to explore how, in Greco-Roman antiquity, individuals governed themselves through voluntary, conscious, and codified practices. In these practices, pleasure — the aphrodisia — is not merely a realm of moral restrictions but a territory of ethical self-formation, a space where the subject is constructed and transformed. The care of the self thus presents itself as a set of historically situated techniques that enable the individual to direct their existence towards a desired form, establishing a particular balance between the body, desire, and social bonds.

In Antiquity, these techniques included physical exercises, diets, organisation of daily life, regulation of sexual pleasures, medical care, and philosophical dialogue. The aim was not only to maintain health but also to cultivate a vigilant and reflective relationship with oneself. Foucault emphasises that this care of the self is not an individualistic retreat or withdrawal from society; on the contrary, it constitutes a way of integrating into the community with a form of ethical and political presence that arises from self-governance. This political dimension is fundamental, as the individual who cares for themselves constructs a space of freedom in the face of external impositions, preserving their capacity to act and decide over their own body and pleasures.

Suggesting a theoretical link between Michel Foucault and sadomasochism (S/M) can be seen by some as a biographical reference, while others view it as inconsistent. Whereas some biographers have frequently highlighted Foucault's personal interest in these sexual practices (Eribon, 1989, p. 337; Macey, 1993, p. 339)—which could also have fostered a fantasy that developed around Michel Foucault's personal life and preferences (Veyne, 2010, p. 142) or influenced moralising interpretations of the French philosopher's personal life (Miller, 1993, p. 27)—, it should be noted that the author of *The History of Sexuality* referred to S/M only tangentially (Foucault, 2024, p. 288), maybe directly only in some interviews given in the years before his death (Foucault, 1996, pp. 383-388). Nevertheless, when Foucault in the 1980s began to refer positively to sadomasochistic (SM) practices, observed within the gay community and urban subcultures, he did so from this ethical perspective. In various interviews and conversations, he mentions SM not as a mere deviation or transgression, but as a laboratory where new forms of pleasure and bodily relations are invented. What may seem anecdotal or marginal actually responds to his interest in demonstrating that the body is a space of experimentation and that power relations are not solely an axis of domination, but also a possible field of play and creation. This directly connects with the notions of care of the self: consensual SM involves discipline, negotiation, knowledge of one's own body and others', attention to boundaries and safety, all within a framework of agreed rules. Just as in ancient practices of care, it is a practice that involves techniques, codes, and an art of living.

In the 1980s, the historical context adds another layer of meaning. The HIV/AIDS crisis radically transformed sexual practices and the public perception of homosexual communities. Medical, state, and media institutions promoted discourses and control mechanisms over sexuality,

imposing models of 'acceptable' or 'safe' behaviour within a normative and hygienist framework. Foucault observes how, in response to these regulations, many communities react not only with explicit political resistance but also by creating new modes of sexual life that incorporate safe practices, codes of mutual care, and structures of consensus. From this perspective, S/M is not merely an aesthetic or playful expression but a practice that rejects the logic of state and medical morality and proposes alternative ways of organising pleasure that are autonomous and communal.

Understanding S/M as part of an ethics of care for oneself involves recognising that the pain, discipline, and power relations enacted there are transformed into meaningful experiences under mutual control. In consensual S/M, pain is not harm but a reinterpreted sensation directed towards erotic or identity-related purposes; power is not mere coercion but a play element, a dramatized structure that can be inverted or dissolved according to established rules. In this sense, S/M shifts the classical axis that separates pleasure and pain, re-signifying both within an aesthetic of existence. And it is precisely this capacity to redefine the most basic codes of bodily experience that interests Foucault: the body, as a field of experimentation, is liberated from prescribed forms and becomes a space where ethics, politics, and aesthetics intertwine.

From a Foucauldian perspective, resistance is not limited solely to directly confronting established institutions or laws. Rather, it also — and perhaps more profoundly — manifests in the invention of ways of life that cannot be fully controlled or neutralised by mechanisms of power. In this context, self-care, as a seed or germ of resistance, takes on a central importance, as it operates by creating forms of existence that are sus-

tained through individual autonomy, deep self-knowledge, and the capacity to establish a personal sense in relationships and pleasures. Foucault recognises that power always traverses bodies and desires, manifesting at multiple levels. However, he emphasises that this constant presence of power does not exhaust all the subject's possibilities for action. Through techniques of the self, the individual can transform that power into raw material for creativity and personal transformation, making it possible for resistance to emerge from the subtlety of subjective and everyday practices.

