

## ARTICLE

### **Spotting the Primacy of Resistance in the Virtual Encounter of Foucault and Deleuze**

Marco Checchi, University of Leicester

**ABSTRACT:** Foucault's intuition that resistance comes first challenges the theses of the co-originality of power and resistance or the superiority of power over resistance. In order to transform this intuition into the concept of the primacy of resistance, the article uses Deleuze's ontology and in particular the idea of the virtual. According to Deleuze, resistance displays a privileged relation with the virtual, understood as the ontological region animated by all the potentialities that might be or might have been actualised. As such, resistance is presented as a creative and affirmative force, provoking reactions and forcing power to change. Nietzsche's divide between active and reactive forces serves to set up a qualitative distinction between resistance and power. Power relations are therefore understood as the interplay of the creative affirmation of resistance and the subsequent reaction of power. The primacy of resistance allows us to elaborate a dynamic model of power relations whose mechanism evokes Tronti's interpretation of Marxism structured upon the primacy of labour and workers' struggle over capital.

**Keywords:** Resistance, active forces, power relations, Deleuze, labour, Tronti.

Rephrasing René Magritte, the title of this article is "chosen in such a way to keep anyone from assigning" the understanding of power relations "to the familiar region that" Foucauldian scholars' "habitual thought appeals to in order to escape perplexity."<sup>1</sup> Everyone is familiar with the well-known quotation from the first volume of Michel Foucault's *History of Sexuality* "When there is power, there is resistance."<sup>2</sup> Even though the aim of this quote was to express the indissoluble bond between power and resistance and their constitutive interdependence, power has ultimately never shared its place of honour with its counterpart. Most of the secondary literature that deals with Foucault's model of power limits its treatment of resistance to a couple of brief references that ultimately appeal to nothing but its subordination to power. Resistance is often said to be incorporated within power, produced or determined by power, a

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<sup>1</sup> Michel Foucault, *This Is Not a Pipe* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), 36.

<sup>2</sup> Michel Foucault, *The Will to Knowledge. The History of Sexuality: 1* (London: Penguin Books, 1998), 95.

rebound or a reaction to power. No surprise that several authors have failed to detect any room for resistance in Foucault's model.<sup>3</sup>

The intention of this article is to challenge this "habitual thought" through a counterintuitive understanding of power relations in which resistance comes first. Rather than replicating the debate on the differences and affinities between Foucault and Gilles Deleuze, the purpose is to use Deleuze's ontology in order to fully develop Foucault's intuition of the primacy of resistance. This productive encounter should uncover the intimate characteristics of resistance, finally clarifying its qualitative distinction from power.

It is Foucault himself who introduces the primacy of resistance in an interview to a Canadian journal in 1982 (reported in *Dits et écrits* under the title *Michel Foucault, une interview: sexe, pouvoir et la politique de l'identité*). Unfortunately, Foucault does not develop this idea any further. Therefore, although it might be argued that the primacy of resistance may fit his model of power, it needs to be asked to what extent this might be considered as a proper Foucauldian concept. In fact, in Foucault this primacy of resistance is nothing more than a sketched intuition. As I will show in this article, in order to elaborate and develop this idea, it is useful to appeal to an ontology—based on the relation between the virtual/outside and the actual, borrowed from Deleuze—that is absolutely foreign to Foucault's work (although it is not ultimately incompatible with his model of power). In his "philosophical obituary" to his friend, Deleuze illustrates Foucault's model of power claiming that resistance comes first in virtue of its privileged relation to the outside.<sup>4</sup> Nevertheless, this is the only excerpt in Deleuze's work in which he explicitly refers to the primacy of resistance. Thus, it might be argued that for Deleuze this remains a more Foucauldian concept that he would probably not fully endorse himself. Therefore, the primacy of resistance might be understood as a point where these two thinkers could possibly converge. However, it definitely represents a challenging contribution that could solicit an innovative rethinking of Foucault's concept of resistance.

