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Post-liberation Feminism and Practices of Freedom

Ladelle McWhorter, University of Richmond

ABSTRACT: Most feminist theorists over the last forty years have held that a basic tenet of feminism is that women as a group are oppressed. The concept of oppression has never had a very broad meaning in liberal discourse, however, and with the rise of neo-liberalism since 1980 it has even less currency in public debate. This article argues that, while we may still believe women are oppressed, for pragmatic purposes Michel Foucault's concept of practices of freedom is a more effective way to characterize feminist theory and politics.

Keywords: Foucault, oppression, domination, resistance, analytics of power, governmentality.

Marilyn Frye begins her essay "Oppression" with this assertion: "It is the fundamental claim of feminism that women are oppressed."¹ For the purposes of this essay, I will take Frye's statement as a given: feminism holds, centrally and essentially, that women as a group are oppressed.² I will argue, however, that at the present time the basis upon which feminists urge change in oppressive practices and structures should not be women's oppression; the current political climate (in the US at least) renders claims of group oppression ineffective. Instead, I maintain, feminists need a different strategy and different conceptual tools. I will argue that Michel Foucault's work can provide some of those tools, and that we do well to conceive of feminism as transformative practices of freedom.

¹ Marilyn Frye, "Oppression," in *The Politics of Reality: Essays in Feminist Theory*, edited by Marilyn Frye (Trumansburg, NY: The Crossing Press, 1983), 1-16, 1.

² Obviously the group of women, however we might delineate it, is not homogeneous, and it is clear from Frye's various writings that she is quite aware of that fact. What is at issue in this paper is resistance as a response to oppression, wherever oppression might be found, so I will not address the controversy over who counts as a woman here. Despite the fact that Frye's essay is over thirty years old, feminist theorists still take this view. See for example Lisa Schwartzman, *Challenging Liberalism: Feminism as Political Critique* (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2006), 172: "What makes feminism distinctive, and different from both Marxism and liberalism, is its understanding of women as a group or class of persons who suffer from a particular type of oppression: male domination."

Foucault does not make much use of the term *oppression*;³ nevertheless, I believe his analytics of power (unlike accounts of power available in more traditional political theory) can accommodate Frye's claim, as well as much of the feminist analysis of women's oppression published over the last four decades. In other words, I maintain, we need not give up belief in women's oppression to adopt alternative strategies suggested by his work. Yet, there are two issues to be resolved to make way for this adoption, both of which I will address in the body of this essay.

One issue is the question of whether the concept of women's oppression can actually be accommodated within a Foucauldian framework. Many feminists have argued that Foucault's work is androcentric and even detrimental to feminist goals. I will argue, however, that there are close similarities (as well as some differences) between *oppression* as Frye defines it and *domination* as Foucault defines it, which affords a starting point for exploring feminist uses of Foucault. This analysis makes up section I. In section II, I carry the analysis further by drawing on Iris Marion Young's account of oppression, and in the third section I mark the incompatibility of these feminist accounts of oppression with a neoliberal account to show that, given neoliberalism's current ascendancy, feminist claims that women are oppressed are unlikely to gain much political traction.

In section IV, I take up a second issue, the widespread feminist use of the term *resistance* as the name of appropriate and potentially effective responses to oppression. I argue that the term *resistance* tends to hold us in the mindset of direct opposition to power, whereas it is Foucault's view that we are always formed in networks of power and cannot directly oppose them. Instead, we must work within them to counter specific effects and at the same time transform ourselves, as I discuss in section V. Effective countering and self-transformation are companion processes that may, in time, destabilize and dismantle some power networks completely, but we should not predicate our work on that goal. As Andrew Dilts has said, we must see our work as the development of ethical practices within networks of power rather than as total opposition to them.⁴ This perspective on feminist work, I conclude, is likely to lead to more effective political action to reduce women's oppression than will insisting that, because women are oppressed under current circumstances, all those with the power to do so are morally obligated join feminists to bring about change.

I. Immobilization: Frye's Oppression/Foucault's Domination

Feminists must, Marilyn Frye asserts, be clear about exactly what the word *oppression* means, especially because they face political opponents who want to use the word in ways that obscure the political phenomena being analyzed and challenged. The word *oppression* is much more powerful than for instance *discrimination*—after all, discrimination is not always negative. A person may be said to have discriminating tastes, meaning s/he has the generally positive attribute of being able to identify subtle, but real, differences in the qualities of things.

³ Foucault does use the term *oppressive* sometimes. See for example Michel Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the Collège de France 1978-1979*, translated by Graham Burchell (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 36.

⁴ Andrew Dilts, "From 'Entrepreneur of the Self' to 'Care of the Self': Neo-liberal Governmentality and Foucault's Ethics," *Foucault Studies*, no. 12 (2011), 143.

Furthermore, discrimination on the basis of sex is not illegal where males and females really do differ; if data show that males have more accidents, for example, companies can charge them more for car insurance. Applying the word *discrimination* to a situation does not automatically indicate that the situation must be changed in order to meet the demand for justice. *Oppression* does automatically imply injustice however. If those in power are persuaded that a group of people is oppressed, they are simultaneously persuaded that those people are treated unjustly, which leaves them morally obliged to act to end that injustice. *Oppression* thus has political value and moral force that other concepts do not. "We need this word, this concept," Frye claims, "and we need it to be sharp and sure."⁵ Sharpening the term is her essay's purpose.

Oppression cannot be identical with suffering, Frye maintains, nor with any and all limits to action, for obviously there are material limits on everybody's choices of action. In addition, being finite creatures, we all suffer sometimes.⁶ Instead, she characterizes oppression as a kind of immobilization. An oppressed person is surrounded (figuratively and possibly literally in some instances) by more or less impersonal barriers, and is thus prevented from moving very far in any direction without encountering opposition.

According to Frye, one telltale feature of oppressive immobilization is the repeated experience of "double binds": A given course of action brings punishment, retribution, or other negative consequences, but so does its opposite, so that one is "damned if you do, and damned if you don't." By way of example, Frye here offers the demand that members of a subordinated group present an ever-cheerful demeanor, regardless of any disrespect they may encounter:

If we comply, we signal our docility and our acquiescence in our situation. We need not, then, be taken note of. We acquiesce in being made invisible, in our occupying no space. We participate in our own erasure. On the other hand, anything but the sunniest countenance exposes us to being perceived as mean, bitter, angry or dangerous. This means, at the least, that we may be found "difficult" or unpleasant to work with, which is enough to cost one one's livelihood; at worst, being seen as mean, bitter, angry or dangerous has been known to result in rape, arrest, beating and murder. One can only choose to risk one's preferred form and rate of annihilation.⁷

Such double binds do not negate a person's freedom to act, but they do entail that every action taken involves a high risk of pain and loss. As a result, oppressed people may take actions that appear to others as (and in fact may actually be) erratic or self-destructive, or they may simply shut down and act as seldom as possible.

