Philosophy Faculty Works   Philosophy

2011

Prophetic Pragmatism and the Practices of Freedom: On Cornel West's Foucauldian Methodology

Brad E. Stone
Loyola Marymount University, brad.stone@lmu.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.lmu.edu/phil_fac

Part of the Philosophy Commons

Foucault Studies

ARTICLE

Prophetic Pragmatism and the Practices of Freedom: On Cornel West's Foucauldian Methodology

Brad Elliott Stone, Loyola Marymount University

ABSTRACT: This essay explores the Foucauldian influence on Cornel West's prophetic pragmatism. Although West argues that Foucauldian methods are insufficient to deliver a philosophy of liberation, I argue that there is nothing in Foucault that would prohibit West from such a goal, even though a philosophy of liberation was not one of Foucault's goals. Fortunately, one can understand West's own project of liberation in terms of "practices of freedom," allowing one to describe West's philosophical project in strict Foucauldian terms.

Keywords: Foucault, West, prophetic pragmatism, polemics, liberation.

> To take seriously "Afro-America" as a political reality in process and a rhetorical figure in textual motion does not mean that we shun European critical discourses, especially those of the Frankfurters (Adorno, Marcuse) and French fries (Derrida, Foucault).[1]

Prophetic pragmatism, Cornel West's brand of pragmatism, is best described in the preface of *Prophesy Deliverance!* as "an Afro-American philosophy that is essentially a specific expression of contemporary American philosophy which takes seriously the Afro-American experience."[2] Taking the African-American experience seriously, however, does not require one to get rid of useful theories formulated by non-Black thinkers. Philosophical culinary puns aside, West has always attempted to fuse African-American sensibilities and European forms; perhaps one could say that West tries to convert "Frankfurters and French fries" into "soul food." This

---

[1] Cornel West, *Prophetic Fragments: Illuminations of the Crisis in American Religion and Culture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 170.

[2] Cornel West, *Prophesy Deliverance! An Afro-American Revolutionary Christianity* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1982), 11.

fusion of African-American life and European style might also justify Rosemary Cowan's term "jazz philosophy" to describe prophetic pragmatism.[3]

But we must also make sure to scrutinize those theories. Even though West is a pragmatist, he quickly tells us that "American philosophy has never taken the Afro-American experience seriously. Even during the golden age of Royce, James, Santayana, and Dewey it remained relatively unaffected by the then rampant lynchings and widespread mistreatment of Afro-Americans."[4] Therefore, West will not be opposed to using Eurocentric thinkers and theories as models, but they must be retrofitted to account for the plight of black people, a plight that is often ignored by the very thinkers and theories being employed. West states this succinctly in an interview with bell hooks:

> To be intellectual, no matter what the color, means that one is going to be deeply influenced by other intellectuals of a variety of different colors. When it comes to Black intellectuals, we have to, on the one hand, be very open to insights from wherever they come. On the other hand, we must filter it in such a way that we never lose sight of what some of the silences are in the work of White theorists, especially as those silences relate to issues of class, gender, race, and empire. Why? Because class, gender, race, and empire are fundamental categories which Black intellectuals must use in order to understand the predicament of Black people.[5]

In other words, the prophetic pragmatist has to be able to modify the theoretical engines provided by mainstream academia so that they can account of race, class, and gender in a way that promotes West's ultimate objective. Dare I say, West's ultimate objective is Black liberation, followed by the liberation of all the oppressed people of the world. Although West would not consider himself a theologian or philosopher of liberation, there is ample evidence that he is.[6]

In this essay I seek to explicate and partially resolve the tension between West's ultimate objective and the Foucauldian method he uses to strive for it. It is clear that prophetic pragmatism can be conceived of as an extension of Foucauldian philosophy that fuses Foucault's methodology with liberation theology in order to create the theoretical underpinning for the vigilant resistance to white supremacy in all of its forms. However, as West himself points out, Foucault's methods can only go so far towards liberation. Foucault's own distrust of the notion of liberation, as well as his lack of interest in concrete polemics, creates great frustration for those who seek a plan of action. I want to claim that it might be permissible for

---

[3] Cf. Rosemary Cowan, *Cornel West: The Politics of Redemption* (Cambridge: Polity, 2003), Ch. 3.

[4] West, *Prophesy Deliverance!*, 11.

[5] bell hooks and Cornel West, *Breaking Bread: Insurgent Black Intellectual Life* (Toronto: Between the Lines, 1991), 35.