### **Foucault's primacy of resistance**

Foucault elaborates a model of power structured by a continuous tension between power(s) and resistance(s). The social network consists of a field of forces whose equilibrium is always contingent, unstable and open to be reversed. The power relations that emerge from this field of forces determine the political dimension of the social network. In virtue of this model, resistance becomes an indispensable element: once multiple forces collide and a relation of power comes to be established, the permanence of active forces that operate against each specific power relation (what we can label 'resistance') grants that the outcome remains open to further modifications. What results from this everlasting dynamic is a context of permanent uncertainty and contingency, a constitutive instability. Power relations emerge in virtue of a difference of intensity between the clashing forces that determines a situation of disequilibrium. All

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<sup>3</sup> See for instance: Nicos Poulantzas, *State, Power, Socialism* (London: NLB, 1978); Mark Philp, "Foucault on Power: A Problem in Radical Translation?," *Political Theory* 11, no. 1 (1983); Lois McNay, *Foucault : A Critical Introduction* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1994).

<sup>4</sup> Gilles Deleuze, *Foucault* (London: Continuum, 2006), 74.

the forces at stake are embedded in a permanent active tension, generating a “perpetual battle,”<sup>5</sup> a continuous struggle that prevents the achievement of a final balance that would arrest the entire dynamic. On several occasions,<sup>6</sup> this operational tie between power and resistance is presented as referring also to a relation of co-originality. Such a thesis could have passed unchallenged if we would not take into consideration a minor interview of 1982 in which Foucault surprisingly steps back from his research on the subject to give once again some insights into the nature of resistance.

[...]If there was no resistance, there would be no power relations. [...] So resistance comes first, and remains superior to the forces of the process; power relations are obliged to change with the resistance. So I think that resistance is the main word, the keyword, in this dynamic.<sup>7</sup>

Obviously, such a quotation does not entirely reject the concept of co-originality. Nevertheless, it does demand a refinement of the concept. Why does resistance come first? It is hard to decipher with absolute certainty the reason that brings Foucault to affirm the superiority of resistance. However, what is perhaps held to be crucial for the primacy is the capacity of resistance to oblige power relations to change. Power tends to crystallize the existent. Even though it remains active and productive, it keeps reiterating its exercise until the forces that resist it oblige power to modify its action. In principle, power is static in the sense that it does not need to do anything different to conserve a specific relation of force and the configuration that this relation determines. In order to illustrate this point, it suffices to think of the working time in a factory. Workers are demanded to be punctual at the beginning of their shift. Their punctuality is backed by a specific power relation between the workers and the management. If everybody is always punctual, the management (power) does not need to take any action in these regards: the initial regulation has been sufficiently crystallized and no further intervention is needed. But let us assume that from one moment on, half of the workers take the habit of arriving few minutes later than the time they were expected to start. At that point, management is obliged to take action, enforcing for instance punitive measures for the workers who are not punctual: power has been obliged to change. Before the actual emergence of this specific resistance, any additional regulation would have been pointless and unnecessary. Therefore, it is only at the very moment when resistance increases or decreases its intensity, that power is obliged to change and to adapt it accordingly. Therefore, resistance is the dynamic and active (in the Nietzschean sense of “active force” that I will present later) element in power relations and this confers to it its primacy over power. This conception echoes a frag-

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<sup>5</sup> Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish; The Birth of the Prison* (London: Penguin Books, 1977), 26.

<sup>6</sup> See for instance “Religious Deviations and Medical Knowledge,” in J.R. Carrette (ed.) *Religion and Culture* (Taylor & Francis Group, 1999), 50; Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, 95; Michel Foucault, “The End of the Monarchy of Sex,” in M. Foucault and S. Lotringer (eds.) *Foucault Live: Interviews, 1961-1984* (New York: Semiotext(e), 1996), 224.

<sup>7</sup> “Sex, Power and the Politics of Identity,” in Paul Rabinow (ed.), *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth* (New York: New Press, 1997), 167.

ment from Foucault's 1973 article, "The force of flight," in which he figuratively promotes resistance (or something that might resemble what, later on, he will label resistance) to serve as a Hegelian motor of history: "In the world of men, nothing big has ever happened through these windows, but everything, always, through the triumphant bringing down of these walls."<sup>8</sup>

However, although this could possibly suffice in order to explain the superiority of resistance over power, in what sense could the primacy be understood? In *Foucault*, Deleuze writes: "la résistance est première."<sup>9</sup> It might be nothing but a pedantic speculation, but in his course on Foucault at Université Paris VIII of 1985/1986, Deleuze speaks also of another "primacy": that of the statement over the visible. In his lectures, he wonders several times what this primacy means. For "primacy" though, he exclusively uses the word "primat." First of all, to have "le primat" does not imply reducibility or isomorphism. On the contrary, a primacy is only possible in virtue of a fundamental irreducibility of one term to the other.

