

The Notion of Experience in the *History of Sexuality*: political and educational implications

Santiago Pich¹

¹Universidade Federal de Santa Catarina (UFSC), Florianópolis/SC – Brazil

ABSTRACT – The Notion of Experience in the *History of Sexuality*: political and educational implications. This essay deals with the problem of experience in the third period of Michel Foucault's work, taking as its main source the first three volumes of the *History of Sexuality*. It analyses the place of experience as a structuring category of the work, and of the French intellectual's thinking, showing the constitutively political character of this elaboration and possible developments to conceive human education. Experience is conceived as a way of relating to oneself that implies the transformation of oneself, based on a slow artisanal elaboration of one's own existence, based on the relationship with the Other, which makes it possible to conceive human education from the ethical-aesthetic-political constitution of the subject in this relationship.

Keywords: Experience. Politics. Ethics. Human Education. Michel Foucault.

RESUMO – A Noção de Experiência na *História da Sexualidade*: implicações políticas e formativas. O artigo trata do problema da experiência no terceiro domínio da obra de Michel Foucault, tomando como principal fonte os três primeiros volumes da *História da sexualidade*. Nele, analisa-se o lugar da experiência como uma categoria estruturante da obra e do pensar do intelectual francês, mostrando o caráter constitutivamente político dessa elaboração e os desdobramentos possíveis para pensar a formação humana. A experiência é concebida como um modo de relação consigo que implica a transformação de si a partir de uma lenta elaboração artesanal da própria existência, que se dá sempre na relação com o Outro, o que possibilita conceber a formação humana a partir da constituição ética-estética-política do sujeito nessa relação.

Palavras-chave: Experiência. Política. Ética. Formação Humana. Michel Foucault.

Introduction

The attempt to be contemporary at the present time confronts us with the radicality of our condition as political subjects, for being beings of language; that is, what opens us up to politics is language. The current nonsense in this field (of politics) leads us to face the ways in which the word enters this game and to glimpse other possibilities of saying, which open us up to new ethical perspectives, or, perhaps, help us to recover our condition of ontological interpenetration of ethics and politics. We affirm this because, for thinkers like Giorgio Agamben (2009) (which we endorse), being contemporary presupposes, paradoxically, not to coincide with the time in which we live, not to be captured by the lights of the present.

It is in this direction that we understand the idea of philosophy in Michel Foucault. For the author there are two great traditions in Western modernity in the field of philosophy; both have their central reference in the Prussian philosopher Immanuel Kant: philosophy as a way of questioning the legitimacy of historical ways of knowing and philosophy as historical-critical practice (Foucault, 1995). The first has as its object the problem of the formal conditions of access to knowledge and is represented by logic and epistemology. The second founded a way of making philosophy that has its primary goal in the critical attitude and takes place in a historical-philosophical practice based on that attitude, whose central question is: “what am I, then, that belong to this humanity, perhaps to this margin, to this moment, to this moment of humanity that is subjected to the power of truth in general, and of truths in particular?” (Foucault, 1995, p. 12, our translation). The radical question of philosophy or intellectual doing, in these terms, is rooted in an ontological questioning about the present and, particularly, about the relationship with the present and its truths, without this resulting, as we affirmed with Agamben, being fused with them.

We must not forget that this problem is situated, as Butler (2013) recalls, in the political questioning that Foucault poses, namely: how can we not be governed? How can we not be governed in this way, by these laws, by these subjects? This attitude is what Foucault will call a *voluntary indocility*, evoking, in the opposite sense, Étienne de La Boétie and his voluntary servitude, as well as referring to his own concept of *Discipline and Punish* and the well known idea of disciplinary power as a producer of politically docile and economically productive bodies (Foucault, 1987). The question for the present is, therefore, constitutively political, putting the notions of criticism and experience in relation (Lemke, 2017); and it is so to the extent that the subjects who question the present do so in the sense of assuming a critical attitude in relation to the mode of government to which they are subject, leading to the creation of other possible modes of government. We agree with the Spanish philosopher Joaquín Fortanet when he states that “The place from which Foucault seems to speak, and claims to be heard, could perhaps be sketched in the assembly of the concept of experience, language and

critical thinking that is realized, for the first time, in his texts of literary criticism” (Fortanet, 2008, p. 25).

We understand that the point highlighted by Fortanet (2008) is crucial as an interpretive key for Foucault’s late thinking – produced in the late 1970s and 1980s and called by Deleuze *being-with-oneself* (Deleuze, 1992). We say this because the problem of resistance is not only linked to the opposition to the prevailing mode of government, but, in the same way and in an emblematic way, to the creation of other forms of communal life, forms that are anchored in an ethical commitment to life that is lived and inscribed in the becoming of contingency; as such, it is unrelated to a necessary and universal law of history. The life that is lived and produced in common, whose shape is always becoming, also allows us to think of human education in a different way, because it is based primarily on the idea that the constitution of subjectivity has as its foundation the ethical-aesthetic-political dimension.