[6] Cf. Cowan, 15: "no matter how much West insists that he is not a liberation theologian, it is impossible to fully understand his work without grounding it in a liberationist theological perspective. What West labels as non-theological 'prophetic Christianity' is simply another name for his African-American liberation theology... [Liberation theology] is the foundation for West's entire body of work." Although I originally resisted Cowan's claim at first (this claim constitutes the thesis of her book), I am beginning to find it more compelling.

those involved in actual cultural battles to use Foucault's methodology *en route* to goals. That said, I will nonetheless defend Foucault's claim that polemics are problematic, and that problematicization should lead to concrete practices of freedom instead of abstract notions of "liberation." Fortunately, West actually pursues concrete practices of freedom, so he is closer to Foucault than he might actually believe.

This essay has four sections. In the first section I will highlight what makes Foucault attractive to West's project in comparison to standard Marxism. Second, I will trace West's critique of Foucault in light of West's hope for black liberation. I will then discuss Foucault's critique of the notion of liberation and why he avoids polemics. Finally, I will respond to West's objections by showing how to better describe prophetic practices in Foucauldian terms.

The Role of Foucauldian Method in Prophetic Pragmatism

In his essay "Toward a Socialist Theory of Racism," published in *Prophetic Fragments*, West formulates the need to move past the traditional Marxist approaches to the question of race, namely, by reducing race to one more type of economic struggle. Although economics is indeed a major part of the story of race in America, "Marxism is inadequate because it fails to probe other spheres of American society where racism plays an integral role—especially the psychological and cultural spheres."[7] This failure is corrected, West argues, by "a microinstitutional analysis" that would precede the traditionally Marxist "macrostructural" critique of government and capitalist systems. West is not going to eliminate the macrostructural critique; rather, he will undergird it with two Foucauldian projects: (1) a "genealogical inquiry into the ideology of racism, focusing on the kinds of metaphors and concepts employed by dominant European (or white) supremacists in various epochs in the West and on ways in which resistance has occurred;" and (2) a "microinstitutional or localized analysis of the mechanisms that sustain white supremacist discourse in the everyday life of non-Europeans... and the ways in which resistance occurs."[8]

Although West uses the word "genealogy" to name his analysis of racist ideology, I would prefer to use the term "archaeology" to describe the first dimension of West's project stated above. Insofar as it is a historical ontology of discourse and knowledge, the analysis of metaphors and concepts used in discourse is more properly a feature of archaeology. Genealogy indeed characterizes the second dimension of the project, for genealogy explicates the apparatuses of power and maps out power relations. Of course, one cannot do genealogy without archaeology, and archaeology requires genealogy to connect knowledge to power and subjectivity. I simply point out here that West uses both archaeological and genealogical methods, both of which show strong Foucauldian influence.

The first project is clearly an archaeological one, which West describes as an "inquiry into predominant European supremacist discourses."[9] This project is most clearly visible in the second chapter of *Prophesy Deliverance!*, "A Genealogy of Modern Racism." The second task is more of a (proper) genealogical project insofar as it will analyze "the ways in which

---

[7] West, *Prophetic Fragments*, 99.
[8] Ibid., 101.
[9] Ibid., 102.

'colored' 'Negro,' and 'black' identities were created against a background of both fear and terror and a persistent history of resistance that gave rise to open rebellion in the 1960s."[10] This project is most clearly visible in *Race Matters*, especially his discussion of Black sexuality.

In *Prophesy Deliverance!* West gives us an archaeological account of white supremacist ideology. The Foucauldian archaeological undertones are very clear here; anyone looking to learn how to do an archaeology can learn a lot from West's description:

> My aim in this chapter is to give a brief account of the way in which the idea of white supremacy was constituted as an object of modern discourse in the West, without simply appealing to the objective demands of the prevailing mode of production, the political interests of the slaveholding class, or the psychological needs of the dominant white racial group. Despite the indispensable role these factors would play in a full-blown explanatory model to account for the emergence and sustenance of modern racism in the West, I try to hold these factors constant and focus solely on a neglected variable in past explanatory models—namely, the way in which the very structure of modern discourse *at its inception* produced forms of rationality, scientificity, and objectivity as well as aesthetic and cultural ideals which require the constitution of the idea of white supremacy.[11]

West accomplishes a lot in this one paragraph. First, in the spirit of this section, West is going beyond the macrostructural reduction of white supremacy to economic production. By moving past the people and conscious motives of modern racism, West explores what Foucault would call the "positive unconscious" of white supremacy that is not obtained by the history of ideas or the historiographical analysis of people's views. By bracketing these items, West will focus on simply the statements made, the enunciative functioning of those statements, the strategies created by those statements, and the concepts that govern those strategies. In short, West will look at the level of discourse itself and show that what was said was only possible due to a given epistemic arrangement, not the motives of people, who are merely placeholders (*lieu-tenants*) in the discursive game. Therefore the guiding question of West's analysis is "What are the discursive conditions for the possibility of the intelligibility and legitimacy of the idea of white supremacy in modern discourse?"[12] The answer to such a question will require archaeological analysis.

