

# Power, Freedom and Obedience in Foucault and La Boétie: Voluntary Servitude as the Problem of Government

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## Abstract

I investigate the contemporary problem of obedience through an exploration of Michel Foucault and Étienne de La Boétie, showing how the former drew on the latter's concept of voluntary servitude as a way of thinking through the paradoxical relationship between power, freedom and subjectivity. My argument is that Foucault's theory of government as the 'conduct of conduct' may be understood as a reflection on the question of voluntary servitude. My aim here is twofold. First, it is to show that obedience is an ethical and political problem just as relevant today as it was in La Boétie's time. Secondly, it is to suggest that voluntary servitude should be interpreted in an emancipatory way, as a problematic that reveals the ontological primacy of freedom and the fragility and instability of power. 'Voluntary inservitude' is something that can be expressed in acts of civil disobedience, and alternate modes of ethical conduct and association.

## Keywords

Foucault, freedom, government, La Boétie, voluntary servitude

The phenomenon of obedience to power and authority has long been a concern of sociology and social theory. Although Weber (2004) defined the state in terms of a monopoly on violence, he was more interested in why people came to recognize its legitimacy.<sup>1</sup> Studies of fascism and totalitarianism in the 20th century drew attention to an 'authoritarian personality' – characterized by conservative attitudes and patriarchal beliefs – where the desire to dominate was only the flip-side of the

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desire to *be* dominated (see Adorno, 1950; Reich, 1946). However, the problem of obedience has become more ambiguous in late modern post-industrial societies, where the breaking down of traditional structures of authority – of the family, religious and political institutions and hierarchically organized businesses and workplaces (see Boltanski and Chiapello, 2018) – seems to coincide with ever greater levels of obedience and docility. Our masters today, in the age of contemporary networked capitalism, are amorphous and obscure. Who, or what, precisely do we obey today? Is it politicians and elected officials, whose symbolic legitimacy has been dwindling for some time? Or is it, ultimately, *ourselves*, trapped, as philosopher Byung-Chul Han (2015) puts it, inside the ‘digital panopticon’ where our narcissistic desire for recognition in the opaque mirror of social media means we voluntarily submit to the gaze of everyone else and obliterate our own privacy and autonomy?

In this paper I want to investigate the problem of voluntary servitude as a way of grasping this subjective threshold upon which freedom and government coincide. I will do this through an exploration of Michel Foucault and Étienne de La Boétie, two figures not often considered together, showing how the former drew, albeit in an oblique way, on the latter’s concept of voluntary servitude as a way of thinking through the paradoxical relationship between power, freedom and subjectivity. My argument is that Foucault’s theory of government as the ‘conduct of conduct’ – which he developed in the mid-late 1970s and pursued into the 1980s in his investigations of ethical conduct and practices of self-government – can best be understood as a reflection on the question of voluntary servitude. Voluntary servitude, a concept first proposed in the 16th century by La Boétie, refers to the free abandonment of one’s own freedom and the voluntary submission to power. The desire for one’s own domination was, for La Boétie, and for many others in his wake, one of the central mysteries of political power. Power did not rely primarily, if at all, on violence or coercion, but rather on people’s willing complicity with it. The question arising here is *why* people obey, even when it is often against their own interests to do so.

My aim here is twofold. First, it is to show that voluntary servitude is an ethical and political problem just as relevant today as it was when it was first diagnosed by La Boétie in the 16th century in his classic text *Discourse on Voluntary Servitude*. Secondly, it is to suggest that voluntary servitude can and should be interpreted in an emancipatory way, as a problematic that reveals the ontological primacy of freedom and the fragility and instability of power. The other side of voluntary servitude is what Foucault referred to as ‘voluntary *inservitude*’ or the will to be free, something that can be expressed in different ways, from acts of resistance and civil disobedience to alternate modes of ethical conduct and association.

My argument proceeds in four stages. First, I investigate the question of freedom in Foucault’s thinking, suggesting that there is a certain

unresolved ambiguity in his understanding of the relationship between freedom, power and subjectivity. Secondly, I seek to clarify this through a discussion of Foucault's concept of critique, which is central to his notion of government and to practices of resistance to power. Here I focus on a crucial text from 1978, 'What is Critique?', which, I suggest, has as its background La Boétie's concept of voluntary servitude. I then turn my attention to La Boétie, exploring his thesis about why people submit to tyrannical power, and drawing parallels here with Foucault's notion of subjectification (*assujettissement*). I propose that La Boétie's theory of *servitude volontaire* is a useful way of deciphering this concept and sheds further light on Foucault's understanding of how power interacts with the subject. Finally, I offer an emancipatory reading of voluntary servitude, seeing in it not only a way of grasping the functioning of power – whether this is the power embodied in the classical figure of tyranny or in contemporary forms of biopolitical, neoliberal and communicative power – but also an ethical guide to resistance and disobedience.