Sometimes the operations of oppression thus construed are easy to perceive, but very often they are not. "Consider a bird cage," Frye writes:

If you look very closely at just one wire in the cage, you cannot see the other wires. If your conception of what is before you is determined by this myopic focus, you could look at that

⁵ Frye, "Oppression," 2.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 2.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 2-3.

one wire, up and down the length of it, and be unable to see why a bird would not just fly around the wire any time it wanted to go somewhere. Furthermore, even if, one day at a time, you myopically inspected each wire, you still could not see why a bird would have trouble going past the wires to get anywhere. There is no physical property of any one wire, *nothing* that the closest scrutiny could discover, that will reveal how a bird could be inhibited or harmed by it except in the most accidental way. It is only when you step back, stop looking at the wires one by one, microscopically, and take a macroscopic view of the whole cage, that you can see why the bird does not go anywhere; and then you will see it in a moment.⁸

Unlike a concrete cell or dungeon where limits are everywhere and obvious, a birdcage is made up of more open space than barrier—each slender wire by itself looks inconsequential—hardly a barrier at all. Only together, as a system, do the wires constitute an effective container.

For Frye then, oppression is the name for a social, political, and/or economic system that operates through time to immobilize those whom it takes as its objects. We are likely to misperceive oppression or miss it altogether if we do not also look for systemic in place of immediate effects. Frye insists that we must consider whole and ongoing contexts of limitation in order to identify and fight oppression, as well as to counter racist and hetero/sexist attempts to obscure the reality of oppressive situations by focusing attention on their individual elements rather than on their systematic nature.

Frye's account of oppression can be mapped onto the account of domination that Foucault offers in his 1984 interview, "The Ethics of the Concern for Self as a Practice of Freedom." Foucault here distinguishes three levels of force relations: "strategic relations, techniques of government, and states of domination."⁹ First, at the most basic level, lie strategic relations, which are simply relations of give and take wherein people try to influence one another's actions, as might the members of a committee in deliberation or a vendor and customer haggling over a price. Next up are techniques of government. These are more stable than strategic relations; they are relatively consistent, perhaps loosely or more tightly institutionalized relations that support and are supported by series of coordinated practices. They enable business as usual in the typical school or workplace where there are recognized authorities and chains of command. At both these levels (local relations and institutionalized routines), even though participants rarely have a comparable range of options for resisting each other's influence, encounters are in principle open-ended; the future is not completely predictable. There is some play in the relations among committee members and even in the relations among teachers and pupils, doctors and patients, supervisors and wage laborers. "These power relations are thus mobile, reversible, and unstable," Foucault says.¹⁰ Only when it has become impossible to reverse the situation—only when some resistant forces have been neutralized—do we reach level three, domination. "When an individual or social group succeeds in blocking a

⁸ *Ibid.*, 4-5.

⁹ Michel Foucault, "The Ethics of the Concern of the Self as a Practice of Freedom," in *Ethics, Subjectivity and Truth: The Essential Works of Foucault 1954-1984*, vol. 1, edited by Paul Rabinow (New York: The New Press, 1997), 281-301, 299.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 292.

field of power relations, immobilizing them and preventing any reversibility of movement by economic, political, or military means, one is faced with what may be called a state of domination."¹¹

Foucault's description of domination appears to coincide with Frye's description of oppression. People are oppressed precisely when they are dominated, when the forces that govern their lives and choices are so arranged that they have no viable options for acting to alter their situation. Domination does not entail that a person cannot act at all, on Foucault's view; like Frye, he maintains that action is still possible, but it is futile with respect to altering the person's situation and may even be self-destructive. For example, Foucault holds it is undeniable that eighteenth century wives were systemically subject to their husbands. A state of domination existed in marriage as it was defined, supported, and practiced in European countries at that time.

[Nevertheless] one cannot say that it was only men who wielded power in the conventional marital structure of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries; women had quite a few options: they could deceive their husbands, pilfer money from them, refuse them sex. Yet they were still in a state of domination insofar as these options were ultimately only stratagems that never succeeded in reversing the situation.¹²

Male domination in marriage was neither complete nor permanent, and some feminine resistance to particular acts of masculine assertion were likely commonplace, as Foucault suggests; even so, domination was very real, for that regime of power/knowledge could perpetuate itself indefinitely regardless of what individual women might do. Change, when it finally came, did not come—and could not have come—entirely as a result of action from within the dominated group.

But here equation of Foucault's domination and Frye's oppression runs into trouble. Frye undoubtedly believes that, despite their oppressed condition, women (and other groups she would label oppressed) can take action to alter their situations. They are not entirely trapped, not absolutely immobilized. There is, after all, a feminist *movement* at the time of Frye's writing, of which she, a woman, is a part. Indeed, she offers her analysis as a tool in the project of altering the conditions of sexist oppression. If we want to speak of groups *effectively resisting* their oppressors or oppressive forces, we cannot equate oppression with domination. As long as there is a chance of reversal in relations of power, a state of domination has not been reached. Either Frye's notion of oppression is not absolutely coextensive with Foucault's notion of domination, or women as a group are not, strictly speaking, oppressed.

Perhaps Frye would say that oppression can be either a state of domination or a state that approaches, but falls short of domination in Foucault's sense, leaving some room for the possibility of the oppressed group's effecting some meaningful change. In fact, at one point in her essay, Frye characterizes oppression as "an enclosing structure of forces and barriers which *tends* to the immobilization and reduction of a group or category of people."¹³ This

¹¹ Ibid., 283.

¹² Ibid., 292.

¹³ Frye, "Oppression," 10-11; emphasis mine.

would mean that some situations are oppressive, not because the oppressed are completely immobilized, but because the forms of governmentality in place—the institutionalized relations of power that structure their situation over time—are embedded in a broad, self-reinforcing system and thus, while they may be resisted, they are extremely difficult to counteract. Options are severely limited, especially for individuals acting unilaterally, and a broad range of individual actions is likely to be met with punitive force. We could say then, that any regime of governmentality tending toward domination can be considered oppressive. While Foucault does not make this claim himself, it is easy enough for his analysis to accommodate it.