The references made by Foucault regarding the subject of sadomasochism, in this context, are neither casual nor random, as they embody, in the contemporary society in which we currently live, what he had observed in ancient and traditional practices: a set of voluntary regulations, a process of learning in the management and control of one's own body, a stylisation of existence that harmoniously combines pleasure with discipline. The transition from self-care, which dates back to ancient Greece and Rome, to contemporary sadomasochism, is neither a linear nor direct process, but both share a fundamental principle: the deliberate and conscious production of a subject who governs themselves in relation to and in harmony with their experience of pleasure. In antiquity, restrictions and doses of pleasure served a purpose aimed at maintaining the balance and health of the body and mind; in sadomasochism, the controlled administration of the intensity of sensations and the definition of specific roles allow for a safe, controlled experience within a framework that fits within a community or collective code. In both cases, it involves practising a knowledge of the body that does not depend solely on external norms, but on a carefully designed and lived ethics by those who experience and adopt these practices, from a perspective of self-knowledge and

personal freedom.

In the political realm, this implies a form of resistance that is not conceived as mere negation of power, but as its reconfiguration. In the consensual SM, relations of domination are represented, regulated, and inverted in a process that escapes the binary logic of master/slave of real power; physical pain becomes a sign, an element of communication and connection. Similarly, the ancient practice of self-care was rich in strategies for the individual to remain as free as possible from the interference of magistrates, doctors, or guardians, using the cultivation of the self as a defence against impositions. In Foucault's formulation, both practices are political insofar as they allow the creation and maintenance of ways of life different from those prescribed.

Furthermore, there is also an element of invention that profoundly permeates both self-care and the work of subjectivation and personal governance. Foucault believed that the subject should 'invent' their own life as if it were a work of art or a unique creation, rather than simply passively submitting to a pre-established model or pattern. The 'aesthetics of existence' he describes are precisely that capacity to shape, style, and personalise everyday life, including how the physical body is treated, the way pleasure and pain are experienced, and the quality of human relationships. In the 1980s, S/M appeared as an exemplary case, in the sense of being a paradigmatic example: it was not merely about mechanically repeating scenarios of power or structures of domination, but about creating entirely new frameworks and choreographies that, as a whole, redefined the meaning of sexual and affective experience. The consensual and carefully codified nature of these practices also ensured that participants maintained control and mutual care, thus reinforcing the ethical and re-

sponsible dimension of all activity.

The context of Foucault's references to S/M cannot be separated from his own experience and observation of gay culture in cities like San Francisco. There, S/M communities not only cultivated alternative erotic practices but also created spaces for socialisation, solidarity, and care in the face of stigma and illness. This makes them a contemporary example of what self-care could be: a bodily and social practice that, at the same time, affirms autonomy and constructs a micro-politics of resistance. The fact that these practices emerged and persisted amidst an environment of intense surveillance and moralisation reinforces the idea that self-care, in any of its historical forms, is inseparable from resistance.

For all these reasons, the interpretation that links self-care with consensual sadomasochism (SM) established in the 1980s is not merely an extrapolation or a forced conclusion, but rather a recognition of deep and fundamental affinities and compatibilities that exist between both aspects. In both situations or contexts, the individual, the subject, positions themselves as a highly active, dynamic, and proactive agent or actor in all areas and aspects of their own life, establishing and defining, through their own decisions and actions, norms, rules, and principles that regulate and control their relationship, interaction, and coexistence with everyday pleasure, which they experience and enjoy daily. All of this is carried out within a framework that prioritises, values, and assigns great importance to safety and personal freedom, which are fundamental and essential concepts in their lifestyle and in their way of understanding and living existence. In the philosophy and thought of Foucault, the French philosopher and thinker, these practices, behaviours, and activities reveal the possibility and opportunity for sexuality to cease being merely a domain

dominated by control, regulation, or repression, or spontaneous and unrestricted liberation, and instead transform into a space of art, technique, and creation—a space where the subject is formed, moulded, reinvented, reconfigured, and continuously transformed. Hence, the interest in SM is not limited to viewing it as a marginal, superficial, or secondary phenomenon, but rather as a clear and evident example that inventiveness, creativity, the capacity for innovation, and discipline can coexist peacefully, harmoniously, and constructively in the process of creating and building one's own identity, the self, subjectivity, and individual character.

Thus, self-care is a seed of resistance, as it contains, from within, the capacity to subvert the imposed order by creating ways of life that do not merely reject norms but also develop alternatives. Foucault's references to the SM corroborate that, for him, the body and pleasure are fields of political and ethical action; that resistance can be dressed in rituals, roles, and coded games; and that the subject, caring for itself and others, invents worlds where power no longer operates in the same way. In times of crisis, surveillance, and moralisation, this idea remains relevant: self-care, in any of its forms, remains an act of resistance that does not renounce freedom or creativity.