We will not rehearse all the steps of West's analysis here. West shows how the modern period mixed modern classificatory science, Cartesian epistemology, and re-appropriated Classical aesthetics together in such a way that white supremacy became an "obvious" concept. This "obviousness" was not the result of any agent or group of people; the discourse itself "prohibited the intelligibility and legitimacy of the idea of black equality in beauty, culture, and intellectual capacity. In fact, to "think" such an idea was to be deemed irrational,

---

[10] Ibid., 103.

[11] West, *Prophesy Deliverance!*, 47 (emphasis his). Unless West attended some of Foucault's lectures at the Collège de France in the late 1970s, he worked on the genealogy of race without hearing or seeing Foucault's own thoughts on racism. The wording here could come from both Foucault's *The Order of Things* and *The Archaeology of Knowledge*. The use of Foucauldian method here is unique for its time.

[12] Ibid., 48.

barbaric, or mad."[13]   As presented here, white supremacy created "white people," not the other way around. This, of course, does not let white people off the hook in the fight for racial equality, but it does remove the guilt by association.

At the end of the chapter, West raises a standard archaeological point: there is a mixture of necessity and contingency in any archaeological analysis. Once a discursive configuration takes hold, its consequences are necessary. However, the configuration itself is contingent. White supremacy is an "obvious" consequence of the mixture of modern classificatory science, Cartesian theories of rationality, and ancient Greek and Roman themes of beauty, but the mixing of these elements did not *have to* happen. Therefore, we have a necessity that is itself not necessarily so. This contingent necessity is the historical *a priori* of all knowledge. West pits this historical *a priori* against the Marxist dialectic, freeing "the everyday life of black people" from being reduced simply to "the exploitative (oligopolistic) capitalist system of production."[14]

West's discussion of black sexuality in *Race Matters* offers us a genealogically-influenced analysis of how identities are formed out of a particular context which is itself a formation of relations of power and nondiscursive practices. One sees in West's description the influence of Foucault's *History of Sexuality, Vol. 1*. West writes that "many white Americans still view black sexuality with disgust. And some continue to view their own sexuality with disgust. Victorian morality and racist perceptions die hard."[15] Black sexuality creates a double-whammy of identity politics (the use of sexuality as a means of subjectification in addition to racial bio-politics), so a genealogy will need to explore both what I call a "sexuality of race" and a "racism of sex."

The sexuality of race pertains to the role of sex in the conception of race. West alludes to this when he writes that

> the paradox of the sexual politics of race in America is that, behind closed doors, the dirty, disgusting, and funky sex associated with black people is often perceived to be more intriguing and interesting, while in public spaces talk about black sexuality is virtually taboo. *Everyone knows it is virtually impossible to talk candidly about race without talking about sex.* Yet most social scientists who examine race relations do so with little or no reference to how sexual perceptions influence racial matters.[16]

Of course, as Foucault noted in *The History of Sexuality*, discourse on sex is actually proliferating, not being silenced. Similarly, racism is bred by an incitement for discourse and a need to confess sexual desires and fears. The relations of power at play in sexuality brings about race, making black people classifiable in either sexually aggressive or asexual terms (for example, Aunt Jemima is asexual, but Bigger Thomas is a rapist).

The racism of sex, a theme that is not as present in Foucault but genealogically possible, is the other direction of the race-sex power cycle. Blacks have to respond to racism by means

---

[13] Ibid.

[14] Ibid., 65.

[15] Cornel West, *Race Matters* (New York: Vintage, 1993), 122.

[16] Ibid., 120.

of sexuality. For some, that means the nihilistic embracing of stereotypical black sexuality as often glorified in pornography and music videos. For others, this means the silencing and hatred of black sexuality identity. This happens in two ways. One way is for black people, especially black Christians, to find sexuality, especially their own sexuality, as sinful and disgusting. This disgust is usually white disgust under the guise of religiosity. The problem with such disgust is that it divorces blacks from "a particular kind of power black people are perceived to have over whites,"[17] namely the lack of white control in black people's sexual lives. The other way is a strong homophobia that associates homosexuality with whiteness, which demonstrates "the refusal to entertain seriously new stylistic options for black men caught in the deadly endeavor of rejecting black machismo identities."[18] Black women are further impacted due to the way the racism of sex redoubles gender inequality.