II. Young's Account of Oppression: The Status of Groups

To back the feminist claim that women are oppressed as a group, however, one must not only explicate the applicable concept of oppression; one must also explicate an applicable concept of *group* and of women as constituting a group. Iris Marion Young accepts Frye's description of oppression as a systematic tendency toward immobilization, but she offers her work as an improvement over Frye's in at least two ways. First, she rejects the idea that *oppression* is amenable to a single description. Focusing on the term's use in the context of US social movements, including those of "women, blacks, Chicanos, Puerto Ricans, and most other Spanish-speaking Americans, Native Americans, Jews, lesbians, gay men, Arabs, Asians, old people, working-class people, poor people, and physically or mentally disabled people," Young first acknowledges that "all oppressed people share some inhibition of their ability to develop and exercise their capacities and express their needs, thoughts, and feelings"; however, she maintains that "the term [*oppression*] refers to several distinct structures or situations."¹⁴ Groups are oppressed if the domain they inhabit is structured in such a way that their lives are marked by exploitation (extraction of their labor power, products, or services), marginalization (exclusion from useful participation in social life), powerlessness (absence of opportunity for skill and capacity cultivation, lack of autonomy, and lack of social "respectability"), cultural imperialism (being defined out of the cultural norm and stereotyped), or violence (at risk for physical harm and harassment that the larger culture finds unsurprising because of group membership). Many groups are subject to several of these forms of oppression, but subjection to any one of them is enough to consider a group oppressed, Young asserts.

A second (and here more relevant) improvement over Frye's analysis is Young's attention to and development of the concept of *group*; "oppression is the inhibition of a *group* through a vast network of everyday practices, attitudes, assumptions, behaviors, and institutional rules; it is structural or systemic."¹⁵ Liberal individualism usually fails to perceive oppression, Young contends, because it does not recognize the reality of groups.¹⁶ Instead, it ac-

¹⁴ Iris Marion Young, "Five Faces of Oppression," in *Rethinking Power*, edited by Thomas Wartenburg (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1992), 174-194, 175. This essay was first published in 1988 in *The Philosophical Forum*, vol. xix, no. 4 (Summer), 270-290.

¹⁵ Young, 180; emphasis mine.

¹⁶ Young, 174; Iris Marion Young, "Gender as Seriality: Thinking about Women as a Social Collective," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, vol. 9, no. 3 (Spring, 1994), 713-738, 718. Young notes that liberals do use the category of oppression, but only in relation to the condition of people under a ruler or class of rulers

cords the individual primary status and views collections of individuals as either simple aggregates or voluntary associations. On the one hand, aggregates are sets of individuals who bear a particular attribute—be it dark skin, a taste for chocolate, or co-presence at a particular place or event (everyone at the corner bus stop at 8:00 this morning, or everyone who was in Washington, D.C., the day of Barack Obama’s second inauguration, for example).¹⁷ In other words, people in an aggregate need have no interest in or knowledge of the others in that aggregate. Associations, on the other hand, are collections of individuals who come together in accordance with some sort of contract or membership procedure. They do have some interest in and/or knowledge of the others in that association. Whether in aggregates or associations, though, individuals exist ontologically prior to the collectivity. Not so with groups Young holds; groups are more basic than individuals and either aggregates or associations; “one *finds oneself* as a member of a group...”¹⁸ Membership in groups is not chosen, and it is not a contingent feature of a person’s identity. “To be in a group is to share with others a way of life that defines a person’s identity and by which other people identify him or her”¹⁹ A Navaho, for example, is a member of the group of Navahos. Being Navaho is not analogous to being a member of the aggregate of people who happen to live in the Western US or to being a member of an association such as a bowling league. It is neither chosen nor incidental to who one is as an individual, even while it is not exhaustive of who one is or will become. One is a member of a group before one is an individual and one likely remains a member of that group whether one desires to do so or not.²⁰

Furthermore, social organization and institutions shape the meaning of those group memberships and even produce the very fact of group identity itself. One is Navaho not because one has a certain genetic heritage (although, incidentally, one probably does), but because some centuries ago the people we now call Native Americans organized themselves into tribal groups, which, for various historical reasons, we continue to recognize today. Similarly, one is homosexual or heterosexual (regardless of one’s individual comportment and whether

who consciously tyrannize over them. Thus, many mid-20th century liberals saw the Cuban people under Fidel Castro as oppressed, but they did not see ghettoized African Americans as oppressed. For discussion, see Young, “Five Faces of Oppression,” 175.

¹⁷ In a later essay, following Sartre, Young distinguishes between groups—which she refigures as people aware of their relationships to each other as a group—and series, which are aggregates in relation with the potential to come to realization as a group given a change in their conditions. For example, the people waiting at the bus stop can begin to recognize themselves as “in the same boat” if the bus is late. They may start talking, organize a protest, and operate for a time as a group. See Young “Gender as Seriality: Thinking about Women as a Social Collective,” esp. 727-28.

¹⁸ Young, “Five Faces of Oppression,” 178; Iris Marion Young, *Justice and the Politics of Difference* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1990), 46.

¹⁹ Young, “Five Faces of Oppression,” 177.

²⁰ Passing as something else is not the same as becoming something else. There is always the danger of discovery, which brings punishment for the perceived deceit. In cases where individuals actually change their status—for example, undergo sex change or get cured of their homosexuality—the new status is not that of the “opposite” group; the former woman is now a transman, and the former homosexual is now an ex-gay. In other words, they join a different kind of group whose identity is inflected by their past group membership.

or not there are such entities as “gay” or “straight” genes) because of a confluence of social, political, and cultural forces that gave rise to those categories of human being at a certain point in time.²¹

There are many groups in our world then, and certainly not all of them are oppressed. In fact, probably most of them are not. Groups are positioned differently vis-à-vis one another in social and political configurations and institutions. As a result of this differential positioning, some groups suffer more and/or have fewer options for developing skills and talents or gaining access to resources than others have, and the resources that they do have are likely to be transferred to other groups rather than used primarily for the benefit of their own. Under the conditions Young outlines, those groups can be deemed oppressed. This does not necessarily mean that there exist other groups who are their oppressors. While those groups to which resources, services, and other goods are transferred certainly benefit from situations that oppress others, they do not necessarily will that oppression’s existence or consciously contribute to its perpetuation, and some of their members may even actively oppose it. Young does hold that “for every oppressed group there is a group that is *privileged* in relation to that group,”²² but a privileged group is not the same as an oppressing group. “While structural oppression in our society involves relations among groups, these relations do not generally fit the paradigm of one group’s consciously and intentionally keeping another down.”²³ The key is that oppression is produced and maintained structurally and systemically; it may very well not be intentionally perpetuated by individuals.

Foucault would certainly concur with Young that there are historically emergent groups with as much reality as individuals. For him, individuality itself is a product of networks of power/knowledge, as he makes clear in *Discipline and Punish*.²⁴ Further, Foucault would agree with Young that any analysis of a power/knowledge regime must focus first of all on repeating patterns of force relations rather than conscious intentions. Foucault, like Young, was deeply interested in—and at least in some cases deeply sympathetic with—groups that find the ways in which they are subject to networks of power/knowledge intolerable and that seek to critique and alter those networks. Foucault very famously refused to set forth any moral or political program,²⁵ but he offered his works as tools for people already engaged in struggle against prevailing power/knowledge networks—that is, patients, prisoners, sexual minorities, any group that could be cast as abnormal, which, I have argued, includes the disabled, people of color, and in many contexts women and the poor.²⁶ If there has to be an im-

²¹ See, e.g., Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Volume 1: An Introduction*, translated by Robert Hurley (New York: Random House, 1978), 43.