A cannot have the primacy over B, if B has the same form of A. If B had the same form of A, this wouldn't be a primacy but a reduction. What is affected by (subit) the primacy of something is necessarily of another form of what exerts the primacy. [...] There is an absolute difference of nature, there is a primacy over the other and still the primacy doesn't suppress the difference of nature? For how can the primacy be exerted in spite of the difference of nature while letting it subsist? [...] How can the primacy be exerted if there is nothing in common?<sup>10</sup>

If we assume this excerpt to be somehow "the rule of the primacy," the methodological remarks that allow recognizing a primacy between two elements, in my opinion this might turn out to be highly problematic once we try to demonstrate the primacy of resistance. Rephrasing the "rule" with the specific elements at stake in this article, we should say that "resistance cannot have the primacy over power, if power has the same form of resistance. There is an absolute difference of nature". But power, as resistance, is not a form. As Deleuze states in his seventh lecture, power is "l'élément informel par excellence." Therefore, the primacy can be grounded exclusively on an absolute difference of nature between power and resistance. But what is their nature? What is the defining element that qualitatively differentiates one term from the other? The difficulty in finding a solution to this problem derives from their relations to "force." Relations of power (that is, between power and resistance to that power) are relations of forces (e.g. forces that exert power and forces that exert resistance). Therefore, force is somehow their common nature (and this would annul the primacy of one element over the other). Nevertheless, there is a difference that allows Deleuze to affirm that resistance comes first. As will be extensively analyzed in the following sections of this article, the distinguishing feature has to be found in their relation to the diagram (where power is completely em-

<sup>8</sup> Michel Foucault, "The Force of Flight," in Jeremy W. Crampton and Stuart Elden (eds.) *Space, Knowledge and Power: Foucault and Geography* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007), 170.

<sup>9</sup> Gilles Deleuze, *Foucault* (Paris: Les Editions de Minuit, 1986), 95.

<sup>10</sup> Gilles Deleuze, "Foucault - Les Formations Historiques. Année Universitaire 1985-1986. Université De Paris Viii, Cours 5 du 19/11/1985", transcribed by Annabelle Dufourcq (Web: Université de Paris VIII, My translation): [http://www2.univ-paris8.fr/deleuze/rubrique.php3?id\\_rubrique=21](http://www2.univ-paris8.fr/deleuze/rubrique.php3?id_rubrique=21).

bedded) and to the outside (to which resistance has a direct relation). Although maintaining that both are forces, the modality of emergence of resistance (that we can fully understand once we verify its primacy) illustrates its difference from power. The privileged relation of resistance to the virtual (meant as the infinite potentialities inherent to any specific constellation of the existent) confers to it a sort of "aura" which will be lost once resistance emerges as an actual force. This "noble" coming-into-being would allow us to combine a qualitative distinction between power and resistance with the model of power as a field of forces, in which power and resistance replace each other according to the outcome of their struggle.

### **The genealogy of the primacy of resistance**

Although Foucault's explicit presentation of the primacy of resistance is limited exclusively to the excerpt of the interview quoted above, Deleuze is so convinced that this primacy animates the model of his fellow scholar that he even attempts to design the trajectory of its conceptual emergence. In a note, Deleuze suggests that the inspiration for this concept may possibly have come from the work of Mario Tronti, one of the founders of the theory of *operaismo* in the 1960s. In his *Workers and Capital*, Tronti writes:

If the conditions of capital are in the hands of the workers, if there is no active life in capital without the living activity of labour power, if capital is already, at its birth, a consequence of productive labour, if there is no capitalist society without the workers' articulation, in other words if there is no social relationship without a class relationship, and there is no class relationship without the working class, then one can conclude that the capitalist class, from its birth, is in fact subordinate to the working class. Hence the necessity of exploitation. [...] Exploitation is born, historically, from the necessity for capital to escape from its de facto subordination to the class of worker-producers. It is in this very specific sense that capitalist exploitation, in turn, provokes workers' insubordination.<sup>11</sup>