## The Problem of Freedom in Foucault

What place did freedom have in Foucault's thought? If power is 'everywhere', if it is coextensive with all social relations, if it is to be found in everyday interactions between individuals, then what room is left for freedom? How can spaces for freedom be reconciled with the ubiquity of power relations, with the apparent omnipresence of disciplinary constraints and biopolitical control, with forms of power/knowledge that construct individuals as subjects and with governmental rationalities aimed at normalizing behaviour? Foucault sees freedom as a kind of 'game' played with power, as a series of strategic moves that can take place within certain limits set by power. However, if this is the case, it would seem to offer only limited, bounded opportunities for freedom. Freedom, and the possibilities of resistance, would appear to be produced by, or at least realized through, the operation of power itself and are therefore always constrained by it.

The charge often made by Foucault's critics was that he left no ground, whether ontological or normative, for an understanding of freedom uncontaminated by power (see Fraser, 1989; Taylor, 1984; Walzer, 1986). This suspicion was further compounded by Foucault's claim that one could never get beyond power; there would always be power relations because power was coextensive with any form of social organization. Revolutions and liberation struggles would therefore not solve the problem of power (see Foucault, 2000a). All that could be hoped for was a relaxing of constraints, a modification or reconfiguration of power relations. Therefore, freedom could not be conceived of as a stable situation; it is not something that can be achieved in a complete form.

One can never say with any confidence that one now lives in a 'free society'. For Foucault this would simply be another regime of power imposed in the name of freedom. Therefore, as Foucault's critics asked, if resistance to power merely exchanged one form of domination, one set of power relations with another, then why bother fighting for freedom? Foucault's apparent pessimism about emancipation would seem to have removed any inducement to seek it at all.

While many of these criticisms were misplaced, they nevertheless reflect a certain unresolved ambiguity surrounding the place and significance of freedom in Foucault's thought. While, I would argue, Foucault was deeply concerned with freedom and with expanding its limits and possibilities, it is often unclear how this concept should be understood. Obviously, freedom could not be thought of as the absence of limit or constraint (i.e. negative freedom). If we take the idea that freedom is only intelligible and realizable through its relation to power, then the notion of 'freedom from' power simply has no meaning for Foucault. Freedom and power are not polar opposites and do not exist in a zero-sum game, such that the absence of one is the condition for the presence of the other (see also Han, 2019). Rather, power and freedom have to be seen as existing in a relationship of mutual incitement and provocation, an agonistic game of strategies and wills, where each opposes the other but is also the condition for the other's existence (Foucault, 2002: 326–48). Freedom is not a property, not an object one can strive after and finally possess. Rather, freedom must be constantly put to the test and made to confront the forms of power that both limit and constitute it.

For Foucault, then, freedom and power presuppose one another. Power can only be exercised over a subject to whom is available a certain range of actions and choices, a field of possibilities that power seeks to limit, direct and control (Foucault, 2002: 341). Therefore, rather than seeing power as a top-down relationship of domination, or as involving coercion or violence, the operation of power is better thought of as 'conducting', or leading and directing, the behaviour of others: the 'conduct of conduct' (Foucault, 2002: 341). This notion of power as the largely non-violent and non-coercive shaping of the actions of individuals is central to Foucault's idea of 'government'. Government is a strategic rationality aimed at the conduct of behaviour on both an individual and collective level. Foucault traces the genealogy of government back to early ideas of the Christian pastorate and monastic practices of obedience, but it became increasingly coextensive with broader society and was incorporated into the structures, calculations and practices of the modern state (Foucault, 2002: 334).

In governing the behaviour of individuals in this way, in turning individuals into subjects through the direction of their freedom, the state may be understood as an 'apparatus', indeed one of many apparatuses in operation today. Following on from Foucault's allusions to this term,

Agamben defines an apparatus as ‘literally anything that has in some way the capacity to capture, orient, determine, intercept, model, control, or secure the gestures, behaviours, opinions, or discourses of living beings’ (Agamben, 2009: 14). Of course, we could apply this to social media and internet communication technologies, to say nothing of smart phones and apps that track our movements, monitor our health and measure our performance. Such devices, technologies and platforms manage a much more effective, sophisticated and all-encompassing government of behaviour than the modern state could ever dream of. Yet, the main point to be made here is that these apparatuses rely at the same time on a certain freedom on the part of the subjects, even, and especially, the freedom to renounce freedom and allow oneself to be captured. Apparatuses create subjects who assume their subjectivity *as free subjects* in the process of their own de-subjectification. Agamben characterizes our contemporary condition as one of generalized submission to apparatuses:

the most docile and cowardly social body that has ever existed in human history...the harmless citizen of postindustrial democracies...readily does everything that he is asked to do, inasmuch as he leaves his everyday gestures and his health, his amusements and his occupations, his diet and his desires, to be commanded and controlled in the smallest detail by apparatuses. (Agamben, 2009: 22–3)