²² Young “Five Faces of Oppression,” 181; Young, *Justice and the Politics of Difference*, 42.

²³ Young, “Five Faces of Oppression,” 180.

²⁴ Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, translated by Alan Sheridan (New York: Random House, 1977), esp. 170.

²⁵ Foucault made such assertions quite often, but for a few examples, see Michel Foucault, *Politics, Philosophy, Culture: Interviews and Other Writings 1977-1984*, edited by Lawrence D. Kritzman (New York: Routledge, 1988), 197, 265, and 301-2. These are all statements made in interviews.

²⁶ Ladelle McWhorter, *Racism and Sexual Oppression in Anglo-America: A Genealogy* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2009), chaps. 3, 4, and 5.

perative underpinning a philosophical analysis, he said, let it “be quite simply a conditional imperative of the kind: If you want to struggle, here are some key points, here are some lines of force, here are some constrictions and blockages.”²⁷ Like Foucault, Frye and Young want their work to benefit and reinforce movements for change. They understand the concept of oppression to be an important analytic tool already in use in feminist struggle and seek to make the concept of oppression more potent and effective.

By putting forth women’s oppression as the motivation for feminist action, however, Frye and Young make a major demand not only on lovers of justice to act on women’s behalf but also, in the years since Frye’s essay was published, on public discourse. The 1970s saw the rise of a phenomenon that many scholars refer to as neoliberalism; a set of values, theoretical assumptions, and policy recommendations that developed in the US among economists and legal scholars at the University of Chicago in reaction against Roosevelt’s New Deal.²⁸ Among its tenets are that governmental regulation of the economy should be confined to monetary policy, that neither risk nor consumption should be socialized (as it is in programs that use tax money to pay for retirement, health care, education, etc.), that government should not hold monopolies on the production of goods and services and should privatize as much of its work as possible—which is why public utilities have been phased out in much of the US over the last three decades, many schools and prisons are now run by for-profit companies, and government agencies rely more and more on private contractors as a labor supply. Neoliberal rhetoric—and thus, with its rise, the rhetoric that prevails in public discourse in the US—is overwhelmingly individualistic. Individuals must assume the risks and the costs of pursuing their goals. Individuals must suffer the consequences of their mistakes. Government should not use taxation to force individuals to share the rewards of their achievements. This rhetoric of individualism makes talk of privileged or oppressed *groups* difficult to sustain. On the prevailing neoliberal view, people always act and are acted upon as individuals. Moreover, group phenomena are not only difficult to discuss in public forums; increasingly they are even difficult to perceive.

Young acknowledges that “[s]peaking the political language in which oppression is a central word involves adopting a whole mode of analyzing and evaluating social structures and practices that is quite incommensurate with the language of liberal individualism that dominates political discourse in the United States.”²⁹ This was true at the end of the Cold War, when Americans still understood “collectivism” to be antithetical to freedom; but if anything US public discourse is even more hostile now, over twenty years after the fall of the Soviet Union. The odds of getting a feminist message across and gathering support—even among oppressed people themselves—are great. If oppressed groups are to rally their members and

²⁷ Michel Foucault, *Security, Territory, Populations: Lectures at the Collège de France 1977-1978*, translated by Graham Burchell (New York: Picador, 2007), 3.

²⁸ This description is terribly over-simplified due to space constraints. For more detailed accounts of the rise of neoliberalism, see Philip Mirowski and Dieter Plehwe (eds.), *The Road from Mount Pèlerin: The Making of the Neoliberal Thought Collective* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009), esp. 1-42. Note also that the roots of neoliberalism go back to Europe; it is not first of all an American phenomenon, and neoliberalism’s developed in Austria, Germany, France, and England as well.

²⁹ Young, “Five Faces of Oppression,” 174.

take effective action to rearrange social structures and practices to reduce and eliminate their oppression, they must influence public discourses so that their central concepts become salient and operative in a larger domain. Feminists must examine this new and very potent brand of individualism carefully. For, neoliberalism does not deny that oppression exists, is unjust, and must be dismantled wherever it occurs; instead, it shifts the meaning of the term so that it cannot serve a feminist (or antiracist or class-resistant) purpose. *Oppression* does mean something in public, neoliberal discourse; however it does not mean what feminists want it to mean.

III. Oppression from the Perspective of Neoliberalism

Neoliberal writings since the 1980s typically consist of empirical studies and guides for practice rather than systematic theoretical analysis. Much theoretical argumentation was published earlier in the century, in great part to attract the attention and gain the adherence of economists and policy-makers. More recent theoretical work tends, by contrast, to be either programmatic or apologetic.³⁰ For neoliberalism's theoretical foundations we will turn then, to Austrian economist Friedrich von Hayek, who played a crucial role in the establishment of neoliberal economics and its companion discipline law-and-economics at the University of Chicago in the 1940s and 1950s.³¹ Hayek's work shaped neoliberal thought over the next half century and is still very influential today.

³⁰ Early theoretical writings include Milton Friedman, "Nyliberalismen og dens Muligheter," *Farmand*, vol. 56 (Feb. 17) (1951), 89-93. This essay was written in English and entitled "Neo-liberalism and its Prospects." It is available at the Hoover Institution archive at Stanford University; Milton Friedman, *Essays in Positive Economics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1953); Milton Friedman, *Capitalism and Freedom* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962); Theodore Schultz, "Investment in Man: An Economist's View," *The Social Science Review*, vol. xxxiii, no. 2 (June, 1959), 109-117; Theodore Schultz, "Investment in Human Capital," *The American Economic Review*, vol. LI, no. 1 (March, 1961), 1-17. This was first delivered as the Presidential Address at the American Economics Association on December 28, 1960; Theodore Schultz (ed.), Special Issue of *Journal of Political Economics* on Investment in Human Capital, vol. 70, no. 5 (1962); and George Stigler, "The Goals of Economic Policy," *The Journal of Business*, vol. XXXI, no. 3 (July, 1958), 169-76. In these writings, Chicago School adherents offer arguments for the theoretical coherence and value of their neoliberal framework. Since 1980 few neoliberal economists have felt a need to explain or defend their principles and policies. One exception is Jagdish Bhagwati, whose 2004 book defends some aspects of what might fall under the umbrella of neoliberalism under the label of "globalization." (See Jagdish Bhagwati, *In Defense of Globalization* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004) After the economic collapse of 2008, some neoliberals went on the defensive, but most of their work is not systematic; see for example Robert Lucas (2009), "In defence of the dismal science," *The Economist*. http://www.economist.com/businessfinance/PrinterFriendly.cfm?story_id=14165405. Empirical studies, some of which are intended to influence policy, are ubiquitous since 1980. Good examples are the studies published in John Williamson (ed.), *Latin American Adjustment: How Much Has Happened?* (Washington, DC: Institute for International Economics, 2009). For discussion of implementation of Friedman's neoliberal policies in Latin America, see Naomi Klein, *The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism* (New York: Metropolitan Books, Henry Holt & Company, 2007), esp. chapters 2 and 3.