The way out of both the sexuality of race and the racism of sex for West is truly open dialogue: "As long as black sexuality remains a taboo subject, we cannot acknowledge, examine, or engage these tragic psychocultural facts of American life."[19] To modify Foucault's statement in the opening chapter of *The History of Sexuality*, perhaps someday black sex will be good again; perhaps even the day will come when being black will be good (Was it ever good before?).

We therefore see that West uses archaeological and genealogical elements as part of what he calls in *Keeping Faith* "prophetic criticism." Prophetic criticism "begins with social structural analyses" and "always keeps open a skeptical eye to avoid dogmatic traps, premature closures, formulaic formulations or rigid conclusions."[20] Be it the ordering of discourse or the arrangement of power, part of prophetic pragmatism seeks to examine the microinstitutional aspects of race and racism.

West's Critique of Foucault

West's overall criticism of Foucault is that archaeology and genealogy do not lay out paths for liberation. This criticism presents itself in four ways in West's writings: (1) Foucault's anti-humanism complicates pragmatic romanticism, (2) Foucault's conception of power is unable to move beyond subjectivization to a more active subjectivity, (3) Foucault's lack of moral (or historical) *telos* makes his theory useless for true "kingdom building," and (4) Foucault's theory is more useful in the academy than in the non-academic world. I will discuss each of these objections in turn.

First, West is concerned about Foucault's anti-romanticism, which is a natural consequence from Foucault's anti-humanism. West alleges that Foucault "surreptitiously ascribes agency to discourses, disciplines, and techniques" while "downplaying human agency."[21] This anti-romanticism contradicts West's Emersonian enthusiasm and Rortyan ironism. It

---

[17] Ibid., 126.

[18] Ibid., 129. Of course, the writings of James Baldwin come to mind here, as well as the recent "crisis" in Black America concerning "the Down Low" in an age of "thug" culture. A future essay of mine addresses the Down Low phenomenon in terms of the racism of sex.

[19] Ibid., 130-131.

[20] Cornel West, *Keeping Faith: Philosophy and Race in America* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 23.

[21] Cornel West, *The Cornel West Reader* (New York: Basic *Civitas* Books, 1999), 163.

contradicts the Emersonian belief that we can achieve our goals through work and determination (hence why West describes pragmatism as an "evasion" of philosophy, insofar as Emerson set the tone of nature and labor as the American standard). It contradicts the Rortyan hope that all things can be redescribed by us (Rorty would remind us that "the world does not speak; only we do."[22]) West asserts instead that "human agency remains central—all we have in human societies and histories are structured and unstructured human social practices over time and space."[23] Insofar as Foucault will not put his trust in "man" to resolve problems, Foucault rubs against what West considers one of the central pillars of pragmatism: individual and collective human agency.

Second, West claims that Foucault limits the discussion of power to the realm of subjectivization. He writes that Foucault "remains preoccupied by one particular kind of operation of power, namely, the various modes by which human beings are constituted into subjects."[24] This preoccupation, West claims, is due to Foucault's Kantian adherence to the transcendental project, the question concerning the conditions of the possibility of subjectivity. Indeed, Foucault's answer is a new answer; unfortunately, the question is one that West does not believe is worth answering. At the end of the day, Foucault is thinking of the post-Nietzschean, immanent possibilities of the transcendental project. By describing power in terms of discipline, biopolitics, and governmentality, Foucault's analysis of power is always for *our* sake. But who is this "us" for whom Foucault's analysis of power is done? Not the agent of change understood in an Emersonian fashion. West detects a tension between Foucault's anti-humanism and his overemphasis on human subjectivity in discussions of power relations. If the true "agents" of things are discursive and nondiscursive practices, shouldn't the analysis of power deal primarily with the practices *themselves* instead of the subjectivity such practices bring about?

The third objection is that Foucault's "fervent anti-utopianism—again in reaction to Hegel and Marxist teleological utopianism—rejects all forms of ends and aims for political struggle."[25] Since West's goals involve changes in the actual quality of life of actual black people, Foucault fails to "keep his eyes on the prize." Foucault's response to the so-called oppression felt by so many is to deny it by incorporating resistance into the power game of the oppressor. In short, Foucault does not claim a moral mandate; he does not do analyses in order to show one side or the other as the side with which God or history would side. There is no way out of Foucault's theory to move on to liberating progressive practices. Nothing is getting better or worse in Foucault's analyses; there is simply epistemic shifts and redistributions of power relations. West's theological underpinnings demand that there is something called "the Kingdom of God" that we are getting closer to or father from bringing about on earth "as it is in Heaven."