In order to properly grasp the precise nature of the relationship between the subject, power and freedom, and indeed the functioning of modern governmental apparatuses, we must therefore come to terms with this phenomenon. The question of why people freely bind themselves to power, why they allow themselves to be subjectified by power and why, at other times, they resist this subjectification is a question that both Foucault and La Boétie are concerned with.

### **‘Critique Will Be the Art of Voluntary Inservitude’**

To explore some of the parallels between Foucault and La Boétie (see also Schachter, 2016), I turn to a lecture that Foucault gave at the Sorbonne in May 1978 called ‘What is Critique?’ Here Foucault sought to explore the emergence in Western thought, dating roughly from the 15th and 16th centuries (crucially we should note that this is the time in which La Boétie was writing), of a certain ‘critical attitude’ that could be seen as a response to the governmentalization of Western European societies during this period. The art of governing, central to the Christian pastorate and which, during the Middle Ages, had been confined largely to religious and monastic institutions, now becomes the

general rationality of society, intervening in matters of family, social, economic and political life. As Foucault says, the fundamental question that presents itself during this period is *how to govern* (1996: 384).

The Christian pastorate, which formed the basis of modern governmental rationality, is characterized by a relationship of obedience. As Foucault says:

Christian obedience, the sheep's obedience to his pastor, is therefore a complete obedience of one individual to another individual. What's more, the person who obeys, the person who is subject to the order, is called the *subditus*, literally, he who is dedicated, given to someone else, and who is entirely at their disposition and subject to their will. It is a relationship of complete servitude. (Foucault, 2007: 177)

What is cherished in this relationship is obedience as the absence or relinquishment of willpower, particularly of the will over oneself.

However, as Foucault shows, such pastoral relations of obedience are always accompanied by the possibility of disobedience. The religious heresies of the Middle Ages, for instance, disrupted the governing power of the Church through the promulgation of divergent, dissonant ideas, doctrines and ways of life. Amongst these, ascetism is perhaps the most important: it is a discipline to which one subjects oneself so that one cannot be so easily mastered by others, and it is therefore the very opposite of obedience. Here Foucault's notion of 'counter-conducts' becomes important. If governing pastoral power is the power to conduct the actions, lives and souls of others in the interest of their salvation, then counter-conducts are practices and ways of life that resist this governing power, that refuse the ways in which one is conducted by others.

It is precisely the spirit of disobedience that re-emerges in the 15th and 16th centuries in response to the explosion of governmental practices and discourses. Thus, alongside the question of how to govern arises the opposing question of 'how not to be governed' (Foucault, 1996: 384). Foucault argues that this impulse to not be governed informs the critical spirit of Kant's *Aufklärung* or Enlightenment, seen as mankind's escape from a state of immaturity, in which one is governed heteronymously, into adulthood as the condition of autonomy. Later this same impulse will find its way into a critique of the excesses of rationalization itself, associated with the excesses of state power; here Foucault is referring primarily to the Hegelian left, Weber and the Frankfurt School.

However, it is in the spirit of this heterodox reading of the Enlightenment that Foucault seeks to initiate what he calls a 'historico-philosophical' mode of enquiry. It proposes a historicization of ideas, which makes possible a critical reflection upon the legitimacy of modern forms of knowledge and truth regimes. This is through what Foucault



terms their 'eventialization' [*événementialisation*] (1996: 393), a way of unmasking the relationship between power and knowledge, of revealing the multiple coercions involved in a system of knowledge and a regime of truth becoming hegemonic. Yet, the question raised here is not so much how a system of knowledge and power is forced upon us but, rather, why and under what conditions does it become acceptable to us? Why do we come to regard as legitimate a mode of power/knowledge that prescribes an identity for us, or imposes upon us norms of behaviour or a certain truth of desire? What must be explored, in other words, is the mechanism by which we voluntarily bind and subject ourselves to a specific form of power through our internalization of its regime of truth.