³¹ Bernard Harcourt, *The Illusion of Free Markets: Punishment and the Myth of Natural Order* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2011), 131. The hyphenated phrase economics-and-law looks odd, but it really is what the discipline is called. See Harcourt, 122.

In his 1960 treatise *The Constitution of Liberty*, Hayek offers a definition of *oppression* that eliminates any reference to group membership; oppression occurs in dyadic relations between individuals. An employee may be oppressed by her employer or a wife by her husband, but she is not oppressed as a woman or as a worker in an economic system that requires those without large amounts of property to sell their time and energy, or that leaves them little choice but to stay in an abusive marriage. Likewise, an employer may oppress his employee or his wife, but he is not able to do so because he is male or a member of the managerial class. Writing in a Cold War environment and in conscious opposition to Marxism, Hayek accords groups no ontological priority and attributes to them no capacity for action above and beyond the actions of the individuals who constitute them. Thus oppression is, exclusively, a “state of continuous acts of coercion”³² perpetrated against an individual by another individual. He writes:

Coercion occurs when one man’s actions are made to serve another man’s will, not for his own but for the other’s purpose. It is not that the coerced does not choose at all; if that were the case, we should not speak of his ‘acting.’ [...] Coercion implies, however, that I still choose but that my mind is made someone else’s tool, because the alternatives before me have been so manipulated that the conduct that the coercer wants me to choose becomes for me the least painful one.³³

Oppression, on this account, can only result from a specifiable person’s intentional and ongoing action, not from some impersonal system or network of forces. It occurs in the aftermath of a battle of wills that has resulted in one person’s total victory and another’s total defeat. At bottom, then, oppression is a matter of two or more people’s mental states—that of conscious intentionality on the part of the oppressor and that of appropriated volition on the part of the oppressed—not of social or political circumstances.

For Hayek, even dire circumstances will not constitute oppression, if nobody consciously intends to substitute his or her will for that of another, or if the intention to do so does not meet with full success. He makes this explicit:

Even if the threat of starvation to me and perhaps to my family impels me to accept a distasteful job at a very low wage, even if I am “at the mercy” of the only man willing to employ me, I am not coerced by him or anybody else. So long as the act that has placed me in my predicament is not aimed at making me do or not do specific things, so long as the intent of the act that harms me is not to make me serve another person’s ends, its effect on my freedom is not different from that of any natural calamity—a fire or a flood that destroys my house or an accident that harms my health.³⁴

Beleaguered and exploited workers, abused wives, unemployed African and Native Americans, queer people denied access to public accommodations, disabled people without health care—all must take responsibility for their situations and the actions they choose to take with-

³² F. A. Hayek, *The Constitution of Liberty* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960), 135.

³³ *Ibid.*, 133.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 137.

in them; these circumstances do not constitute oppression on Hayek's definition, and thus they do not constitute an injustice. Therefore, no one owes these people any additional protection or relief. The worker can change jobs or take to begging in the streets; the wife can abscond with her children to a relative or a shelter; the Native or African American can take a menial job or become an entrepreneur; the queer person can purchase private accommodations; the disabled person can accept charity. All these individuals can suffer or even die for lack of whatever it is that they need, just as they might suffer and die for lack of water in a drought or lack of oxygen in a fire or flood. That suffering and dying may well be tragic, but it is not oppression.

Hayek's views were taken up and disseminated by the emerging New Right in the US in the 1970s and by British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher in both her social and economic policies and in her explicit statements in the 1980s.³⁵ As the neoliberal economic thinking and practices advocated by the Chicago School, which Hayek played a key role in founding³⁶, now pervade public discourse and policy, these views have come to seem simply true and therefore unassailable. A classic articulation occurred in a 1987 interview in *Woman's Own*, when Margaret Thatcher declared:

I think we have gone through a period when too many children and people have been given to understand "I have a problem, it is the Government's job to cope with it!" or "I have a problem, I will go and get a grant to cope with it!" "I am homeless, the Government must house me!" and so they are casting their problems on society and who is society? There is no such thing! There are individual men and women and there are families...³⁷

For Thatcher, as for Hayek, there are no groups in Young's sense, only individuals, aggregates, and more or less voluntary, conscious associations of individuals.³⁸ Thus, there is no basis for

³⁵ Although they did not always agree on how to effect the changes they wanted in the world, Thatcher and Hayek did know each other and corresponded on matters of economic policy. Klein, 131ff. For a copy of a 1982 letter Thatcher sent to Hayek on the economic policies imposed in Chile after the fall of Allende, see Klein's website: <http://www.naomiklein.org/shock-doctrine/resources/part3/chapter6/thatcher-hayek>, accessed January 30, 2012.

³⁶ Rob Van Horn and Philip Mirowski, "The Rise of the Chicago School of Economics and the Birth of Neoliberalism," in *The Road from Mont Pèlerin: The Making of the Neoliberal Thought Collective*, edited by Philip Mirowski and Dieter Plehwe (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009), 139-78, esp. 155-59.

³⁷ Margaret Thatcher, "AIDS, education, and the year 2000!," *Woman's Own* (October 31, 1987), 8-10. Excerpt available and accessed at <http://www.margaretthatcher.org/document/106689> on January 27, 2012.

³⁸ Most neoliberal theorists do allow that households or families are units for the purpose of many forms of economic analysis. However, other than the minor children in a family, households are treated as voluntary associations. See for example Gary Becker, *A Treatise on the Family* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981). For socially conservative neoliberal activists and policy-makers, families are held to be morally important and are the object of disciplinary mechanisms as well as population policies. But the "family" that is held in moral esteem is basically a child-rearing apparatus whose aim is to produce the sorts of adults who can and will take responsibility for themselves. In other words, it reproduces not only human beings but in particular individuals. For a discussion of motherhood in an age of individualism, see Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, *Feminism without Illusions: A Critique of Individualism* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1990), esp. 125. For a history of the developing complexity of Thatcher's neoliberal social engi-

declaring that people are systemically oppressed by virtue of their membership in any group. Unless there is intentional discrimination or an act of violence against a particular individual, government (let alone that imaginary group "society") has no obligation to intervene, for no injustice has been done.

There have been many critiques of and challenges to Hayek's definitions of coercion and freedom over the last half-century.³⁹ Yet his views have retained their credibility with politicians and policy-makers as well as with political philosophers. As their popularity has grown, feminist perspectives on the social world have fallen farther and farther outside the mainstream, and I suspect they will continue to do so unless feminist theorists circumvent the question of oppression.⁴⁰ We need not necessarily abandon our belief that women as a group can be and have been oppressed, but we do need to rethink our modes of opposing what we perceive as oppressive regimes of power/knowledge.