Although capitalism is supposed to affirm the sheer domination of capital over the working class, Tronti inverts this assumption by showing the real dynamic of the constitution of this opposition. Capital is, by definition, a product of labour. It is the living activity of labour power that produces the surplus that constitutes capital. Harry Braverman defines capital as "labour that has been performed in the past, the objectified product of preceding phases of the cycle of production which becomes capital only through appropriation by the capitalist and its use in the accumulation of more capital."<sup>12</sup> Capital consists of nothing else than dead labour. Therefore, labour comes first. There is an historical and constitutive primacy of labour over capital that determines a factual subordination of the latter. The relation of power (what Tronti calls "exploitation") at play between capital and workers emerges as a consequence of that subordination, in order to escape it. Given that capital is a product of labour, capital needs exploitation (a specific set of power relations – institutional, disciplinary, economic, so-

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<sup>11</sup> Mario Tronti, "The Strategy of Refusal," in Sylvere Lotringer and Christian Marazzi (eds.) *Autonomia: Post-Political Politics* (New York: Semiotext(e), 1980), 31.

<sup>12</sup> Harry Braverman, *Labor and Monopoly Capital. The Degradation of Work in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1974), 261.

cial) in order to establish a vertical hierarchy. Rephrasing this argument in the terminology of this article, it might be said that the virtuality of workers' resistance to the appropriation of their product engenders a series of measures that determine the emergence of a power relation (the capitalist mode of production). Therefore, the capitalist mode of production replicates the essential mechanism between power and resistance. The managerial activity turns out to be a mere reaction to the anticipated recalcitrance of the workers, namely a resistance to (a virtual) resistance. As Braverman puts it, "[t]he enterprise shared from the first the characterization which Clausewitz assigned to war; it is movement in a resistant medium because it involves the control of refractory masses."<sup>13</sup> The degree and intensity of force deployed in the action of the enterprise is proportionally adjusted to the resistance that is expected to be encountered.

However, to what extent can this series of insights, clearly developed within a Marxist tradition, be combined with Foucault's model of power? There are two essential distinctions that need to be made between the two approaches, namely the primacy of labour and the primacy of resistance. In his *Labor and Monopoly Capital*, Braverman conceives of this refractivity of the masses as a natural given. His critique appeals to an idea of human nature which resists the capitalist mechanisms of subordination. In my opinion, this strategy of founding resistance in an originary human nature (that several authors find also at work in Foucault's concept)<sup>14</sup> is not viable as it somehow implies the reactionary appeal to a lost dimension of innocence that does not fit with Foucault's antagonist model. Rather than as a natural property, resistance needs to be analysed only in its indissoluble relation with power. Secondly, the dichotomy between labour and capital has a rigid historical and spatial localization. The relation implied by capitalism is the historical product of specific pre-existing relations of power. The primacy of labour is meaningful only within its relation with capital but it cannot be postulated as an absolute primacy (as it could be possibly argued in case we endorse a naturalistic account). Within a Foucauldian antagonistic framework, labour can instead be genealogically deconstructed, revealing what actually comes before it, namely a specific interplay of forces. On the other hand, the primacy of resistance does not need to be supported by an antecedent element or dynamic. Therefore, if following Deleuze's suggestion, it might be argued that Foucault's primacy of resistance can be traced back to Tronti's primacy of labour over capital, this conceptual brotherhood cannot be extended beyond the resemblance of the mechanism at play in both the accounts. The dynamic between labour and capital is structurally similar to that between power and resistance: although B is normally believed to be the reactive product of A, it is actually B that is the key element in the relation that sets their dynamic interrelation into motion. Nevertheless, the primacy of labour is nothing but a particular instance in which the more fundamental dynamic between resistance and power emerges.

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid., p. 46.

<sup>14</sup> See for instance: Gad Horowitz, "The Foucaultian Impasse: No Sex, No Self, No Revolution," *Political Theory* 15, no. 1 (1987); S. Brodribb, *Nothing Mat(t)ers: A Feminist Critique of Postmodernism* (New York University Press, 1992); P.P. Patton, "Le Sujet de Pouvoir chez Foucault," *Sociologie et sociétés* 24, no. 1 (1992); Mike Michael and Arthur Still, "A Resource for Resistance: Power-Knowledge and Affordance," *Theory and Society* 21, no. 6 (1992); J. Oksala, *Foucault on Freedom* (Cambridge University Press, 2005).