At the moment when the French thinker is concerned with the practices of the self, produced in the context of classical Greece and in Greek-Roman Hellenism, an understanding of subjectivity will emerge which, when referenced in the idea of Greek exemplarity, has no *a-priori* reference for its production, but takes place in the permanent practice of itself, based on the relationship with the Other¹ and with things, based on the ethical commitment to the word and the life we live. Foucault draws attention to the idea that experimenting is this becoming-other-of-oneself, which brings into play the relations between knowledge, government and subjectivity (Foucault, 2016). This understanding involves, for us, a powerful set of tools that allows us to think about this moment in his work from the perspective of experience and its political and educational implications. We chose to focus on the first three volumes of the *History of Sexuality* because we understand that, in this work, the concept of experience operates as a vector of Michel Foucault’s thought, particularly his method.

Initial remarks on the concept of experience

The concept of experience has been a guiding category in the Western tradition of thought and has constituted a full semantic field. According to Jay (2009), these theoretical constructions would be guided by two major premises, situated as vectors of production of meaning around the category: on the one hand, the relationship between experience and language; on the other hand, the relationship between experience, subjectivity and eventalization or contingency. The first problem, that is, questioning the extent to which the experience would be accessible or not to the word, is guided by a double possibility, namely: a) the experience would be something to be carried out, but not communicable, being, therefore, an element radically subjective; and, on the other hand, b) the experience would be communicable, but in singular ways of using language.

The first understanding, presumes the word as a barrier corresponding to a necessary loss of experience, since it would be constitutively unspeakable. The words would presuppose an always unsuccessful attempt to apprehend what happened in the experience. Experience and life, according to this understanding, would be a potentiality situated in the horizon of happening and resistant to being captured by the word, which, in turn, would undertake again and again a vain effort to apprehend them.

The second position, which we approach here, starts from a different understanding. It moves away from the notion that science is a way to speak experience, because science presupposes accuracy (radically opposite to experience) but admits that the word is a medium that needs singular forms of production in order to be able to be spoke and passed on. Here, the word would be a constitutive dimension of the experience, a necessary condition for its emergence.

That said, the question here is: which is/are the mode(s) of production of the word that include(s) the possibility of experimenting? Language appears here as an ambivalent dimension, both of possibility and of the concretization of the becoming of the experience (mainly in the field of art or, better, of the artistic or artisanal relationship with the word), as well as in the experience that may be impossible to do (notably in science). In short, in this position, the word does not contain a substance in itself, regardless of its use, but is ontologically conditioned by the way it is produced in different historical contexts, a condition that will make it possible – or not – to experience (something).

The second problem, the relationship between event and experience, confronts us with the question of whether or not experience emerges from the sphere of predictability and calculability – both with regard to what can be structured to cause it to happen – and how the consequences of the experience in the production of subjectivity. In this case, we would also have two options. The first of these would be to think of experience as something from the sphere of eventalization, of contingency in its radicality; here, experience cannot be planned, nor can its effects on the constitution of subjectivity be foreseen. In this perspective, the experience could only be anchored in the subjective movement that did not contain a set of a priori techniques or modes of action and that could enable its emergence. Thus, only the individual or a group could operate something in the order of the radically contingent; this situation seems best illustrated in artistic creation, which does not contain rules to be followed, but rather elaborated in the artistic production process itself. The second option assumes that the experience would be somewhat ambivalent, with a set of rules and techniques that, based on a subject's commitment to the truth and life, would make the experience possible. However, such a set would not provide any predictability of the result of this experience, precisely because it presupposes a radical opening of the subject to becoming, therefore, without any a priori identity model as a safe haven. In both cases, one postulates the notion that experience is a way of relating the subject to life, presupposing a

being-affected-of-subject in his being as a subject, which supposes his transformation. The subject of experience never has a mapped destiny, and is always at risk.

Our understanding of Foucault's late work, analysed here, makes use of the two elements previously mentioned: a) the idea of the word as a condition for the possibility of access to the experience based on singular ways of relating to it; and b) the notion that experience presupposes a radical transformation of itself without any guarantee or safe haven, but that includes a set of rules that make it possible.

Experience: introductory comments and its presence in the *History of Sexuality*

The concept of experience in the work of Michel Foucault has been little explored, with a more expressive presence in studies on literature (O'Leary, 2008). We cannot make conclusive statements about the reasons that lead to this interpretative framework of the work, but we see the previous reading as a limit on the understanding of the Foucauldian theoretical project. On the contrary, we understand that experience plays a central role in the work of the French thinker, particularly in the 1960s in the writings dedicated to literature, but also from the mid-1970s and in the 1980s (Jay, 2009, Fortanet, 2012). The *History of Sexuality* project is a landmark in this trajectory. In these different moments, the concept gains new outlines, ranging from the idea of the experience of desubjectivation in literary writing, through the technical concept of correlation between knowledge, normativity of behaviors and constitution of the subject's ways of being and ways of subjectivation, up to experience as a transformation of the self (Jay, 2009), the latter being the elaboration that we will discuss here.

It is worth remembering that, at the end of the 1970s, we see the emerge of a new elaboration of the concept of experience, which includes central elements to the problem that is the object of the present work. We largely see Foucault's second mode of elaboration of the category from the end of the '70s (from 1976 onwards, more precisely) in interviews with Duccio Trombadori in 1978 (Jay, 2009), in the first three volumes of the series *History of Sexuality* (although the last two are more relevant in terms of conceptual elaboration) and in the courses taught at the *Collège de France* between 1981 and 1984. These materials, however, do not have a singular understanding of the concept of experience, but instead mix two complementary constructions that share a single structuring principle: the transforming nature of experience. Such conceptualizations are structured around two nuclei of meaning: on the one hand, the transforming character of the subject's being, which is not given spontaneously, but methodically through a way of being, the result of constant and methodical work on oneself, guided by a relationship of ethical implication of the subject with the truth, which always happens in the relationship with the Other; and, on the other hand, the concept of philosophy and the role of the intellectual linked to it: not

a *professional* activity of a technical-instrumental character, but something that produces in it a *way of life*; philosophy here is never solipsist, but it comes from an ethical-political commitment to the present world.