IV. A Step Toward an Alternative

Frye's and Young's writings make it clear that we must challenge the now prevalent assumption that the individual is the primary analytic category.⁴¹ Furthermore, this has to occur not

neering, see Paul Morris, "Freeing the Spirit of Enterprise: The genesis and development of the concept of enterprise culture," in *Enterprise Culture*, edited by Russell Keat and Nicholas Abercrombie (London: Routledge, 1991), 21-37. A more difficult phenomenon for neoliberal theorists to handle is the existence of corporations, which are regularly as treated as persons under the law. How can a corporation composed of more than one individual act as an individual? For a very interesting history and overview of the ways in which twenty-century American economic theorists have tried to answer this question, see William W. Bratton, Jr., "The New Economic Theory of the Firm: Critical Perspectives from History," *Stanford Law Review*. Vol. 41, no. 6 (July, 1989), 1471-1527.

³⁹ Right after *The Constitution of Liberty* was published in 1960, there was a flurry of philosophical critique. See for example Lord Robbins, "Hayek on Liberty," *Economics*, vol. 28, no. 109 (February, 1961), 66-81; Sidney C. Sufrin, "Some Reflections on Hayek's *The Constitution of Liberty*," *Ethics*, vol. 71, no. 3 (April, 1961), 201-204; and J. C. Rees, "Hayek on Liberty," *Philosophy*, vol. 38, no. 146 (October, 1963), 346-60. Later John Gray weighed in; see John Gray, "Hayek on Liberty, Rights, and Justice," *Ethics*, vol. 92, no. 1, Special Issue on Rights (October, 1981), 73-81. For a more recent and in-depth discussion, see Raymond Plant, *The Neo-liberal State* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).

⁴⁰ A possible point of reentry for systemic social analysis into the mainstream may be emerging in antiracist critiques of modern prison systems, where some analysts have begun developing accounts of racism as a systemic and organizing phenomenon. For an excellent and provocative example, see Ruth Wilson Gilmore, *Golden Gulag: Prisons, Surplus, Crisis, and Opposition in Globalizing California* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2007).

⁴¹ There are a variety of ways to do this. One that I find intriguing is to think and take action in terms of open-ended systems or networks or assemblages. An approach to de-individualization that has gained momentum in the early years of the twenty-first century is to construct and disseminate an ontology where individual human beings have no special priority or agency simply by virtue of their humanity but figure, rather, as nodal points in larger material and dynamic nonlinear systems and as systems themselves made up of smaller material dynamic nodal points. This is the approach taken by, for example, political theorist Jane Bennett (*Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010) who prefers to speak of "assemblages" (following Gilles Deleuze), rather than self-conscious unities. These assemblages are "actants" (following Deleuze and Bruno Latour) (Bennett, viii), and they are themselves configurations of material forces that, also as actants, produce effects. They can be self-reflective human bodies,

only in academic circles, but also in public discourse, which is now saturated with individualistic rhetoric. Given the current political climate, I believe that our starting point should be not oppression *per se* but systems of power more generally, and Foucault's work is an obvious resource.

In *The History of Sexuality, Volume 1*, Foucault contrasts his analytics of power with theories that attempt to define or describe power as such, power with a capital P, as he sometimes puts it. The analytics works instead "toward a definition of the specific domain formed by relations of power..."⁴² A key idea in this approach is that power is to be treated not as a thing, but as sets of shifting force relations that can only be seen and studied in concrete situations. In the course summary he wrote for his 1976 lecture course, Foucault stated it as follows: "We should be trying to study power not on the basis of the primitive terms of the relationship, but on the basis of the relationship itself, to the extent that it is the relationship itself that determines the elements on which it bears..."⁴³

From a Foucauldian standpoint, some situations that feminist theorists deem oppressive are states of domination, but some are the effects of the operation of regimes of governmentality. Shifting from the language of oppression to that of governmentality means sacrificing a certain rhetorical advantage; labeling a network of forces "a regime of governmentality" does not serve to condemn it or to motivate people to oppose it as inherently unjust. The advantage to using the term *oppression* is that it, unlike *governmentality*, can do much of our arguing for us. For feminists and neoliberals agree that anything that counts as oppression is unjust and should not be tolerated. Under Hayek's definition, there is no question that the 1,000

but they can also be animal and plant bodies, inorganic beings, or huge configurations of both organic and inorganic beings in systems such as the northeastern US/southeastern Canada electrical grid. (Ibid., 24) A similar strategy can be seen in Stacy Alaimo's work (Stacy Alaimo, *Bodily Natures: Science, Environment, and the Material Self* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2010), see esp. 143) and that of her co-editor and the authors in her 2008 anthology *Material Feminisms*. See Stacy Alaimo and Susan Hekman, *Material Feminisms* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2008). The cultivation of ecological thinking and experiences of ourselves as open systems among and in and part of other open systems, coupled with growing public concern about global ecological crises, may make the Chicago School's version of rational human individualism increasingly untenable. A radical revision and dissemination of materialist ontology is a monumental undertaking, however, and despite my interest in and sympathy with such projects over the longer term, it is not a path I will follow here.

⁴² Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Volume 1*, 82.

⁴³ Michel Foucault, "Society Must Be Defended": *Lectures at the Collège de France 1975-1976*, translated by David Macey (New York: Picador, 2003), 265. Foucault makes this point in a number of places, of which I will mention two. In "Clarifications on the Question of Power," an interview in 1978 in which Foucault responds to criticisms leveled by French Marxists, he denounces any analysis of power that would reduce it "to a kind of metaphysics of Power with a capital P..." and asserts that "I never use the word power with a capital P; they are the ones who do that" (Michel Foucault, "Clarifications on the Question of Power," in *Foucault Live*, edited by Sylvère Lotringer, translated by James Cascaito (New York: Semiotext(e), 1989), 179-92, 185). In *The History of Sexuality, Volume 1* he makes a similar statement: "By power, I do not mean 'Power'..." (Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Volume 1*, 92) In *The History of Sexuality, Volume 1*, however, Foucault does not use the word *domination* in the narrow way that I use it in this paper. He only makes a clear distinction between power and domination after 1976. See for example Foucault, "The Ethics of the Concern of the Self as a Practice of Freedom," 283.

men and women whom Florida law enforcement officers freed from slavery under agricultural labor contractors between 1996 and 2011 were oppressed.⁴⁴ The disagreement rests on the questions of whether a group can be oppressed and whether oppression can occur as an effect of a system rather than simply as an intentional act of an individual. Die-hard neoliberals will probably never believe that such effects and thus such systems are unjust. But careful and widely accessible exposés of oppressive effects, coupled with a theoretical vocabulary for conceptualizing them as systemic, can go a long way toward persuading people who are not “true believers” in neoliberalism but simply accept its perspective because they have no other concepts for understanding political, social, and economic life.