Finally, West sees Foucault as a perfect model for a particular kind of struggle, one that is necessary but unfortunately limited to the academy. West refers to this in many different

---

[22] Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (Cambridge: Cambridge, 1989), 6.

[23] West, *The Cornel West Reader*, 163.

[24] Ibid., 162.

[25] Ibid., 163-164.

places, but I will focus on its descriptions in *Keeping Faith*. In the essay "The Dilemma of the Black Intellectual," West describes the Foucauldian black intellectual as one who questions the will to truth:

> the postmodern situation requires "the specific intellectual" who shuns the labels of scientificity, civility and prophecy and instead delves into the specificity of the political, economic and cultural matrices within which regimes of truth are produced, distributed, circulated and consumed. No longer should intellectuals deceive themselves by believing... that they are struggling "on behalf" of the truth; rather the problem is the struggle over the very status of the truth and the vast institutional mechanisms which account for this status.[26]

What this means is that the Foucauldian correctly realizes that "the truth" itself is what everyone is fighting about. The sphere of "the true" is not fixed but is itself the battlefield upon which intellectual battles are waged. The bad news for this model of black intellectual life is that it "encapsulates black intellectual activity within the comfortable bourgeois academy of postmodern America."[27] For West, the work to be done is happening *out there*: on the streets, in the churches, and at the town halls. West describes the goal for black intellectual life as "the creation or reactivation of institutional networks that promote high-quality critical habits primarily for the purpose of black insurgency... to stimulate, hasten and enable alternative perceptions and practices by dislodging prevailing discourses and powers."[28] The Foucauldian model works if the thinker were to plug herself into the public battles outside of the academy. Insofar as West thinks that that does not happen, this lack of engagement serves as a criticism. In the essay "Theory, Pragmatisms, and Politics," West states that although the academy is an important site for resistance, "oppositional professional intellectuals" (West's term for those in the academy) often fail "to break out of the local academic context and make links with non-academic groups and organizations."[29]

A second example in *Keeping Faith* is his discussion of critical legal studies, which examines the will to truth in legal research. West compliments the field for showing how certain notions in legal studies need to be re-examined, a move which follows from West's favorite aspects of Foucauldian method. However, West claims impatiently, "[f]or too long critical legal theorists have put forward primarily academic critiques of the academy—critiques that further extend the authority of the academy while they attempt to delegitimate the academy... they remain highly limited without elaboration of their implications in the public sphere of intellectual exchange."[30] Like West's comments about Foucauldian postmodern academics, those who challenge the will to truth in law schools often do so within the confines of the academy. They hope that training people to think critically about the law in new ways that are mindful of oppressive practices and cultural bias will result in a changed world, but it is at most only a hopeful action, not concrete *praxis*.

---

[26] West, *Keeping Faith*, 81.

[27] Ibid., 82.

[28] Ibid., 83.

[29] Ibid., 100.

[30] Ibid., 204.

Keeping West's ultimate objective in mind, it is easy to observe West's main tension with Foucault and Foucauldians. West wants a theory that will help lead particular people (African-Americans) to perform particular actions (vote for Barack Obama) in order to gain particular goals (black liberation). Foucault is skeptical of these kinds of theory. From a Westian point of view, Foucault is aloof concerning the true power of his own theory. It seems that there should be nothing stopping Foucault from offering solutions to problems. Perhaps what West finds unnerving about Foucault is that Foucault will take up an actual problem that actually affects society, analyze it in great detail, and then walk away, theoretically satisfied. For West, satisfaction should only come when the problem is solved, not when it is theoretically "understood." After all, as Dewey reminds us, a problem correctly posed is a problem half-solved. Since Foucault's method of problematization works so well when it comes to posing the real problems, why walk away from solving them?

It is important to note that Dewey's view of pragmatism as the study of the intelligibility of practices is playing a role here. For West, theory should "prove" the practices of resistance against white supremacy that everyday black people are performing. Foucault, West would allege, downplays resistance, which in turn might suggest that those practices are not theoretically significant. Insofar as West seeks to theoretically support such practices, Foucault is a powerful yet insufficient resource for prophetic pragmatism. West sees himself as taking the Foucauldian method to its fullest potential by coupling it to the quotidian battles for decency and dignity: in short, the plight of people of African descent in the United States. We might say that prophetic pragmatism is an extension of Foucauldian philosophy that fuses Foucault's methodology with liberation theology in order to create the theoretical underpinning for the vigilant resistance to white supremacy in all of its forms. The goal is to tell those who are fighting for freedom that the fight is itself justified and, from the liberation theological perspective, sanctioned by God's will.