In the interviews he gave in 1978 to the communist newspaper *L'Unità*, directed by Duccio Trombadori, Foucault mobilizes the category of experience to shape the way he conceives intellectual work (Foucault, 2009). Here we emphasized that in 1978 t he was already in a mature stage of his academic career and had won a highly relevant place in the international scenario of philosophy and the humanities (he had become a member of the Collège de France in 1970). In this sense, the interviews can be considered as a space for reflection on his own intellectual trajectory and the way it was produced.

In order to better situate the understanding of the concept explained at that moment, it is worth presenting some conceptual elaborations that he had developed in a conference *What is critique?*, given in the same year. Our author, in order to situate his conception of philosophy, identifies Immanuel Kant as the creator of the two hegemonic philosophical traditions of modernity: the critical tradition and the tradition based on epistemology and logic. The first finds its place of emergency in the text *What is enlightenment?* and the second in Kantian criticisms, particularly *The Critique of Pure Reason*. In the first tradition, philosophy would have as its first task to develop an *ontology of the present*. The second tradition, on the other hand, is guided by a formal and external relationship with knowledge, based on the concern with a logical path in the production of truth. Foucault inscribes many thinkers in the first tradition, including Max Weber, the intellectuals of the Frankfurt School, and himself. In this way, he conceives the task of philosophy as a way of permanently interrogating the present that it inhabits – though these questions would not be the exclusive realm of philosophy. In addition, it is important to underline that he is concerned with defining his understanding of critique: he conceives it as an attitude, that is, as a way of questioning a social reality in order to to problematize the way in which which it is governed, advancing in questions about limits and forms and by which subjects one wants to be governed (Foucault, 1995). Therefore, the problem of critique entails the commitment of those involved in the problematization and elaboration of the power relations in which they are located. This is a fundamentally political issue. Therefore, thinking means problematizing the present in which we live, based on an attitude that is constitutively political (Lemke, 2017); it allows us to conceive human education as an ongoing process, situated in the plane of eventalization, because it is guided by the primacy of the relationship and the subject's ethical-political commitment to the world s/he inhabits.

In the interviews he gave to Trombadori, Foucault says that he always wrote *experience-books*. With this, he wants to present his relationship with intellectual work, which presupposes the ethical-political commitment of those who think with the object of intellectual activity. To think and write means to think and produce oneself. An experience-

book supposes the author becoming other to h/erself, a transformation of the subject's own being, in the act of writing. For Foucault, it would only make sense to write a book if he became someone different in relation to the object of the research after the investigative process (Foucault, 2009). In this elaboration, in the mature phase of Foucault's intellectual trajectory, experience is considered as a principle that guides his intellectual project itself; it is therefore, a key concept in the development of his *oeuvre*.

At this moment, it is worth highlighting the centrality of language in accessing experience: language articulates life or, better, makes it alive, because it is inscribed in life as the locus of the production of experience. When conceiving intellectual work in this way, experience also opens up as a conceptual tool of great relevance for us to think about the relationship with language in education. For Foucault, writing is an act of self-production: before any relationship with an object of knowledge to be thought, the author must embody a singular way of relating to language, aiming to overcome the (always unsuccessful) representational and instrumental character of language. This attitude situates the subject himself as a being of language, someone constituted by and in it.

In a later interview with with American philosophers at the University of California at Berkeley, Foucault recovers the notion of experience in his concept of philosophy and the philosopher. He states that "[...] one must have a demanding, prudent, 'experimental' attitude; one must at every moment, step by step, confront what is thought and what is said with what is done and what is" (Foucault, 2004a, p. 219). He later concludes: "The key to a philosopher's personal political attitude should not be sought in his ideals, as if he could deduce them, but in his philosophy as a way of life, in his philosophical life, in his *ethos*" (Foucault, 2004a, p. 219). Again, we see the inseparability between experience and reflexivity; in this way, to experience oneself is to take oneself as an object of reflection and production, based on a artisanal elaboration of thought as a way of life. The life one lives is the sounding board of the truth and always takes place in the relationship with the Other.

Another element that we want to draw attention to before entering the debate on the *History of Sexuality* is the diagnosis of modernity that Michel Foucault makes in *Hermeneutics of the Subject* (Course 1981-1982 at Collège de France). We consider this issue fundamental to our argument. For the French thinker, modernity would be a historical period in which *spirituality* – in the manner in which it took place in classical antiquity and, particularly, in Greco-Latin antiquity – would no longer be possible. Therefore, Foucault excavates antiquity from a concern with the present, without intending to find any *way out*, but as a way to find other possible ways of producing subjectivity.