What is needed, moreover, is not merely feminist resistance to those regimes but feminist opposition to them. For Foucault, relations of power are points at which force meets and pushes against force and where the outcome of that confrontation is not given in advance. “Where there is power, there is resistance...”⁴⁵ Nor, we must hasten to add, is resistance present on only one side of a power relation. As a point where force meets force, power and resistance occur simultaneously. Each force resists the other, even as it presses the other back, deflects, or gives way to it. There is nothing particularly progressive or anti-oppressive about resistance *per se*, then. And in many cases resistance “as usual” does nothing more than hold power networks firmly in place. *Resistance* is both too negative and too timid a term, therefore. We do not need simply to resist oppressive networks of forces; we need to oppose them, counter them, disrupt them, and displace them.

Countering formations of power or regimes of governmentality does not mean opposing the whole system; it means strategically intensifying some of the forces within given relations, augmenting them, linking them with other networks that can supplement them. Sometimes formulating a clear analysis of a situation or a clear argument demonstrating its injustice adds force to the push against a particular regime. But sometimes such formulations are rendered impotent in advance, depending on how the network of forces is operating. This latter is the case, I have suggested, with the feminist conception of oppression. In a neoliberal framework, resistance to sexist, racist, and other forms of group oppression cannot be sufficiently augmented through deployment of that term. Other strategies are needed.

Effective opposition to a given arrangement of force relations can occur in at least three different registers. One register is that of intensification of specific forces to overcome opposing resistance. A second is that of mobilizing forces at right angles, so to speak, to specific power relations as a means to disrupt or redirect them. And a third is that of developing what Foucault calls “practices of freedom.”⁴⁶ In what remains of this essay, after a brief discussion of action in the first two registers, I will suggest that feminist opposition to oppression in situations that fall short of what Foucault’s terms domination—situations that I will refer to “post-liberation”—might best be articulated and developed as a set of practices of freedom.

⁴⁴ See Jane Black, “Barry Estabrook’s ‘Tomatoland,’ an Indictment of Modern Agriculture,” *The Washington Post* (June 10, 2011): http://articles.washingtonpost.com/2011-06-10/entertainment/35233611_1_winter-tomato-immokalee-workers-barry-estabrook/2, accessed 5/7/13.

⁴⁵ Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Volume 1*, 95.

⁴⁶ Foucault, “The Ethics of the Concern of the Self as a Practice of Freedom,” 283.

V. Feminism as Foucauldian Practices of Freedom

We may very well want to retain Frye's understanding of feminism's principal assertion: Women are oppressed. There is no reason in Foucault's analysis to give up that belief. However, contrary to Frye's claim, sharpening the concept so that we can persuade people that women are oppressed may be irrelevant to actually eliminating women's oppression. Deploying or not deploying that term is a question of strategy. Whether we deploy the term *oppression* or not, our goals will be to liberate women from domination where domination exists and to alter any regimes of governmentality that diminish women's mobility, development of capacities, expression, and general well-being in comparison with men's.

Working in Foucault's first register, we will identify and oppose not women's oppression *per se* but particular objectionable circumstances—particular wire posts in the cage, to invoke Frye's metaphor—and consider how to push back to effect change. In other words, we will find ways to intensify the forces women are able to exert. Examples include lobbying for voting rights and for laws guaranteeing equal pay for equal work and equal educational opportunities. By giving women greater access to resources, these measures intensify the pressure women are able to bring to bear in a wide variety of contexts. And of course feminists have been doing exactly this for decades, with some obvious success. Some of those wire posts have been broken or at least bent, and more women have more “room to move” than previously. In other words, many women have actually been “liberated” from domination, but of course, such liberation by no means constitutes the end of feminist struggle.

Working in Foucault's second register, we may create new relations of power/knowledge that traverse, rival, or even displace what is objectionable. Feminists have also done this for decades. Examples are women's efforts to take charge of their own health care (as in the midwifery movement and the Boston Women's Health Collective) and women's creation of private community domestic violence shelters in the days before government agencies supported such institutions. Insofar as male physicians' control over women's bodies was possible because women had little knowledge of their own anatomy, physiology, and sexuality and because few alternatives to male-dominated allopathic medicine were available, generating and disseminating information about female health directly to women enabled some women at least some of the time to take themselves out of relationships they found oppressive. Similarly, insofar as man-on-woman (and child) domestic violence was possible because of police and courtroom indifference and women's relative lack of material resources, creating safe, cost-free spaces for women wanting out of those relationships served to interrupt dangerous situations. However, work in this second register need not focus directly on women's situations at all. Changes in technology can alleviate women's oppression even in cases where its development has had seemingly nothing to do with feminist goals or activities. Tools that are smaller, lighter, less expensive, and more readily available can change women's lives, opening possibilities for intensification of resistance and for mobilization that were not available previously. Power steering, cell phones, and handguns—not to mention birth control pills, aspirin, and tampons—are innovations that have altered the balance of power in many women's lives. Feminists could adopt (and some have adopted) strategies of technological devel-

opment or distribution, then, to alter networks of power deliberately.⁴⁷ Changes in political alignments can also result in augmenting feminist forces for change and in disrupting and displacing particular oppressive networks. For example; coalition-building across groups can alter the field of power relations over the long term, even if the new coalition of forces does not work directly on so-called women's issues.⁴⁸

Feminist actions and coordinated strategies in both these registers can and do increase many women's ranges of options, enrich their lives, and thereby diminish their oppression, as both Frye and Young define it (whether anyone conceives of women's situations as oppressive or not). However, I would contend, what they oppose and disrupt is not really *women's oppression* conceived as a generally pervasive cultural phenomenon. They oppose and disrupt specific oppressive relations and effects of regimes. Many feminists do hold, however, that there is a deeper and more general level of sexist oppression that saturates the very fabric of our culture and languages. Addressing oppressive structures at that level requires more than simply giving women more latitude in decision-making or more options for self-enrichment. To combat the oppression of women as something like a general tendency of—as opposed to a concrete circumstance within—large systems of power/knowledge requires work in what I have called here the third register: what Foucault calls “practices of freedom.”

Practices of freedom are first of all protective. Unlike normalizing disciplinary practices, which increase capacities but simultaneously increase docility (obedience, inhibition, etc.) and leave disciplined bodies vulnerable to a variety of forces, practices of freedom increase capacities while decreasing docility; developed capacities strengthen embodied individuals rather than disabling their resistance. Thus, practices of freedom help protect their practitioners from the damaging effects of oppressive forces but practices of freedom are also, and more importantly, transformative and creative.