4. Conclusions

Michel Foucault's intellectual trajectory reveals a persistent preoccupation with the intricate relationship between power and freedom, a relationship he neither collapsed into a purely repressive model not idealised as an unconditioned domain of autonomy. The shift in his work from the 1970s to the 1980s, often portrayed as a radical break from genealogies of power to ethical practices of the self,

must instead be understood as a continuation — indeed, as an intensification — of his effort to explore how subjects are constituted within, and through, power relations, while retaining the capacity for transformation. The analyses of disciplinary mechanisms in Discipline and Punish and of biopolitical regulation in *The History of Sexuality I* set the stage for a rethinking of the subject not as a passive bearer of domination, but as an active agent whose existence is shaped by, and who can respond to, the microphysics of power. This concern does not disappear in the turn to ethics; it merely takes on new conceptual strategies for examining how freedom can be exercised from inside the field of power.

The "analytics of power" formulated in the 1970s worked to dissolve the juridical and sovereign models that understood power only as negative prohibition. By emphasising the dispersed, relational, and productive nature of modern power, Foucault revealed its presence in the mundane fabric of institutions, norms, and disciplinary techniques. Yet what remained less developed at that stage was a full account of how subjects might creatively operate within this web, beyond forms of mere resistance. The introduction of ethical themes and practices in the early 1980s provided him with the tools to address this lacuna. In *The Care of the Self*, self-formation appeared as a practice aimed not simply at avoiding subjection but at consciously stylising life, attending to the body, pleasure, and conduct in ways that might yield distinctive modes of existence.

It is in this light that the supposed rupture between "politics" and "ethics" is better read as a reconfiguration of the field of struggle. Rather than abandoning the political, Foucault relocated it within the intimate processes of subjectivation, making the construction of the self a political act. The constant interplay between governing others and governing

oneself indicated a double movement, where external forms of guidance intertwine with internal forms of discipline and freedom. That interdependence is already latent in the polysemy of "submission": the term in French can describe both coerced obedience and voluntary consent. This semantic ambivalence shows that the subject's role in sustaining power is never merely imposed from outside, but always involves an element of participation. And precisely in this participation lies the possibility of transformation — submission can become a site of self-fashioning, not merely compliance.

Foucault's engagement with sadomasochism during his immersion in San Francisco's gay community in the 1980s exemplifies this dynamic in a particularly vivid and controversial manner. While the practice has often been reductively interpreted as a form of violence or pathology, Foucault saw in it an experimental space in which the grammar of power could be rewritten. S/M scenes render power visible in their operational codes—rules, roles, asymmetries, rituals— yet, by inverting the logic of coercion, they operate under conditions of conscious negotiation and mutual design. The very elements conventionally associated with subjugation — pain, physical constraint, hierarchical position — become raw materials for deliberate creation. In this way, sadomasochism functions as a "laboratory" for reorganising relations, producing new configurations of pleasure and subjectivity that parody, displace, and recompose the mechanisms of domination.

Such bodily performances fracture normative understandings of intimacy, gender, and eroticism, revealing that power is not a fixed structure imposed from above but a relational field open to rearrangement. In their aesthetic dimension, they inscribe the body as a site of political

invention, shifting it from a passive object of regulation to an actively curated surface for exploration. This is where Foucault's notion of "life as a work of art" finds its concrete instantiation: not in decorative or purely private acts of self-stylisation, but in embodied practices that intervene in the codes of acceptable conduct, making visible the possibility of other forms of living. These forms, although they emerge within power relations, do not merely oppose power; they transform its modalities by redirecting its flows and reframing its meanings.

From this perspective, the polarised readings that separate a biopolitical Foucault from an ethical Foucault obscure the continuity of his concern with how subjectivity is both a product of, and a field for, power's reorganisation. The "biopolitical" tradition tends to emphasise the totalising grip of control on life, often leaving little room for agency, while the "aesthetics of existence" approach risks a depoliticised account of freedom that isolates it from collective struggle. The reality, as the late work suggests, is that power and freedom are mutually constitutive: freedom is not exercised in a vacuum outside power, but within the very circuits that govern life. The practices of the self Foucault studies in Antiquity, and the contemporary erotic experiments he comments upon, share precisely this logic — the art of inserting creation into constraint, of finding latitude in structures that appear closed.

It is essential to acknowledge that in his later years Foucault himself recognised the unfinished nature of this inquiry. He did not fully articulate how an ethics of self-care might connect to the broader political field in which subjects are situated. This incompletion has allowed divergent interpretations to flourish, some underplaying the political relevance of self-work, others collapsing it into purely aesthetic self-stylisation. Yet

if we take seriously his insight that governing always also entails self-governance, and that voluntary submission can be a site of active reorientation, then we can reconstruct his project as an attempt to theorise the production of freedom within given conditions. Freedom, on this view, is neither a transcendence of power nor its total negation, but a capacity to work upon oneself and one's relations so as to vary the possible forms that life can take.