### **Deleuze's Foucault**

To sum up the genealogical path of the primacy of resistance explored so far, Tronti might be considered as the point of departure in which the concept begins to acquire some of the features that will be developed later on. Then in Foucault, it is ultimately a hidden presence that animates somehow his antagonistic model, although it can be spotted only in backlight as it becomes manifest only in a minor interview. Therefore, it is only from Deleuze that a more detailed picture of the primacy of resistance might be extracted. Nevertheless, it is worthwhile to remember that such a concept cannot be fully ascribed to Deleuze either, as otherwise it would be expected to reappear in his work. On the contrary, only a few pages in his book on Foucault are devoted to this idea, raising doubts about the paternity of the primacy of resistance. Perhaps the most cautious way to understand it is to consider it as a hybrid concept that might be developed within a framework that would include both Foucault and Deleuze without attempting to secure an orthodox loyalty to any of them. The deployment of this framework necessarily passes through what Deleuze writes in his *Foucault*:

The diagram, as the fixed form of a set of relations between forces, never exhausts force. [...] The diagram stems from the outside but the outside does not merge with any diagram, and continues instead to 'draw' new ones. [...] In this sense force displays potentiality with respect to the diagram containing it, or possesses a third power which presents itself as the 'possibility of resistance'. [...] Moreover, the final word on power is that resistance comes first, to the extent that power relations operate completely within the diagram, while resistances necessarily operate in direct relation with the outside from which the diagrams emerge.<sup>15</sup>

The primacy of resistance amounts to a specific ontology structured on the complex interplay between the virtual/outside and the actual. Because of its extreme complexity, the thorough disentanglement of all the elements at stake in this Deleuzian ontology of force is beyond the scope of this paper. Therefore, the analysis that follows has the only purpose of illustrating this dynamic insofar it can constitute the basis on which the axiological superiority of resistance over power may be articulated.

The actual would appear to be the easiest concept to define, while once we need to posit the limits to its extension, we face all the difficulty of this endeavour because of all the subtle ambiguities in language which it involves. The actual could be understood as the defined set of stable substances that we experience as existing. The actual is what there is, the existent, what materially/concretely exists (the very definition of the actual reveals a series of ambiguities in each of the terms used to describe it – as even what is immaterial could be said to “exist”; limiting the actual to materiality would exclude the symbolic, whose influence instead is crucial for the structuring of the actual). Perhaps, the most cautious way to define the actual is through its relation to temporality: the actual is what there is at a given moment, in the present (even though this definition is also imprecise, as an “expected resistance” does exist in the present, but in a different modality, not in the actual).

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<sup>15</sup> Deleuze, *Foucault*, 74.

However, the relation that Deleuze and Foucault respectively maintain with the concept of the outside is quite ambivalent. Whereas it might be said to be a central category in Deleuze's thought, Foucault's use of it does not involve an extended philosophical analysis of the concept itself. Deleuze extensively elaborates the concept of the outside, referring it back also to Foucault especially in relation to the famous expression "la pensée du dehors."<sup>16</sup> Nevertheless, in this case, it has been argued that the connection between Deleuze's conception and Foucault's actual texts is quite tenuous.<sup>17</sup> On the other hand, we can consider the outside as a blind spot that allows the productive encounter between two thinkers.<sup>18</sup> And at the origin of this meeting point there is obviously Maurice Blanchot's concept of the outside.

In order to define what the outside is (in Deleuze and in Deleuze's *Foucault*), we need to appeal to the concept of force. The outside is the region where the disruptive play of forces takes place. Yet, there is no distinction between outside and forces as for a form (or empty box) and its content. The outside ultimately coincides with these forces and their continuous motion. Forces structure the outside, or better still, they animate it in virtue of their constant agitation.<sup>19</sup> These forces and their interrelation determine what comes into being, the emergence of diagrams, networks of power, bodies and so on. Therefore, the outside is something like the foundation of the real, or the subterranean energy that shapes the existent, as its absolute externality and exteriority paradoxically correspond to its infinite proximity to the world.<sup>20</sup>