Foucault discusses this notion of practices of freedom in the same interview where he makes the distinction between relations of power and states of domination. People who exist in a state of domination are in need of liberation, Foucault says. “But we know very well...,” he continues, “that this practice of liberation is not in itself sufficient to define the practices of freedom that will be needed if this people, this society, and these individuals are to be able to

⁴⁷ An obvious example is the Jane collective in Chicago from 1969 to 1973 who learned how to use and then improved a suction method for doing early-term abortions without medical assistance. They performed 11,000 safe but illegal abortions during their existence. See the Jane Abortion Collective Oral History Collection, University of Chicago, accessible at and accessed February 27, 2012: <http://www.uic.edu/depts/lib/specialcoll/services/rjd/findingaids/JAbortionf.html>.

⁴⁸ Some community organizers refer to this sort of operation as “building strategic capacity.” It need not have any immediate effects but creates the possibility of bringing a much larger force to bear on new issues as they arise. See for example Richard L. Wood, “Higher Power: Strategic Capacity for State and National Organizing,” in *Transforming the City: Community Organizing and the Challenge of Political Change*, edited by Marion Orr. Lawrence (KS: University of Kansas Press, 2007), 162-92; Richard L. Wood, “Raising the Bar: Organizing Capacity in 2009 and Beyond,” research report for the Neighborhood Funders Group (2009); available at <http://hdl.handle.net/1928/10675>; Joe Szakos and Ladelle McWhorter, “Virginia Organizing: The Action is at the State Level,” in *Transforming Places: Lessons from Appalachia*, edited by Stephen Fisher and Barbara Ellen Smith (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2012), 183-97.

define admissible and acceptable forms of existence or political society.”⁴⁹ Eighteenth century European wives—and indeed women in the US in the twentieth century—needed to be liberated, but liberation from domination in and of itself could not enable them to realize a feminist vision for their lives or communities. Other transformations, including transformation of those women themselves, were necessary. Creative forces had to be marshaled. Post-liberation, practices of freedom must become central to the project of creating and maintaining selves and communities able to exercise freedom.

A great many women, I believe, now live in a state of post-liberation. Certainly many women do not; many live in dire poverty, without rights to education, without health care and birth control, subject to violence without recourse, etc., and liberation is exactly what they need, just as liberation was what our predecessors needed. But for many of us things really are different now.

As a child, I was well aware of the pressures, prohibition, frustrations, and emotional and intellectual deformations that marked the lives of women of my mother’s generation. I had intimate knowledge of sexist oppression on a daily basis as I watched my older sister cope with sexist confinements and expectations as she reached adulthood in the 1960s. Also, I believed (not without a large measure of horror) that in time I would have to cope with those things too, but for the most part, I did not. Thanks to Women’s Liberation—not just the existence of an organized movement, but more particularly the *fact* of liberation that followed in its wake, to the extent that liberation became a fact during the 1970s—as a young woman in the 1980s I had options and access to resources that women who came of age in the decades before me did not have. Sexist oppression—indeed, something very close to Foucault’s domination—was palpable and very widespread in my early life, but it has retreated considerably in recent decades. While sexist domination and oppression do still exist in our world, current regimes are much more fragmented and localized than they were in the mid-twentieth century, and liberating those who still suffer under them will require much more localized analyses and locally tailored strategies and interventions.

While many of us may be post-liberation, we are decidedly not post-feminism. Feminist practices are crucial in new ways. As Foucault insists, “Liberation paves the way for new power relationships, which must be controlled by practices of freedom.”⁵⁰ In addition to continuing to work for the liberation of women who still live in states of domination, feminists must counter the persisting tendencies toward sexist domination still widely present in our post-liberation cultures and political milieus. We must continue to work to transform our communities and to develop our capacities for the exercise of freedom. Feminism now must deliberately cultivate itself as a set of practices of freedom.

Foucault allies practices of freedom closely with the ancient notion of care of the self, which was the conscious and long-term project of constituting oneself as a free person in an *ethos*. One takes up freedom as “the ontological condition of ethics”⁵¹ and one works on own habits, comportment, relationships, and abilities so that one becomes increasingly able to ex-

⁴⁹ Foucault, “The Ethics of the Concern of the Self as a Practice of Freedom,” 282-83.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 284.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

emply one's values and maintain oneself in one's freedom. Whether there is any imminent threat of domination or not, one cultivates the capacities and builds the sort of life that militates against the possibility of being dominated *and* of dominating others.

Some critics have worried that this ethic is too individualistic.⁵² However, *oneself* must be understood non-atomistically in Foucault's work. A self comes to and continues to be in a network of social and political relations; selves do not exist without others.⁵³ Caring for oneself involves caring for both known and unknown others in personal, communal, and civic relationships. Foucault notes that ancient care of the self was construed in later eras as selfishness, while self-knowledge was promoted in the project of self-renunciation prerequisite for Christian salvation.⁵⁴ But if we understand selfhood, as both Foucault and many contemporary feminist theorists do—as a socially constituted relational phenomenon—selfishness need not come into play. Indeed, communal existence is primary.

If we adopt this Foucauldian approach, the question becomes what practices feminists can develop and engage in that would work against any tendencies toward sexist domination that exist or might arise. Here again, it seems to me that feminism already includes some such practices. Feminist critique—the perpetual exposure and problematization of sexist customs, language, art forms, institutions, etc.—works against a coalescence and spread of sexist forces. Feminist pedagogy problematizes tendencies toward sexist and other forms of domination in the classroom and thereby inhibits the tendency of authoritarianism to reinforce itself. Early feminist consciousness raising groups bequeathed to us a number of political and economic practices that have similar effects—methods of insuring all voices are heard, sliding scales for the cost of goods, services, and access to events, and so forth. Historically, feminism has been concerned not only with the liberation of the oppressed but also with the creation of a world where oppression never gets a foothold once it is vanquished. With that goal in mind, we can build on these practices and develop new ones as well.

Adopting the view that post-liberation feminism is about practices of freedom, which is to say about ethics in Foucault's sense, is to emphasize feminism's positive, transformative, and creative aspects. The energy that drove Women's Liberation grew out of frustration and anger but also, and more directly, out of a strong perception of open possibility for a better future. I believe that post-liberation feminism can cultivate that driving energy more readily by developing practices of freedom than by deploying the notion of oppression as a central fact in most women's lives.

VI. Conclusion

I have argued here that Foucault's analytics of power offers contemporary feminists some useful tools for the transforming the ways in which we think of feminism itself in a post-liberation age. While, depending on our definitions, we may still believe women are on the whole oppressed in our society, rather than styling feminism as resistance to oppression, we might fare

⁵² This is an old feminist worry, but recently Lois McNay has offered a nuanced version of it in her comparison of Foucault and Rancière. See McNay, esp. 68.

⁵³ Foucault, "The Ethics of the Concern of the Self as a Practice of Freedom," 287.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 284.

better if we style it as an ethical movement that cultivates and embodies transformative practices of freedom.

Ladelle McWhorter
Department of Philosophy
University of Richmond
28 Westhampton Way
Richmond, VA 23173
USA