Because these regimes of truth can only become dominant through our free acceptance of them, this means that their emergence is contingent rather than inevitable, and thus subject to rupture, reversal and destabilization – or at least to an ongoing questioning of their legitimacy. As Foucault (1996: 395) says: 'Bringing out the conditions of acceptability of a system and following the lines of rupture that mark its emergence are two correlative operations'. In other words, it is precisely because we freely subject ourselves to these regimes of power/knowledge/truth that they can, at the same time, be thought otherwise and undone. All apparatuses of power are therefore haunted by the possibility of their own disappearance. Power is an *event* rather than a transcendental, ahistorical essence – and all events can be reversed, superseded and transformed. Critique is therefore the practice of interrogating the limits of power, drawing attention to power's impermanence and contingency, and thus to its possible illegitimacy. In this sense, it seeks to de-mystify power. In focusing on the *how*, rather than the *what*, of power – on how power works, what its effects are – Foucault sought to show that power did not actually exist as such, that it had no single, unified identity or essence (2002: 336–7). As I will argue, La Boétie, in a slightly different way, was making precisely the same point.

Therefore, the implication of Foucault's analysis is that freedom is the ontological basis of power. In other words, if power depends at some level on the subject's free consent – on the will to obey – then this means that the overturning of power relations is also a matter of will, the will to be free, the will to disobey and to resist the various ways we have been subjectified. Here Foucault refers to a '*decisive will to not be governed*':

If governmentalization is really this movement concerned with subjugating individuals in the very reality of a social practice by mechanisms of power that appeal to a truth, I will say that critique is the movement through which the subject gives itself the right to question truth concerning its power effects and to question power about its discourses of truth. *Critique will be the art of voluntary*

*inservitude, of reflective indocility.* (Foucault, 1996: 386, emphasis added)

## La Boétie and the Problem of Voluntary Servitude

Yet, to grasp the significance of this idea of *voluntary inservitude*, we need to understand more precisely the problem of voluntary servitude itself. This requires an investigation of Étienne de La Boétie and his famous text, *Discours de la Servitude Volontaire*. La Boétie was a French writer and poet in the humanist tradition, confidant and friend of Montaigne, and later a member of the Parlement of Bordeaux. His essay on voluntary servitude, written around 1549, thereafter had a complex and ambiguous history, being circulated by Huguenots and monarchomachs who used it as propaganda in their struggle against the French crown. It has been seen as a call to resistance against unjust tyrannical rule, and has had a major influence on the ideas of political dissent and civil disobedience (see Bleiker, 2000) and on the anarchist tradition (see Kinna, 2019; Newman, 2016). La Boétie is an important figure for French social theory, included amongst thinkers like Marcel Gauchet, Claude Lefort and Pierre Clastres (see Moyn, 2005). Moreover, the concept of voluntary servitude has been utilized in studies not only of political domination under totalitarian systems (see Lefort, 2007) but also of the Silicon Valley ideology (see Vion-Dury, 2016), as well as the sociology of the modern workplace (see Chaiznot, 2012).

In the *Discourse*, La Boétie (1975: 42) asks one very simple question:

For the present I should like to understand how it happens that so many men, so many villages, so many cities, so many nations, sometimes suffer under a single tyrant who has no other power than the power they give him; who is able to harm them only to the extent to which they have the willingness to bear with him; who could do them absolutely no injury unless they preferred to put up with him rather than contradict him.

According to La Boétie, our obedience to the tyrant is not coerced but freely given. We willingly submit to his authority and allow him to abuse us. We voluntarily abandon our own freedom and render it up to this one figure who comes to dominate us. The power the tyrant wields over us is only the power we freely endow him with. This phenomenon cannot be explained by cowardice: in the situation thus described, the people outnumber the solitary figure of the tyrant to such an extent that cowardice cannot account for their submission. They could easily overpower him if they chose, but do not do so. Instead, they voluntarily sacrifice their own freedom and choose to live as slaves: 'A people enslaves itself, cuts its



own throat, when, having the choice between being vassals and free men, it deserts its liberties and takes on the yoke, gives consent to its own misery, or, rather, apparently welcomes it' (1975: 46). Something other than cowardice must be at work here – a strange psychological mechanism, a moral sickness or vice that La Boétie is confounded by: 'What monstrous vice, then, is this which does not even deserve to be called cowardice, a vice for which no term can be found vile enough, which nature herself disavows and our tongues refuse to name?' (1975: 44). The *Discourse* thus overturns standard notions of consent that claim that it is natural and rational to obey authority; for La Boétie, voluntary consent is a genuine puzzle.