Spirituality is conceived by Foucault as a way of relating the subject to truth that in a double symmetrical movement: on the one hand, the subject's ethical commitment to the stated truth and, on the other hand, the transformation of the subject's being by this ethical relation-

ship with the truth, an *etopoiesis* (Foucault, 2004b). Foucault describes this movement with the word *experience* (Foucault, 2004b; 2016). He contends that spirituality and experience would no longer be possible in modernity, because the modern subject is *capable* of truth, but the truth of which it is capable does not *save* the subject (Foucault, 2004b). Thus, the conceptual pair subject/truth remains accessible only to subjects linked to the artistic field and to revolutionary movements (although this thesis is not developed in the author's writings). In addition, he says that care of the self and the experience inherent to it are fundamental conditions for thinking about a new form of politics. In the first passage of the course, when presenting the problem of *The Hermeneutics of the Subject*, he states that he would like to place the problem of the relationship between the true saying and the subject's governance in a context prior to Christianity. Here, the problem of experience would be central, not only to understand the question in Greco-Roman antiquity, but also to problematize the Western subject.

[...] it is possible that in these many efforts to reconstruct an ethics of the self, in this series of more or less watertight efforts, fixed in themselves, in this movement that leads us, at the same time, to refer incessantly to this ethics of the without, however, ever providing any content, it is possible to suspect that there is a certain impossibility of constituting an ethic of the self today, when perhaps this is an urgent, fundamental, politically indispensable task, if it is true that, after all, there is no other point, first and last, of resistance to political power if not in the relation to oneself (Foucault, 2004b, p. 306).

We see that the Foucauldian excavation of subjectivity in classical and Greco-Roman antiquity is guided by an eminently political concern based on a question (and an irrefutable appeal) for creation of other modes of government at the present time. Certainly, human education is called upon to be part of this process of constituting the ethical-political subject, which allows us to question the way of producing the form of school and the education system in late modernity, in addition to the place (or its impossibility) of a relationship of ethical commitment to the word.

After going through the anteroom of the concept of experience in Foucauldian thought, let us now move on to the discussion of the concept in the first three volumes of the *History of Sexuality*.

Michel Foucault's greatest theoretical project is, we all know, the *History of Sexuality*. The reading that we propose here is that the concept of experience is a fundamental vector of this project. Still, we realize that, throughout the elaboration process, the concept is modified from the archeology explored by the author, standing between a technical notion and an idea: the *etopoietic* production of subjectivity, a stylistics of existence. We contend that experience conceived as the production of the self as a work of art, or an *etopoietics* of subjectivity, appears and leads the investigative movement throughout the course of the three

volumes analyzed here, and not only in volumes 2 and 3 of this project (mainly of volume 2), as Jay (2009) and Fortanet (2008) suggest. We contend that Foucault makes use of the category as a guiding vector for the entire series and that it is precisely the displacement of meaning in the category of experience that leads him to modify this thought through the 1980s to create an interpretive horizon of the mode of relation of the self in classical antiquity and in the schools of Greek-Roman Hellenism.

The experience in *The Will to Know*

To understand the analytical movement using the category of experience in the first volume – *The will to know* – we must first refer to the second volume – *The use of pleasures* –, where Foucault performs a methodological retrospective on his project. Commenting on his initial intention, the author tells us:

In short, it was a matter of seeing how, in modern Western societies, such an *experience* is constituted, that individuals are led to recognize themselves as subjects of a 'sexuality' that opens up to quite different fields of knowledge, and that articulates with a system of rules and coercions. The project was, therefore, that of *a history of sexuality as an experience* – if we understand by experience the correlation, in a culture, between fields of knowledge, types of normativity and forms of subjectivity (Foucault, 1984, p. 10, emphasis added).

In the above passage, we see an explicit concept of experience conceived as an articulating element between knowledge, normativity and subjectivity. The author says that in experience, "individuals are led to recognize themselves", that is, subjects are governed through the orientation of the other (who acts as the spiritual confessor once did), so that subjects start to assume the truth of the emerging *scientia sexualis* as their own and to be guided by the normativity of sexual life defined by it. This process thus subjects subjects to a normatized way of living, a process that constitutes a political agency of life (Foucault, 1985a), an agency for which the emergence of the sexuality device was of fundamental importance because it established the idea of *sex* as an object. This elaboration is embodied in the production of the hysterical woman, the need to pedagogize infantile sexuality, avoiding the risks of the onanism of the masturbating child, the psychiatric pathologization of perverse pleasure and the socialization of procreation expressed in *coitus interruptus* of the Malthusian couple.

It is also important to point out that unlike in the tradition guided by psychoanalysis – which, according to Foucault, substantiates the desiring subject and historicizes various culturally produced repressions – he starts from the premise of historicizing the subject of desire in order to understand the emergent conditions that made it possible for western man to be recognized as a subject of desire. Therefore, it is a question of desubstantializing the dimension of the desiring being in order

to situate it as a problem inscribed in the becoming of history (Foucault, 1984). This understanding is guided by a category coined by Foucault in the early 1980s: technologies of the self (Foucault, 2008). Concerned with the ways in which subjects are complicit in the processes of subjectification that make them what they are, he proposes that in Western history several technologies of power were developed that led subjects to assume for themselves truths that emerged in different spheres of social life, like religion and science, and to be produced from the implication and subjection to these truths, in a heteronormative logic. This matrix of subjectivation was born with the privileged locus of the Christian pastorate and underwent a process of secularization in modern science. Thus, subjects are led to recognize themselves from categories created by modern institutions and based on several domains of modern knowledge: at school, we are led to recognize ourselves as good or bad students; within the scope of biomedical institutions, as obese, hypertensive, diabetic or *normal subjects*. These categories serve as the ideal of modern biomedicine. Foucault also applies this concept to Hellenism and the care of the self, in the discussion of subjectivation processes guided by the relationship between subjectivity, ethics and freedom. Thus, when introducing this category, Foucault operates a shift in his analytics, problematizing the subject in the production of his own being – always historical – and therefore serves as a technical concept, both to problematize modes of subjectification guided by heteronormativity and through subjection, as if to think about processes based on self-creation as a stylistics of existence.