The outside/virtual includes the definite set of potentialities that could emerge from a given state of the actual. In order to illustrate the relation between the virtual and the actual, we could take as example the beginning of a game of chess. The configuration of the pieces on the chessboard (sixteen white pieces on one side and sixteen black pieces on the other side) constitutes the actual. To be sure, even the set of rules that determines that specific positioning of the pieces, and the rules that determine the capacity of movement of each piece belong to the actual. Given this specific state of the actual, the virtual consists of all the possible reconfigurations of the actual after the first move: in this scenario, there are twenty-one new possible configurations that are equally probable to be actualised (if the white wants to win, obviously there are moves that the player will be much more likely to make rather than others, nevertheless, at the ontological level, they all share the same chances to be actualised). Each pawn can advance either one or two squares (for a total of sixteen moves available), each horse has two possible squares to occupy (four moves available), plus the possibility that the player decides not to play at all, leaving the chessboard as it is, as its actual configuration. Therefore, at any given time, the actual (the combination of the present position and the rules that govern the game) determines the extension of the virtual (all the possible new configurations), but at the same time, the actual is contained within the virtual as possibility of conservation of the

<sup>16</sup> Michel Foucault, *La Pensée Du Dehors* ([Fontfroide le haut]: Fata morgana, 1986).

<sup>17</sup> Ronald Bogue, "Foucault, Deleuze and the Playful Fold of the Self " in Ronald Bogue and Mihai Spariosu (eds.) *The Play of the Self* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1994).

<sup>18</sup> Peter Pál Pelbart, "The Thought of the Outside, the Outside of Thought," *Angelaki* 5, no. 2 (2000).

<sup>19</sup> Donato Mansueto, "Figura Sola: Il Diagramma Secondo Deleuze," *Idee* 31/32, (1996), 100.

<sup>20</sup> Deleuze, *Foucault*, 72.

status quo. Nevertheless, the priority of the actual over the virtual, implicit in the assumption that it is the actual to determine what constitutes the virtual, is only apparent. As the actual is nothing but one of the multitude of configurations which belonged to the virtual before the rules of the game were stated: there could have been other rules, other pieces, other boards.

The virtual is articulated by a series of multiplicities that lay out "the many ways in which a society, a language, an animal, and so forth, can exist."<sup>21</sup> In the virtual all the series are compossible, namely they share an equal right to be actualized. Nevertheless, it is the very actualization of one specific virtuality that precludes the actualization of all the others that remain within the virtual as the roads not taken. "The actual and the virtual can never fully overlap: the virtual must remain as adjacent, as the road not taken, as the nagging reminder of what might have been."<sup>22</sup> The impossibility of their overlapping depends on the ontological priority of the virtual and on its indefinite extension as it includes both the actual (as what has been and will be actualized) and what could have been but has not been and what will possibly be.

However, in the previous paragraphs, it has been assumed that the outside was identical to what Deleuze calls the virtual. Given the definition of outside presented above, it is probably necessary to step back from this assumption and refine these two concepts. First of all, the virtual is eminently a Deleuzian concept. It might somehow animate Foucault's work as well, but it never makes it to the surface. And the virtual cannot be thought otherwise than in relation with the actual, i.e. what there is, the existent (the real might be part of this list, but I would tend to understand the real as the sum of the actual and the virtual altogether). The virtual consists of a sequence of fragmented and ephemeral images.<sup>23</sup> Images or singular configurations which are impossible in the actual, do coexist in the virtual. The passage into being occurs through the actualisation of a specific configuration of forces as a singularity, which obviously excludes the other impossible singularities that remain locked up into the virtual. In fact, the virtual conserves past and future configurations that might have been actualised but that eventually did not happen to be. On the contrary, the outside is exclusively open to the future.<sup>24</sup> It is perhaps this extended temporality that marks the difference between the virtual and the outside: as the latter consists of the concrete interplay of forces, the virtual includes all the possible outcomes of that interplay. To put into a sketched visualisation of this difference, we might take as an example two forces that are in motion within the outside. Those two forces and their motion coincide with the outside. At any given point, an infinite number of possible encounters (or non-encounter) of the two forces might be imagined. They might collide frontally on the same direction; or one might hit the other with a slight inclination; or same inclination but at a different point of the vector, and so on. Each of these modalities of collision determines a fragmented image which belongs to the virtual together with all

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<sup>21</sup> John Protevi, *Political Affect. Connecting the Social and the Somatic* (Minneapolis, London: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), 11.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 110.