However, in La Boétie's analysis, freedom is ontologically primary; it comes before power. Freedom, and the natural bonds of companionship and equality that go along with it, is seen as a natural moral condition. Like Foucault (2003) after him, La Boétie rejects justifications of power based on social contract theory. Indeed, this whole rationalization of submission is reversed: rather than an original state of war, which compels us to seek the security of a sovereign political order, we first enjoy the freedom and equality, and the plurality and singularity, endowed by nature, and then for some reason we renounce it and have been slaves ever since. For La Boétie, people suddenly and quite voluntarily switch from freedom to servitude. Our relinquishment of freedom comes about as a result of apathy or laziness – we find it easier to obey than to resist. But, at the same time, La Boétie suggests that voluntary servitude is *active* rather than passive; it is something we continuously, even energetically and enthusiastically, participate in. Our submission is something that is renewed through our everyday behaviours and interactions: 'you make yourselves weak so that he [the tyrant] can be strong and oppress you ever more harshly' (1975: 44).

La Boétie proposes, tentatively, three possible factors that might explain this phenomenon. First, he says that people become habituated into servitude, such that they forget that they were ever free. Obedience and docility become a matter of habit (a 'habituation to subjection' as he puts it); this 'moulds us into its own shape, whatever our natural disposition' (1975: 49). This seems to resonate with Foucault's idea of the 'docile bodies' that have been trained, moulded and shaped in the disciplinary regimes of modernity. To what extent would this power be possible without the subjectification of the subject, such that he or she actively desires and willingly participates in his own disciplining and normalization?

Second, La Boétie refers to the power of spectacles:

Theatres, games, farces, spectacles, gladiators, strange beasts, medals, tableaux and other such drugs were the bait that lured ancient nations into servitude, they were the price at which freedom

was sold, they were the instruments of tyranny; they were the methods, the procedures, the allurements which ancient tyrants could use to put their people to sleep, to place them under the yoke. (1975: 58)

Third, La Boétie shows how power constructs for itself a hierarchy of relations in which the tyrant's place is sustained by intricate networks and relations of dependency. The tyrant's power lies not in coercion and violence, but rather in a complex ecosystem: those immediately surrounding the tyrant, his advisers and councilors, who in turn maintain a network of dependents, below whom are hundreds if not thousands of others, each with a place within this pyramid of power. Thus, the power of the tyrant is really based on an interlocking system of relations of fear and dependency that includes many thousands of people who are all complicit in their own domination. Our submission and obedience are assured by payoffs we receive from those immediately above us; we submit to the power of another in return for our own unhappy place in the structure of power (1975: 72).

### The Illusion of Power

How should we interpret La Boétie's theory of voluntary servitude? To some extent, his explanations for this phenomenon are inadequate. Moreover, the idea that people voluntarily surrender their power has often been interpreted in a pessimistic, even conservative and authoritarian way.<sup>2</sup> However, I would propose here a more radical and emancipatory reading of La Boétie's text, one that aligns with Foucault's critical, non-essentialist understanding of power. Indeed, the *Discourse* should be regarded as a call to freedom, as a way of rousing us from a state of servility and enfeeblement – in the same way that Foucault reads Kant's *Aufklärung* as a way of rousing humanity out of a state of immaturity. In a similar way to Foucault, La Boétie reveals the hollowness and instability at the heart of power. If, in other words, power is only sustained through our ongoing free consent, then, ultimately, power is a kind of constitutive illusion, one that we have retroactively created through our recognition of it. The power of the tyrant is only *our* power in an alienated form:

Where has he acquired enough eyes to spy upon you, if you do not provide them yourselves? How can he have so many arms to beat you with, if he does not borrow them from you? The feet that trample down your cities, where does he get them if they are not your own? How does he have any power over you except through you? How would he dare assail you if he had no cooperation from you? (1975: 48)

By unmasking this dimension of voluntary servitude as the foundation of power, La Boétie, like Foucault, aims at a de-mystification of power. To see power in this way is to strip away its abstractions and to reveal the freedom that it is founded upon.

Of course, unlike La Boétie, Foucault would not trace voluntary servitude to one obscure but fateful historical moment, to a fall from our original state of freedom; rather, there has only been self-subjection in specific ways to specific regimes of truth and power. Nevertheless, the fundamental insight is the same: that all forms of power, no matter how they are historically constituted, depend at some level on our willing acquiescence. La Boétie's text might be seen as the key that allows us to unlock the eternal mystery of power; it shows us that power cannot exist without our own subjection to it. It sheds light on the threshold of subjectification that Foucault saw as the underside of any power relationship: why does the subject allow herself to be attached to certain modes of individualization, to be judged according to certain norms, to have her actions and behaviour directed towards certain goals?

La Boétie's text thus serves to remind us of our own will: how we lost it, and how we can regain it. There is a clear connection here with Foucault's '*decisive will not to be governed*', which, for him, is the basis of all critique. The other side of voluntary servitude is therefore *voluntary inservitude*; the other side to power is freedom. The *Discourse on Voluntary Servitude* is, like Foucault's work, an ethical meditation on freedom and its possibilities.