Despite recognizing the central presence of the concept of experience along the lines presented above, we Foucault is already developing another elaboration of the concept: the notion of experience as a transformation of the self. The problem appears, apparently in a timid way, in the first volume, although it is already noted that this idea is an important, let us say fundamental, vector of the project.

When presenting the object of the first volume (*The will to know*), the author chooses to follow a mode of definition by contrast (as, indeed, it is a usual practice in Foucault), placing as opposites what he understands to be the two great ways of producing the truth of sex. Foucault contrasts a *scientia sexualis* with an *ars erotica*. The first is a unique and exclusive expression of Western modernity and guided by the truth-game of science; the second was an expression of ancient societies that produced a way of relating to sexuality not given in science, but in an artisanal way. We highlight the opposition between science and art because the first presupposes universal and necessary rules that detach themselves from the subject to impose themselves as truth while the second presupposes a subject's singular commitment to the object (sexuality), where s/he also acts on himself and gives h/erself form, transforming h/erself into a subject being. In this way, in the register of *ars erotica*, "[...] the truth is extracted from pleasure itself, seen as a practice and collected as an experience" (Foucault, 1985a, p. 57). If we look at this tripod – truth-pleasure, self-practice and experience – we can al-

ready see the movement of production of subjectivity that will be the ground of Foucault's archeology in the 1980s. The relationship with the truth given in pleasure, and not in its negation, puts us in another place to think about the subject's relationship with the truth; it is no longer situated in the place of representational discovery, but in mutual implication. The practice of self also leads us to understand that the truth is always practice; in addition, a new self is produced from the experience. Furthermore, Foucault points out the importance of the master's relationship with the disciple and indicates that the production process of what he would later call a *stylistics of existence* in the ancients, was a present concern and situated, albeit in an embryonic way, along the lines of that would be developed in the following decade. Directing the analysis toward the problem that concerns us here, if we understand the idea of collecting as an experience in the sense of thinking the effects that such art can have on the subject (as we suggested above), we will arrive at the understanding that these effects materialize in the transfiguration of the being of the subject, composing a formative process based on authenticity. In this way, experience is constituted in the effects of putting oneself at risk in *ars erotica*. Let's see what the author tells us:

The effects of this masterful art, far more generous than the aridity of its recipes would suppose, must transform the one on whom its privileges fall: absolute dominance of the body, exceptional enjoyment, forgetting time and limits, elixir of long life, exile of death and its threats (Foucault, 1985a, p. 57).

We thus see that the problem of experience as a transformation of the self, the being of the subject, is already set as a vector that has guided the production of the theoretical project of the *History of Sexuality* since its beginning, and that the ancient idea of *ars erotica* in the ancients already occupied Foucault.

Here it is also worth noting that Foucault makes it clear that sexuality, even in modernity, can never be fully captured through the institutions that operate the normalization of modern sexuality, notably psychiatry and psychoanalysis. There are always lines of flight, a rest, the power of life. Therefore, in the modern period, even marked by the regulatory and normalizing action of social institutions, sexuality is still a possible ground for experience.

The problem of experience in *The use of pleasures*

First, a preamble to our argument about the concept of experience in volume 2 of the series, *The use of pleasures*. In the entry on Michel Foucault in the *Dictionnaire des philosophes* published in 1984 but written in the early 1980s, we already see the central role of the concept of experience. Signed under the pseudonym Maurice Florence, the text explains the direct relationship between subjectivity, experience, and truth in his ongoing project: "It is, in short, the history of 'subjectivity', if we understand this word as the way in which the subject experiences

himself in a real game in which he relates to himself” (Foucault, 2004a, p. 236). It is important to point out that the concept of experience is situated as the equivalent of *relating* to the self, that is, it assumes here the place of the specific, singular and historical way in which the subject, when relating to the self, is produced. Subsequently, the author adds that the idea of subjectivity as an experience of oneself does not pose itself as an absolute negation of the subject’s existence, but demands “[...] to show the processes proper to an experience in which the subject and the object ‘are formed and transformed” (Foucault, 2004a, p. 236). That is, the notion of experience presupposes a reflexive relationship between the subject and himself based on the relationship with the object whose horizon is the transformation of the self, which is based on a singular way of relating to the word, with the truth. When assuming an ethical-aesthetic-political commitment to the truth, the subject’s form of education moves from a relationship of exteriority and of an instrumental nature to situate itself as a permanent and reflective practice of the self. With this introduction, let us move on to volume two.