Foucault and Practices of Freedom

In the spirit of fairness, Foucault is not suggesting that one cannot strive to be agents for change or be politically active: his own life would contradict such a claim. However, Foucault's concerns about polemics, repression, and liberation are worth taking seriously. Foucault is making a very subtle distinction, one that I worry is missed by many who read Foucault's work, including West (but West is definitely not alone in this regard). In this section, we will look at Foucault's take on polemics, repression/oppression, and liberation.

In his interview with Paul Rabinow, "Polemics, Politics, and Problematizations," Foucault worries that our current state of political discourse "defines alliances, recruits partisans, unites interests or opinions, represents a party; it establishes the other as an enemy, an upholder of opposed interests against which one must fight until the moment this enemy is defeated and either surrenders or disappears."[31] One finds polemics on all sides of the issue, which leads to political gridlock or the prevalent multiple split-screen discussions on news networks with everyone fighting for their position but no one communicating. This model of

---

[31] Michel Foucault, *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth. Essential Works of Foucault 1954-1984, vol. 1*, ed. Paul Rabinow (New York: New Press, 1994), 112.

discourse limits the possibilities for new ideas and new ways of thinking. Foucault wants to avoid polemics, because political interests contaminate the pursuit of knowledge. He tells Rabinow that he "never tried to analyze anything whatsoever from the point of view of politics, but always to ask politics what it had to say about the problems with which it was confronted."[32] In other words, Foucauldian analysis is not done "in order to reject all possible solutions except for the one valid one."[33] Foucault is not interested in "proving" any particular point of view to be the correct one. Once his analysis is done, anyone may take his findings and make better-informed moves. But no particular group "gains more ammunition" from Foucault's writings. So Foucault is not against the political use of his work if all involved understand that he is not endorsing any given position. He is interested in *problematization*, the analysis of the elements that form a given situation. From that situation, a whole myriad of solutions can be proffered.

Foucault ends the interview with a great definition of archaeology as the history of systems of thought that bolsters his claim that his task was not to pick sides but to show the conditions of the possibility of the sides themselves:

> To one single set of difficulties, several responses can be made. And most of the time different responses actually are proposed. But what must be understood is what makes them simultaneously possible: it is the point in which their simultaneity is rooted; it is the soil that can nourish them all in their diversity and sometimes in spite of their contradictions... the work of a history of thought would be to rediscover at the root of these diverse solutions the general form of problematization that has made them possible—even in their very opposition.[34]

Perhaps those who critique Foucault for not being sufficiently political are simply wishing that Foucault took sides (preferably *their* side) within his problematizations. Foucault is not as quick to discredit "oppositional" positions since the actual positions are less interesting than the battlefield on which the battle is taking place. This is why the distinction between "true" and "false" are uninteresting for Foucault; the more interesting question is what is the "truth" that undergirds all classification of propositions into true ones or false ones. There are many possible solutions to any problematization, and it is not Foucault's task to rank them. Others can rank them; in doing so, they simply show which side of the battle they are on. West would rank solutions based on how effective they were for bringing about black liberation since that is what he is trying to do.

Foucault's method of problematization is indeed a hard sell to those who feel the forces of power directly affect their lives in the form of oppression and humiliation. Foucault's answer is an unsatisfactory one to those who have defined themselves in terms of struggle. As Mark David Woods writes, "[t]he victims of racism, sexism, and exploitation would not get very far in their struggle to rid the world of these social ills on the basis of Foucault's concept of power... Foucault's theory of power loses its capacity to explain who uses power against

---

[32] Ibid., 115.
[33] Ibid., 114.
[34] Ibid., 118.

whom and for what."[35]   There are people in the world who consider themselves "oppressed." Would Foucault not suggest that they fight for liberation?

Foucault is very clear that he is not against overcoming oppression. In the interview "The Ethics of the Concern for Self as a Practice of Freedom," Foucault defines philosophy as "that which calls into question domination at every level and in every form in which it exists, whether political, economic, sexual, institutional, or what have you."[36] Foucault reminds us that the problem lies in the fact that we want to equate power with domination, an equivocation that should not be applied to his analysis. When Foucault claims that power is everywhere, he is not saying that everyone is in a state of domination. He states that "[t]he idea that power is a system of domination that controls everything and leaves no room for freedom cannot be attributed to me."[37] Foucault is indeed a post-Nietzschean Kantian: freedom is everything. One could even say that freedom, not power, is Foucault's main interest.