## The Discipline of Indiscipline

In the final section, I would like to briefly explore three possible ways of understanding this notion of freedom as the release from voluntary servitude. These strategies are what I refer to as the *discipline of indiscipline*, as they involve practices of self-discipline or self-mastery, understood in both an ethical and political sense. My point here is the practice of voluntary inservitude or, simply, freedom is not a spontaneous act but rather a conscious and deliberate work on the self, a reconstitution of desires and a re-direction of the will that takes place at the level of the subject.

First, and most obviously, we can understand voluntary inservitude in terms of acts of civil disobedience. La Boétie's thesis has been influential in the tradition of non-violent resistance and civil disobedience. La Boétie urges peaceful resistance to the power of the tyrant. Indeed, the *Discourse* can be read as an ethical guide to disobedience. Disobedience need not take the form of a violent uprising but is rather an individual and collective act of self-emancipation in which people turn their backs on the tyrant, refuse to recognize his power over them and instead empower themselves. La Boétie says that if we want to free ourselves

from the power of the tyrant, all we need do is take back our power – that is, to stop empowering him, to stop giving ourselves over to him. If we no longer recognize the authority of the tyrant, and instead recognize our own power, then the spell of power is broken and the tyrant falls of his own accord. It is merely a matter of volition, of ‘willing to be free’: ‘Resolve to serve no more, and you are at once freed. I do not ask that you place hands upon the tyrant to topple him over, but simply that you support him no longer; then you will behold him, like a great Colossus whose pedestal has been pulled away, fall of his own weight and break into pieces’ (La Boétie, 1975: 48–9)

Foucault’s interest in the Iranian Revolution (1978–9), the event that forms the political background to ‘What is Critique?’, was to do with the question of the will in resisting power, particularly the will to risk one’s life for freedom. For Foucault, the will is something that positions the individual in a certain relationship to his or her own subjectivity. At times, he says, there is the will to be a slave; at other times, there is the will to be free and to risk death for freedom (Foucault, 2016: 41). These two dimensions of the will are the two sides of the same phenomenon of voluntary servitude. While this idea of dying for freedom does not really figure in La Boétie’s account, and while, furthermore, La Boétie does not deal with any of the practical implications and real costs associated with mass organized dissent, there is the same concern with the importance of reorienting the will of the subject from servitude to freedom. Recent protests and insurrections against police violence and racism that have been taking place around the world, in the midst of the pandemic, show a similar willingness to risk life for freedom, and might be seen as collective acts of voluntary inservitude.

Second, voluntary inservitude involves an ethical transformation of the self, even a form of ethical self-discipline. For Foucault, the subjectivity that power creates for us is also the material from which we can resist power and from which we can fashion for ourselves new ways of being. But this involves an ethical work conducted upon the self, a conscious practice of self-constitution. Foucault’s later interest (see Foucault, 1988, 2005, 2010) in the idea of the ‘care of the self’ in ancient Greece and Rome – referring to practices such as ‘ascesis’ (ascetism) – was to do with the ways in which individuals sought to discipline themselves, to master their own desires. The goal here was a certain form of ethical self-mastery, the attempt to govern one’s desires and instincts, to impose one’s will upon them, in the name of greater autonomy. Autonomy might be understood in two senses here. First, while these practices of self-discipline were a reflection of the cultural forms and norms that existed at the time, they were nevertheless much more autonomous, precisely because they were self-imposed, than the institutionalized (religious, psychiatric, medical) modes and practices of discipline that emerged later with the Christian pastorate and have continued,

in different forms, into modernity. Foucault sees these alternative, non-institutional processes of self-disciplining or self-fashioning as an ethical practice, which is always related to the practice of freedom (Foucault, 2000: 284).

Second, this sort of ethical self-discipline was a way of coming to terms with the problem of voluntary servitude, which is essentially the abandonment of the will. As both Foucault and La Boétie recognized, there are tendencies within us, certain desires and dependencies that make one more susceptible to the power of others. La Boétie saw voluntary servitude as a kind of weakness, a moral sickness, a wayward and inexplicable desire, born of laziness, habit, distraction or induced through the false promise of riches and favours. Practices of self-discipline are aimed at controlling such tendencies, so that one would not be so susceptible to being disciplined and governed by others. In other words, they are a way of rediscovering or reconstructing the will. As Foucault puts it: 'the concern for the self and care of the self were required for right conduct and the proper practice of freedom, in order to know oneself . . . as well as to form oneself, to surpass oneself, to master the appetites that threaten to overwhelm one' (2000: 285).