The second volume of the series was published eight years after the first, in 1984, at which time Foucault was entirely dedicated to the study of classical antiquity: especially Greek and Roman Hellenism. In this volume, *scientia sexualis* is no longer the terrain of the archeology, but *aphrodisia*, conceived as an ethical substance of the ancient *ars erotica*. By choosing the name *aphrodisia* and not the word *pleasures*, he insists on the non-transitivity of the concepts. Although it is a work on sexuality, the objects of Greek sexuality cannot be subsumed to those of modern sexual science; the lexical framework of ancient *ars erotica* does not allow a transitive relationship with the concepts of the modern *scientia sexualis*.

Foucault insists that his study of sexuality is unique because of the methodological shifts developed in the re-elaboration of the initial object; he states that he chose to “[...] study the real games in the relationship to oneself and the self as a subject, taking as a reference space and field of research what could be called the ‘history of the man of desire” (Foucault, 1984, p. 11). In this shift, the concept of experience itself also changes, as it opens up a space for the reflexivity in relation to oneself, because it must give way to thinking and thinking oneself, being situated in the games of the true and the false and not in the field of knowledge.

A history that would not be that of what could be true in knowledge, but an analysis of the ‘games of truth’, of the games between the true and the false through which *the being is historically constituted as an experience, that is, as being able and should be considered* (Foucault, 1984, p. 12, emphasis added).

We see in the citation above a central theoretical postulate for Foucault’s work, at least since the late 1970s: the triad of being, experience and thought (and the game between the true and the false inher-

ent to it). He expresses a historical ontology in which being occurs in experience, conceived as the different forms – always contingent because they are situated on the horizon of historicity – of the subject’s thinking. Clearly, language occupies a central place in this elaboration, insofar as thinking takes place in language, the home of truth-games. This movement will lead him to the fundamental problem of his intellectual project: “Through what games of truth did a human being recognize himself as a man of desire?” (Foucault, 1984, p. 12).

Foucault’s concept of experience has a double face and contains an ambivalence we need to address. While he defines the object based on the relationship between being, experience and truth-games, he is also concerned with defining the condition of the thinker and the concept of philosophy based on the notion of experience. Recovering the ideas already presented since the late 1970s, the author reaffirms that the only relevant curiosity is that which allows those who think “to separate themselves from themselves” (Foucault, 1984, p. 13). When asked about the concept of philosophy, Foucault affirms: “But what is philosophizing today – I mean philosophical activity – if not the critical work of thought on thought itself?” (Foucault, 1984, p. 13). Therefore, when assuming this concept, the author commits himself to what he thinks and does, involves his way of thinking and living in his own intellectual work, which cannot be conceived as something with which a technical-instrumental relationship is maintained.

Foucault links the appearance of this concept to his study of classical and Greek-Latin antiquity, already underway in the 1970s. It is good to remember that one of the main authors to which Foucault refers is Pierre Hadot, whose studies on antiquity and the schools of Hellenism were of fundamental importance in the Foucauldian intellectual project of the 1980s. Hadot recovered the idea of philosophy as a way of life in the ancients. His studies played an important role in French intellectual life since the early 1970s; his work *Spiritual Exercises*, which is referred by Foucault, dates from 1977. Since that decade, the problem of revising the concept of philosophy seems to be a concern present in Foucault’s work. Resuming the modern tradition of the essay and placing himself in the wake of the concept of philosophy as a way of life, he states:

The ‘essay’ – which is necessary to understand as *a self-modifying experience in the game of truth*, and not as a simplifying appropriation of others for communication purposes – is the living body of philosophy, if at least it is still what it was today in the past, that is, an ‘asceticism’, an exercise of the self, in thought (Foucault, 1984, p. 13, emphasis added).

Again, we see, in parallel, the place of experience as a modification of oneself in and by thought. For Foucault, thinking presupposes a critical practice of oneself that aims at the self-transformation of the

one who thinks, an exercise on oneself. He uses language of folds, so we understand the concept of experience is a Möebius strip, which in this moment of Foucault's work includes a double and inseparable face: the production of the moral subject as experience and the self-transformation of the one who thinks. We conceive of this principle as being of fundamental importance for thinking about human education, because it opens us up to an ongoing, unfinished and contingent process.

It is worth noting that the French thinker operates with the idea that morality is not the imposition of a socially given code on the individual, but the singular relationship that the subject establishes with the set of norms established by the social order to which he belongs. Foucault tells us:

[...] 'moral' also means the real behavior of individuals in relation to the rules and values that are proposed to them: the way in which they submit, more or less completely, to a principle of conduct; by which they obey or resist an interdiction or a prescription; by which they respect or neglect a set of values; the study of this aspect of morality must determine how, and with what margins of variation or transgression, individuals or groups conduct themselves in reference to a prescriptive system that is explicitly or implicitly given in their culture, and of which they have a more or less clear conscience (Foucault, 1984, p. 26).