In light of this, Foucault differentiates between *practices of freedom* and *processes of liberation*. Practices of freedom are often called "practices of the self" in Foucault's work. These are the practices undertaken by individuals and groups to form themselves into persons. These persons are not identical to the Cartesian and phenomenological notions of subjectivity; they are works of art that one makes out of one's self. The later works and lectures of Foucault focus on these practices. A *state of domination* occurs when practices of freedom "do not exist or exist only unilaterally or are extremely constrained and limited."[38] In those cases, liberation is needed, and Foucault is completely in favor of liberation against domination.

That noted, Foucault wants us to only use the language of liberation in the context of domination. Most of what is called "liberation" actually isn't; it is more properly classified as "resistance." But resistance is a sign of freedom and power, not domination. When Foucault says that resistance is part of the power relation, he is therefore not absorbing oppression into domination, but rather proving the freedom possible in resistance. Foucault clarifies this point in the interview:

> [I]n order for power relations to come into play, there must be at least a certain degree of freedom on both sides... in power relations there is necessarily the possibility of resistance because if there were no possibility of resistance... there would be no power relations at all. This being the general form, I refuse to reply to the question I am sometimes asked: "But if power is everywhere, there is no freedom." I answer that if there are relations of power in every social field, this is because there is freedom everywhere.[39]

Foucault's point is that resistance is itself a practice of freedom. The ability to resist "oppressive" powers is the proof that one is not totally oppressed. A true state of domination does not allow for any resistance or practice of freedom. Thus, Foucault is not suggesting that libera-

---

[35] Mark David Wood, *Cornel West and the Politics of Prophetic Pragmatism* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2000), 61. Wood goes on to argue that West compromises his earlier Marxist sentiments by strongly entertaining Foucauldian motifs.

[36] Foucault, *Ethics*, 300.

[37] Ibid., 293.

[38] Ibid., 283.

[39] Ibid., 292.

tion is not needed or that it is impossible; he is simply making a careful distinction between oppression and domination.

A Foucauldian must be skeptical of claims of oppression if it seems clear that what those who claim to be oppressed mean is that there are obstacles in the way of their will to power. That is the case for everyone; power cannot operate without resistance. Therefore everyone has a law, another person, or historical circumstances that get in the way of their will to power. That is not oppression. Some people have had "larger" historical obstacles in their way than others; some have even experienced states of domination. But Foucault is quite clear that liberation from states of domination is insufficient; practices of freedom are then necessary: "this practice of liberation is not in itself sufficient to define the practices of freedom that will still be needed if this people, this society, and these individuals are to be able to define admissible and acceptable forms of existence or political society."[40] Since everyone needs practices of freedom, Foucault puts more emphasis on them than on processes of liberation, which are the conditions for the possibility of one exercising practices of freedom.

Therefore it would be a mistake to claim that Foucault is blind to oppression and *a fortiori* to liberation. What Foucault is more interested in is resistance, and the creative practices of freedom that provide such resistance. One could say that Foucault *empowers resistance*; he assures us that resistance is a natural part of power relations and that power relations are key in the formation of selves as persons. Foucault believes that one must work at becoming a person; therefore, practices of freedom are more appealing than processes of (mere) liberation.

> I have always been somewhat suspicious of the notion of liberation, because if it is not treated with precautions and within certain limits, one runs the risk of falling back on the idea that there exists a human nature or base that, as a consequence of certain historical, economic, and social processes, has been concealed, alienated, or imprisoned in and by mechanisms of repression. According to this hypothesis, all that is required is to break these repressive deadlocks and man will be reconciled with himself, rediscover his nature or regain contact with his origin, and reestablish a full and positive relationship with himself. I think this idea should not be accepted without scrutiny.[41]

Once liberated—once one is capable of performing practices of freedom—one is to create oneself. Most advocates of "liberation" believe that one must overcome oppression and then everything will be fine. Foucault indeed wants people to be free from oppression, but the real task remains thereafter. Liberation cannot be an end in itself. Tying this into the discussion on polemics, one is not finished once one's opponent is defeated in a political race or an argument is won in a debate. Such a goal is wrong-headed, for it excludes not only the truth about discursive formations and power relations but also the task for everyone to take care of themselves and form themselves into persons.

---

[40] Ibid., 282-283.

[41] Ibid., 282.