Of course, there are important differences between Foucault and La Boétie here on this question of self-constitution. Whereas La Boétie's account of the subject's submission to power is largely ahistorical, Foucault is much more concerned with the specific practices of subject-constitution that emerged in different historical periods and cultural contexts, practices and understandings of the self that cannot be universalized or essentialized, which are, indeed, untranslatable from one historical period to another. Whereas La Boétie is concerned with the universal condition of humanity – its self-enslavement and its self-emanicipation – Foucault is interested in specific historical practices of freedom and self-cultivation; for him, there is no universal subject destined for freedom. Nevertheless, the point I am trying to make in drawing a parallel between these thinkers is to emphasize the different ways in which they both come to terms with the same problem: how the will to be free, to resist domination, can form within the subject.

For Foucault, one such way of cultivating this will was through the ancient practice of *parrhesia*. This is not only because *parrhesia* was understood as a form of free and fearless speech – an ancient form of speaking truth to power – and therefore carried great personal risk, as Plato discovered when he gave unwelcome philosophical counsel to Dionysius, the tyrant of Syracuse. According to Foucault, *parrhesia* was also a form of ethical subjectivation in which, in the act of ethically committing oneself to telling the truth, regardless of the consequences, it was also a way of 'freely binding oneself to oneself, and in the form of a courageous act' (Foucault, 2010: 66, emphasis added). In other words, truth-telling brings into play the will to be free and to stake one's life on

this act – to identify absolutely with the truth of one's discourse and to bear the risks associated with it. It is thus a reversal of one's will to be a slave, to remain silent. This notion of risk is central to Foucault's idea that freedom must always be understood *agonistically*, as a testing of the limits of power, limits which are both external to the subject as well as internal, in the sense of constituting his or her desires and identity. To speak freely and fearlessly was therefore a mode of ethical self-constitution as a free subject.

Finally, the discipline of indiscipline is *associative* – it always involves ethical (and political) relations with others and is always practised in association with others. La Boétie defines tyranny as the rule of the one over the many, the antidote to which is the reaffirmation of the natural relations of equality and plurality – what Miguel Abensour (2011) refers to as the 'all ones' (*tous un*). The condition for freedom in La Boétie is a kind of shared plurality, in which singularity is preserved even in collective association with others. Here La Boétie stresses the value of friendship as the ethical counterpoint to tyranny: 'Friendship is a sacred word, a holy thing; it is never developed except between persons of character, and never takes root except through mutual respect; it flourishes not so much by kindnesses as by sincerity' (La Boétie, 1975: 77). By contrast, the tyrant is a lonely figure without friends. The only relations he has are ones based on dependency, fear and self-interest (77). Foucault (2000b) also spoke of the radical possibilities of friendship, particularly within gay communities. Friendship as a way of life shared between individuals of different ages, social status, professions and cultures could become the basis of new ethical relations, new forms of community and association, and indeed new modes of subjectivity that escape institutionalized and normalized relations and identities.<sup>3</sup>

The problem of voluntary servitude has no doubt become more complex and enigmatic under contemporary regimes of neoliberalism. Neoliberalism is a rationality and a way of life in which individuals are governed through their own freedom: freedom is the threshold upon which the subject's actions and behaviours are conducted in certain ways and directed towards certain ends specified by the market. According to Foucault, this new mode of governance penetrates into the very soul of the individual, who is remade as *homo economicus* – a free individual who has internalized the imperatives of the market and who thus becomes 'an entrepreneur of himself', permanently accountable to the market norms and social processes which produce him (Foucault, 2008: 226). We are no doubt very far here from La Boétie's antique model of tyranny, in which the structure of domination, and therefore the 'target' of resistance, is more straightforward.

However, as I have endeavoured to show, although both thinkers have different accounts of how power actually operates, their approach to the problem of government is inspired by the same question: why does the



subject *freely* internalize and thus reproduce the forms of power that constrain him; and how can this self-domination be reversed? Here both thinkers understand resistance – whether collective or individual – primarily as a kind of ethical *revolt against oneself* that brings a halt to the subject's voluntary servitude and allows the will to be reconstituted. Perhaps this is how we should interpret Foucault's proposal that: 'Maybe the target nowadays is not to discover what we are but to refuse what we are' (2002: 336).

## Conclusion

Contemporary neoliberalism – or perhaps what is more accurately referred to as authoritarian neoliberalism (see Brown, 2019) – displays two faces of power today: sovereign power and algorithmic power, the coercive power of the state and the surveillance and governing power of big data. It is my contention that both apparatuses or *dispositifs* of power can be better grasped through the problematic of voluntary servitude I have developed in this paper.