Therefore, the concept of defended morality is ambivalent: it can lead to subjection but also to resistance, since it implies the subject and/or the group as instances that not only *suffer* the code but need to incorporate the code. This incorporation opens scope for criticism. In a complement to this definition, as if constituting a conceptual pair, our author will propose the historical existence of two types of morals: the morals *oriented towards the code* and those *oriented towards ethics*. The first ones are guided by a rigorous and exhaustive detail of the codes of conduct to be observed, by an institutional order that fulfills the role of control and inculcator of the code and applies the appropriate sanctions, in case it is not followed fully. They are legalized codes, based on social institutions, which guarantee their introjection and privilege the structural dimension of the social order. Evidently, this type of code limits the scope of action for the constitution of oneself as a moral subject: the space to carry out experience (along the lines that we are exposing) clearly remains almost nil. We suspect that, for Foucault, modern Western society is a clear example of the social order in which this type of code prevails. *Ethics-oriented* morals, on the other hand, are centered on the dimension of "forms of subjectivation and the practices of the self" (Foucault, 1984, p. 30). In this case, the codification is not exhaustive, but is centered on a set of *rules of existence* from which the subject elaborates a singular relationship to oneself and with the Other. Following the author, "[...] the emphasis is, then, on the forms of relationships with oneself, the procedures and techniques by which they are developed, the exercises by which the subject himself gives himself as an object to know, and *the practices to transform their own*

way of being" (Foucault, 1984, p. 30, emphasis added). We see that in this type of morality the problem is placed on the production of the subject as a moral subject, for which experience is a necessary condition. The Foucauldian interpretation is that in some schools of classical antiquity and Greco-Roman Hellenism this second type of morality would have been predominant. Finally, it should be noted that both types of morals are not exclusive, and can be opposed, coexist, and even join. It would not be correct, therefore, to confuse the different regimes of morality with social orders, but to think that in different social orders different moral regimes coexist, albeit with substantive differences in their importance and their location in those same social orders².

Foucault did not wish to use the experience of the schools of Greek-Roman Hellenism as a horizon to reference human education in the present. His thought invites us to think subjectivity as openness to other modes of subjectivation. Such an opening is not given, but it needs to be enhanced by the specific social and institutional conditions in which the production of subjectivity is always emerging, in this case, based on the idea of a singular production, shaped by an aesthetic and *etopoietic* dimensions related to the rules of existence.

Experience in *The Care of the Self*

The main difference between volumes two and three of the *History of Sexuality* is the historical period in which they are located. While *The Use of Pleasures* is situated in the classical period of Greece, *The Care of the Self* is concerned with the first two centuries of the Roman Empire, while addressing similar themes. However, we also see different methodological accents: in the second volume there is a genealogical presentation of the project while care of the self structures in the third volume in a detailed and precise way, with the traditional conceptual rigor of Foucault's books. It is precisely in this elaboration of the concept that the problem of experience appears in the third volume: it resumes the debate about the relationship to oneself that presupposes the transformation of oneself.

In discussing the concept of individualism, our author presents three conceptual elaborations: as an absolute value of the individual, as an appreciation of private life, and as an intensity of relations to oneself. The last is what matters to Foucault, defining it as the "[...] ways in which one is called to take oneself as an object of knowledge and a field of action to transform, correct, purify oneself, and promote the own salvation" (Foucault, 1985b, p. 48). In Foucault's analysis, in some sectors or institutions of classical and Greco-Latin antiquity, what stands out is an intense relationship to oneself directed at the transformation of the subject's being, his salvation. This salvation must be understood from the notion of exemplarity, that is, the immortalization of the subject based on the production of an existence so virtuous that it is inscribed in the historical memory of the *polis*.

We must underline that this way of elaborating a stylistics of existence cannot in any way be confused with a retreat to individuality without commitment to social and political life; it is not a solipsist enclosure of the individual. The production of subjectivity demands an Other as a condition of its possibility; the education of the self implies a relationship of someone who already knows how to take care of h/erself, who helps another to learn to take care of oneself, a relationship that, over time, can be mutually transmuted. In the following words, we find a precise presentation of this idea:

When, in the exercise of the care of the self, an appeal is made to another, who guesses that he has the ability to drive and to advise, a right is used; and it is a duty that is fulfilled when helping someone else or when receiving with gratitude the lessons that he can give (Foucault, 1985b, p. 58)³.

The care of the self has as its object the production of an ethics of self-sovereignty. However, it is important to note that this ethics is not based exclusively on prohibition; on the contrary, its foundation is pleasure. The state to be reached is not conceived as a relationship of repression to the body or a rational possession over passions. What is at stake is a slow rational elaboration of the relationship between body and soul, which makes it possible to govern oneself based on the pleasure that one has of oneself. Without ceasing to have a primacy of the soul as an object of care, the body gains a privileged status in the care of itself, establishing an exchange relationship with the soul. In this way, self-sovereignty ethics presupposes a stylistic of existence that takes oneself as an object of care, but with pleasure as an object to be elaborated:

[...] the experience of the self that is formed in this possession [of oneself] is not simply a dominated force, or a sovereignty exercised over a force about to revolt; it is a pleasure you have with yourself. Someone who has finally managed to have access to himself is an object of pleasure for oneself. Not only is one satisfied with what one is and accepted to limit oneself to it, but also to 'please' with oneself (Foucault, 1985b, p. 70-71).