A Foucauldian Response to West

West is so committed to liberation theology (whether he wants to acknowledge it or not) that he underplays practices of freedom. Or does he? One of the things I like most in West is his account of black prophetic practices: preaching, powerful praying, dancing, and music. African-Americans had to create themselves virtually out of nothing. In slavery, blacks were in a state of domination, yet there was just enough freedom for slaves to create songs about emancipation and final retribution on the day of judgment. Blacks created a whole cuisine out of scraps and their own dialect of the English language.

After emancipation, yet still limited in freedom due to Jim Crow, African-Americans developed even more practices of freedom that served as resistance to white supremacy. Jazz, blues, and soul music are West's favorite examples. West praises black music precisely insofar as it provides "freedom from unfreedom."[42] The black ability to convert misery into joy through music is nothing short of freedom. This "jazz freedom," West tells us, is "open to the whole world if they're willing to want to learn how to be free—really free—in their hearts and minds and souls. Nothing like it in the world."[43] Black music also serves a critical function for West. Not only does black music inject African-American sensibilities into European musical forms, it also injects itself into discourse proper, allowing African-American sensibilities crack into Eurocentric understandings of our bodies and aesthetic possibilities. West claims that black music inserted a "blue note" into American culture:

> the blue note that black people injected into human history: a note of *defiance* that calls into
> question the unjustified suffering, a note of *dissonance* that shatters the superficial harmony,
> a note of *dignity* that allows us [African-Americans] to dig deep into the depths of our souls
> and call into question the attacks on our beauty, our intelligence, our moral capacity.[44]

Even hip-hop music, the most recent formulation of this blue note, serves as a practice of freedom and resistance. Hip-hop critiques the police state found in inner-city ghettos and housing projects. Although West worries that hip-hop's materialist representations of success and often-misogynist lyrics lead to black nihilism, it is nonetheless part of what he calls "the struggle for freedom," or what we would call practices of freedom.

In *Democracy Matters*, West uses black culture as a model for resistance against the terrorist attacks of 9/11. He discusses the 1955 murder of Emmett Till by white supremacists (who West calls "American terrorists") and how his mother held an open-casket funeral with Emmett's mangled body for everyone to see. At the funeral, Till's mother says "I don't have a minute to hate. I'll pursue justice for the rest of my life."[45] West believes that this would have been a better response than the one given by the Bush administration:

> Since 9/11 we have experienced the niggerization of America, and as we struggle against the
> imperialistic arrogance of the us-versus-them, revenge-driven policies of the Bush admini-

---

[42] Cornel West, "Jazz Freedom," *Street Knowledge* (Audio CD, 2004).

[43] Ibid.

[44] Cornel West, "The Finale," *Sketches of My Culture* (Audio CD, 2001), emphasis (accentuation) his.

[45] Cornel West, *Democracy Matters: Winning the Fight Against Imperialism* (New York: Penguin, 2004), 21.

stration, we as a blues nation must learn from a blues people how to keep alive our deep democratic energies in dark times rather than resort to the tempting and easier response of militarism and authoritarianism.[46]

Of course West is being polemical here, but his point is otherwise exact: Americans can adopt African-American responses to the violence that had been done to them. African-Americans have already worked out the peaceful practices of freedom that provide resistance to terrorist uses of power.

It turns out that African Americans have created quite a few practices of freedom, constantly defying the alleged "domination" of white supremacy. I believe that a closer dialogue between West and Foucault becomes possible once those practices take center stage, instead of focusing solely on the forces of power that create oppressive states of affairs. This is where Foucault's turn to ethics becomes useful. A future analysis would connect African American cultural practices to the technologies of the self practiced by the Stoics and Cynics. West's accounts of revolutionary Christianity and subversive hope are the most likely points of comparison. Since West does not move from genealogy to ethics, he cannot get past the polemical view of power and turn to Foucault's account of freedom, a freedom that African Americans have mastered over the centuries, even in spite of oppression and perhaps because of it.

In conclusion, if West's only objection to Foucault is that Foucault does not leave sufficient room for liberation, a Foucauldian can simply respond by pointing out that Foucault indeed leaves room for liberation and, additionally, West's "libratory" prophetic practices are better classified as practices of freedom. If one is willing to drop the oppression-liberation model of thought, then West and Foucault become closer to each other as mutually strong post-Marxist possibilities.[47]

Brad Elliott Stone
Department of Philosophy
Loyola Marymount University
1 LMU Drive, Suite 3600
Los Angeles, CA 90045
USA

---

[46] Ibid.

[47] I thank Colin Koopman and an anonymous reviewer for their insights and comments in response to a draft of this essay.