<sup>23</sup> Edson Passetti, "Sociedade De Controle E Abolição Da Punição," *São Paulo em Perspectiva* 13 (1999).

<sup>24</sup> Pelbart, "The Thought of the Outside".

the other configurations that could occur from the encounter of these two forces. Only one, though, may happen to be actualised.

### Outside and resistance

What is exactly the relation at stake between, on the one hand, the ontological dichotomy of the actual and the outside/virtual, and on the other hand, the relation of force between power and resistance? Returning to Deleuze's quotation about the primacy of resistance reported above, the actual is patterned and structured by a specific diagram, namely a given set of power relations. The virtual instead includes the infinite series of alternative outcomes that might be generated through the interplay of forces at stake. In principle, it might be said to contain both forces that could determine new diagrams and forces that could engender resistance. Nevertheless, Deleuze holds that resistance rather than power possesses a privileged relation to the virtual. As I will attempt to make clear in this section, this point is absolutely crucial for affirming the primacy of resistance and, consequently, for the possibility to insert a qualitative distinction between power and resistance without rejecting the fact that they are both forces.

The virtual consists of the totality of all the potentialities that might be or might have been actualised. The concept of potentiality is insightfully analysed in an article by Mike Michael and Arthur Still.<sup>25</sup> They compare this dynamic that they see at work in Foucault's work with the concept of affordance as developed by the psychologist James Gibson.<sup>26</sup>

An object or a surface may afford many things to an organism. Thus a flat horizontal surface also affords writing on, chopping vegetables, laying out maps, etc., and these possibilities do not have to be inferred from visual clues—there is information in the "optic array" that amply specifies the possibilities for the perceiver. How it is actually perceived will depend upon the current desires or interests of the organism.<sup>27</sup>

Affordance appeals to the process of discovery of the possibilities and potentialities that remain hidden behind what is held to be the dominant or most common function or use of a particular object. To use Michael and Still's example, a lamppost has a specific function, i.e. it serves to illuminate a street or an area. Yet it might be used for climbing up in order to get a better vantage point, for instance. Thus, the lamppost also "affords" climbing up.<sup>28</sup> For instance, a hardcopy of this article might be supposed to be used to be read and to provide interesting insights to other scholars. On the other hand, it could possibly also afford other functions, as for instance it could prevent a table from wobbling. Through the uncovering of these multiple alternatives whose perception is severely obfuscated by what Foucault, citing Ma-

<sup>25</sup> Michael and Still, "A Resource for Resistance".

<sup>26</sup> Gibson calls affordances the perceivable properties of a given environment that determine the possible actions that are allowed by that environment. In particular, he focuses on the basic affordances of an environment that "are usually perceivable directly, without an excessive amount of learning" (J.J. Gibson, *The Ecological Approach to Visual Perception* (Hillsdale, New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1986), 143).

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 876.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 881.

gritte, calls "habitual thought,"<sup>29</sup> we can cognitively access the virtual, although not in its entirety.

Nevertheless, an attentive comparison between the account of the virtual advocated so far and Gibson's concept of affordance clearly shows some points of divergence that may help to delineate the theoretical framework that more accurately supports the primacy of resistance. In Gibson's account, potentialities are immediately related to particular objects and their environment. Therefore, they might be considered as physical or natural properties inherent in an object or in matter more generally. It is the very nature of matter that determines what it might, or might have, become. To what extent is this naturalistic account of the virtual (that ultimately implies a naturalistic account of resistance) compatible with a more Foucauldian antagonistic account? It is by replacing the term "matter" with its constitutive element, namely force, that we may perhaps deconstruct the naturalistic account in order to show how it implies the risk of completely neglecting the dimension of antagonism. It is the interplay of force that determines the emergence of an object. What an object can afford is not inscribed in its nature, rather it immediately depends on the multiple ways in which a particular set of forces may interact. Therefore, as the object is the effect of the encounter of forces (precisely as force is an effect of other forces), potentialities are effects of forces, rather than properties. It seems as if the naturalistic account stops its perception one step too early: underneath the series nature-matter-objects-properties, there is the more fundamental and perhaps even foundational series force-antagonism-history.