The implications of this reading extend beyond Foucault scholarship. They invite us to consider how contemporary practices — whether explicitly political or seemingly private — may embody micro-strategies of transformation. The consensual protocols of S/M, for instance, offer a model for how power relations can be designed and inhabited deliberately, opening spaces where bodily limits and asymmetries become components of pleasure and mutual recognition rather than instruments of unilateral control. In these spaces, we witness the possibility of inventing new relational configurations, exploring the thresholds of consent, and performing alternative subjectivities in ways that communicate with both those within the scene and the wider social audience.

Thus, the conclusion is that Foucault's late engagement with ethics, aesthetics, and non-normative sexualities should not be construed as a retreat from politics but as its radical relocation. By situating the political within practices of self and body, he exposed the depth at which power penetrates life and the intimate zones where it can be reworked. His thought challenges us to move beyond models that view resistance solely as external opposition, urging instead a practice-oriented understanding of freedom as the ongoing invention of ourselves in relation to others. In this way, the seemingly marginal references to S/M crystallise

a fundamental insight that runs through his oeuvre: even at the heart of submission, there exists an opening for creation.

References

Agamben, G. 1998. *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Baudrillard, J. 2007. *Forget Foucault*, California: Semiotext(e).

Cadahia, L. 2011. *"Dos caras de una misma moneda: Libertad y Poder en los escritos foucaultianos"*, in Logos. Anales del Seminario de Metafísica, 44, 165–188.

Cadahia, L. 2014. *"Michel Foucault y la gramática del poder y de la libertad"*, in Estudios de Filosofía, 49, 33–48.

Caillat, F. (ed.) 2014. *Foucault contre lui-même*, Paris: Presses Universitaires de France.

Eribon, D. 1989. *Michel Foucault*, Paris: Flammarion.

Esposito, R. 2008. *Bíos: biopolitics and philosophy*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Foucault, M. 1978. *The History of Sexuality. Volume 1: An Introduction,* New York: Pantheon.

Foucault, M. 1985. *The History of Sexuality. Volume 2: The Use of Pleasure*, New York: Random House, Inc.

Foucault, M. 1986. *The History of Sexuality. Volume 3: The Care of the Self*, New York: Pantheon.

Foucault, M. 1995. *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison,* New York: Vintage.

Foucault, M. 1996. *Foucault Live: Collected Interviews 1961-1984,* New York: Semiotext(e).

Foucault, M. 2024. *Genealogies de la sexualité,* Paris: Vrin.

Fraser, N. 1981. *"Foucault on Modern Power: Empirical Insights and Normative Confusions"*, in Praxis International, 3, 272–287.

Habermas, J. 1987. *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, New York: Polity.

Hadot, P. 1995. *Philosophy as a Way of Life: Spiritual Exercises from Socrates to Foucault,*

Oxford: Blackwell.
Hardt, M., & Negri, A. 2000. *Empire,* London: Harvard University Press.
Hartsock, N. 1990. *"Foucault on Power: A Theory for Women?",* in L. J. Nicholson (ed.), *Feminism/Postmodernism*, New York: Routledge.
Holloway, J. 2002. *Change the World Without Taking Power*, London: Pluto Press.
Kellner, D., & Pierce, C. (eds.) 2011. *Philosophy, Psychoanalysis, and Emancipation,* Vol. 5, New York: Routledge.
Lagasnerie, G. 2012. *La dernière leçon de Michel Foucault: Sur le néoliberalisme, la théorie et la politique*, Paris: Fayard.
Lemke, T. 2016. *Biopolitik zur Einführung*, Hamburg: Junius Verlag.
Macey, D. 1993. *The Lives of Michel Foucault*, London: Hutchinson.
Mbembe, A. 2003. *"Necropolitics"*, in Public Culture, 15 (1), 11–40.
Miller, J. 1993. *The Passion of Michel Foucault*, New York: Simon & Schuster.
Nealon, J. T. 2008. *Foucault Beyond Foucault: Power and Its Intensifications since 1984,* Stanford: Stanford University Press.
Schmid, W. 2000. *Auf der Suche nach einer neuen Lebenskunst: Die Frage nach dem Grund und die Neubegründung der Ethik bei Foucault*, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag.
Veyne, P. 2010. *Foucault: His Thought, His Character,* Cambridge: Polity.
Zamora, D. (ed.) 2014. *Critiquer Foucault. Les années 1980 et la tentation néolibérale*, Bruxelles: Éditions Aden.
Zamora, D., & Behrent, M. C. (eds.) 2016. *Foucault and Neoliberalism*, London: Polity.
Žižek, S. 2000. *"Class Struggle or Postmodernism? Yes, please!",* in J. Butler, E. Laclau, & S. Žižek (eds.), *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality: Contemporary Dialogues on the Left*, London & New York: Verso.