We pause for a moment to note the fundamental relationship between experience and reflexivity. Reflexivity does not presuppose a rational and external relationship with an object of knowledge, but a reflexive relation to oneself, guided by an ethical-aesthetic rationality, a way of being of reason that includes pleasure as a matter of elaboration, as an ethical substance. We understand that here an excellent problem opens up for us to think about Foucault's way of relating to this issue, because, as we understand it, it is not a question of denying reason, but of thinking it beyond the subject of consciousness, situating pleasure as a substance from which it is constituted. Pleasure that can never be thought of in solipsistic terms (because then there would be no pleasure, which presupposes an Other); it is reached by the laborious mold-

ing of oneself, which results in the domination of oneself, and which takes place in the relationship with the Other, a rationality based on the ethical-aesthetic dimension, which is always being, in its radical contingency and historicity.

When thinking about education based on this idea, we conceive that the Foucauldian proposal presents us with a rich horizon to reflect on another form of rationality in the process of subjectivation, one founded on an ethical-aesthetic dimension. We understand this movement as experience, which allows other elements to come into play when conceiving the educational process. Here we highlight one element: the relationship between body, pleasure, and thought. We understand this triad as a clue to a possible becoming of a formative conception radically different from the one that prevails in the contemporary education system. Pleasure does not imply an unbridled surrender to the delights of the body, but a slow elaboration of self-control, which results from the inseparability of thinking and the body. Thinking is radically immanent and contingent – and therefore historical. In addition, it invites us to understand thought not as the capture and apprehension of a knowable object, but as a way of the subject's presence in the relationship to oneself, and of opening to the Other and the world.

Final remarks

Following the path of experience in the third part of Foucault's work allows us to glimpse the power of the category of experience in Michel Foucault's intellectual and life project. Far from being a peripheral or marginal concept, we understand that the concept of experience as central, umbilically related to the problem of politics.

We should underline that the question of experience is strongly linked to the creation of a unique way of relating to life. Subjectivity can only emerge from a meticulous work in the relationship to oneself, in which words and rules of existence are selected and incorporated in an artisanal way, to compose a way of life guided by excellence and exemplarity, to produce life itself as a work of art. It should also be noted that the analytical movement carried out by Foucault in relation to the ancients was not only a distant, external gaze, but also involved the transformation of those who think about the act of writing: the researcher must experience oneself. The act of writing and transforming oneself – this act that experience presupposes – is constitutively political and not an escape to interiority, not a capitulation before the social or collective world.

We understand that the *History of Sexuality* was, from the beginning, guided by the vector of experience. Right from the start, in the will to know, we observe the idea, still in a germinal state, of experience as a singular way of relating the subject to himself, which allows to transcend the dimension of subjectivity of the modern *scientia sexualis*. In the following volumes, *The Use of Pleasures* and *The Care of the Self*, the idea of experience as a transformation of oneself is consolidated and

deepened, which takes place in a laborious and artisanal permanent practice of oneself, based on a singular relationship with words and moral rules.

The problem of experience allows us to open up new ways of thinking about education. It opens up another horizon to think about the subject's relationship with language, a relationship in which the subject gives himself and produces himself. At the same time that being a subject of language places one in the condition of openness to the Other, it invites us to think of language and experience as elements that make up the subject's ethical-aesthetic-political formation. Language and experience, thus conceived, confront us with the challenge of displacing the problem of rationality, to anchor it in the life that is always lived with the Other, and that is rooted and materialized in the body in its radical immanence, contingency and historicity.

The experience of oneself presupposes a return to oneself, to distance from oneself to return to oneself. To experience oneself is to come back to oneself in a different way, because the self is already affected by the rules of existence that have been incorporated, that have become body; it is to always have oneself in another way, because the idea that passes through the body transforms it into multiple becoming⁴.

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Notes

- 1 We chose to write the word Other in this work with a capital letter, to refer to the intersubjective relations that are constituted from the production of difference, in its radicality. The Other is thus conceived from the perspective of Otherness. In this way, the Other is the one to which the subject refers and with which the subject relates, without subsuming him to the condition of a normalized subjectivity. The notion of Otherness has its reference in the English-speaking concept of Otherness.
- 2 It is interesting to point out about *The use of pleasures* that the structure of the book and the chapters that compose it are organized based on the four axes of the experience of sexuality, according to the analysis that our author had made of aphrodisia in antiquity, namely: relationship with the body, the relationship with the wife, the relationship with the boys and the relationship with the truth (Foucault, 1984, p. 31). We can say, therefore, that the work in its entirety has the anchor and structuring point in the notion of experience.
- 3 It is important to point out that Foucault will refer to the concept of psychagogy, in contrast to that of pedagogy, to think about human formation in the context of Greco-Latin antiquity. However, this debate is beyond the scope of this essay (Freitas, 2013).
- 4 Educação & Realidade informs that the publication of this study was partially financed by the Coordenação de Aperfeiçoamento de Pessoal de Nível Superior - Brasil (CAPES) - Finance Code 001".

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Santiago Pich possui graduação em Educação Física pelo Instituto Del Profesorado en Educación Física e mestrado em Ciência do Movimento Humano pela Universidade Federal de Santa Maria. Doutorado no Programa de Pós-Graduação Interdisciplinar em Ciências Humanas da Universidade Federal de Santa Catarina (UFSC). Pós-Doutorado na Universidade de Barcelona (UB). É Professor do EED/CED/UFSC. Atua com pesquisas que discu-

tem a relação entre linguagem, corpo e formação humana.

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8064-1320>

E-mail: santiagopich@gmail.com

Editor-in-charge: Fabiana de Amorim Marcello

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