Recent debates about government measures in response to COVID-19 have reflected concerns about the problem of domination and obedience in contemporary societies. In the early days of the lockdown imposed in Italy, Agamben controversially argued that such restrictions were entirely disproportionate and excessive, constituting a sovereign state of exception that was becoming normalized: 'First and foremost, what is once again manifest is the tendency to use a state of exception as a normal paradigm for government' (Agamben, 2020). The biopolitical imperative that life be preserved at all costs led, according to Agamben, to the readiness to sacrifice basic freedoms, normal social interactions, and any sense of ethical dignity. Leaving aside the debates ensuing from these comments, which were seen to be downplaying the seriousness of the virus (see Benvenuto, 2020; Berg, 2020), Agamben, rightly in my view, points not only to the dangerous precedent set by these emergency measures which, one year on, have already become a routine feature of everyday life, but also to the way that they have been accepted and willingly complied with by a majority of citizens without any real questioning of their efficacy or legitimacy: 'Therefore, in a perverse vicious circle, the limitations of freedom imposed by governments are accepted in the name of a desire for safety that was created by the same governments that are now intervening to satisfy it' (Agamben, 2020).

There is a similar degree of complacency when it comes to new forms of biopolitical and biometric surveillance implemented or currently being proposed in response to the pandemic – from contact tracing apps to digital vaccine passports.<sup>4</sup> The acceptance of these technologies, and the degree of control they will give over our lives not only to governments but to big tech firms, is part of a more general problem of what might be

called algorithmic power – that is, the way that life in contemporary societies is governed or ‘conducted’, as Foucault would put it, through computer algorithms and data analytics, particularly on social media, that track movements, monitor interactions, online behaviours, interests and spending habits and direct individual preferences, even political preferences. This points to a new age of authoritarian capitalism, or what Shoshana Zuboff (2019) calls ‘surveillance capitalism’, unhinged from any kind of democratic control or accountability. However, as commentators like Byung Chul-Han (2015) have pointed out, this control and surveillance exercised over us, particularly on social media, is something we freely consent to and cooperate with; the digital web in which we are caught is one that we spin through our everyday interactions (see Romele et al., 2017). A similar point is made by Zygmunt Bauman who, in his consideration of the new modes of ‘liquid surveillance’ – digital and biometric technologies – argues that the tendency of power in contemporary societies has shifted from the governors to the governed, who no longer need to be coerced or mastered by some top-down force because they voluntarily give up their desire for freedom and freely participate in their own domination (Bauman and Lyon, 2013: 52–3). Foucault might consider this a kind of digital pastorate, a new way of governing people through their own freedom (see Cooper, 2020). In an age when we willingly consent, in the name of convenience, to myriad forms of digital surveillance, biometrics, and the RFID microchipping of products, credit cards, clothes and even of our own bodies (see Hayles, 2009; Metz, 2018), it would appear that the notion of voluntary servitude has lost none of its currency.

In this paper, I have proposed the idea of voluntary servitude as a theoretical framework for understanding the ethical and political problem of government. I have argued that the best way to understand freedom and its possibilities today is to start with the problem of its abandonment. In drawing together La Boétie and Foucault, and in showing how the latter’s notions of government, freedom and subjectification might be better grasped through the thinking of the former, I have sought to outline an ethics and a politics of freedom as *voluntary inservitude* – a concept that is useful for understanding acts of resistance, counter-conduct and civil disobedience through which subjectivity is reconfigured in more autonomous ways.

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## Notes

1. Weber (2004: 35) defined charismatic authority as being based on acquiescence and submission to the personality of a demagogic leader, something

people feel ‘called’ to do: ‘People do not submit to them because of any customs or statutes, but because they believe in them.’ But the question left unanswered in Weber’s analysis – which is really La Boétie’s question – is why people believe in these rulers and place themselves in thralldom to what are often unremarkable individuals; this is the voluntary act of submission that retrospectively constitutes their charisma (La Boétie, 1975: 44).

2. For a discussion of the various readings of voluntary servitude see Abensour (2011).
3. A similar point is made by Paul B. Preciado (2020), who talks about the possibilities of resistance to the biopolitical measures and technologies of control, surveillance and communication to which we have been subjected in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. There are practices of resistance and subjectification that we can learn from sexual minorities. This would involve creating new forms of collective subjectivity through global cooperation, as well as the refusal of certain technologies. Here Preciado invokes a kind of voluntary biopolitical mutation, which can be seen as a form of voluntary inservitude: ‘Just as the virus mutates, if we want to resist submission, we must also mutate. We must go from a forced mutation to a chosen mutation.’
4. The introduction of a new contact tracing app in France ignited concerns about ‘digital tyranny’ and led one MP to condemn its implementation as a form of ‘voluntary servitude’ (Marlowe, 2020).

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