Deleuze's account seems to oscillate between these two positions. While the primary role he assigns to force is beyond doubt, there are several references to the concept of matter both in Deleuze's texts<sup>30</sup> and in the relevant secondary literature.<sup>31</sup> Nevertheless, the mathematical model Deleuze uses in order to represent the dynamic at play between the virtual and the actual is absolutely compatible with the antagonistic account presented above, and it is arguably helpful in order to better grasp the complexity of this mechanism. As Ronald Bogue notes,

For every general species of curve or parabola one may determine the existence of a singular point, Deleuze points out, but one cannot specify the coordinates of such a point until a particular curve or parabola is generated through the assignment of a given set of values. Thus, the singular point, before specific values are assigned, may be seen as a real but virtual entity that delimits a problem, or a zone of possibilities, with any number of concrete curves or parabolas actualizing that problem as various values are assigned to the basic equation that generates that species of curve or parabola.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Foucault, *This Is Not a Pipe*, 36.

<sup>30</sup> For instance, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus. Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987).

<sup>31</sup> On this point: Horowitz, "The Foucaultian Impasse"; Peter Hallward, "The Limits of Individuation, or How to Distinguish Deleuze and Foucault," *Angelaki* 5, no. 2 (2000); John Protevi, *Political Physics. Deleuze, Derrida and the Body Politic* (London: The Athlone Press, 2001).

<sup>32</sup> Bogue, "Playful Fold of the Self", 10.

The virtual contains these sets of possible outcomes depending on a particular curve or parabola. The way in which a singular point emerges or is actualized, thus abandoning the virtual in order to overcome the threshold of the real, is through the assignment of a given set of values. It is nothing but the interplay of forces that determine which set of values is to be assigned to a particular curve or parabola. This mathematical model may arguably serve to show why it is resistance that affirms its creative superiority over power by prompting change. The singular point that emerges to the actual may be said to be in a power relation with all the other points that could have been determined by the assignment of different set of values to the curve. The emergence of one point is necessarily at the expense of all the other possible points. The impossibility within the actual postulates that only one point can emerge, while all the others remain locked up into the virtual. Thus, it might be argued that the singular point which has been actualized exerts power over all the other virtual points. As when there is power, there is always resistance, what counters the power of the actual is precisely the non-actualized and not-actualized-yet points that exert, by definition, resistance. Challenging the Foucauldian orthodoxy, the virtual is the locus of resistance, although it is a non-locus, a place that does not exist, or better still, a place that can never emerge to the actual, "a placeless place."<sup>33</sup> Only fragments of the virtual come into actuality, but never the virtual in its entirety. As a non-place, the virtual might even be named as the Heterotopy with a capital letter, the discomfiting region par excellence insofar its being (that belongs to the real but not to the actual) ceaselessly threatens what there is in actuality. Change or the possibility of anything new can emerge only from this heterotopic region: "resistance in this sense is the provocation of a new action."<sup>34</sup> Therefore, resistance might be said to be the motor of history. The becoming is triggered exclusively by the agitation and the motion that animate the virtual as heterotopy. And it is precisely in virtue of its fundamental role in this dynamic that resistance can claim its primacy over power. Rather than as a temporal primacy, it must be understood as axiological and founded in ontology, or perhaps in the physics of ontology. Are the primacy of resistance and the contemporaneity of power and resistance two mutually exclusive claims? The primacy of resistance does not lie so much in a temporal precedence. If there is any temporal primacy, it refers exclusively to a virtual anticipation that does not conflict with the idea of the contemporaneity of power and resistance, as the actualisation of a singular power relation consists of the mutually provoked emergence of power and resistance.

To sum up, the virtual is animated by these multiple resistances that generate alternatives to the actual configuration of power. Resistances are mostly anticipated by power that deploys its forces and its strategies according to what it expects to encounter (even when power remains static, it is simply because resistance is not anticipated to represent a dangerous threat). However, resistance is never entirely predictable, and this reveals the fundamental impotency of power. Let us refer once again to the example of chess. This time we could take into consideration the case that one of the players comes up with something completely unexpected: she places on the chessboard a new piece, a frog, and states the rule of its move.

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<sup>33</sup> Michel Foucault, "Of Other Spaces," *Diacritics* 16, no. 1 (1986), 24.

<sup>34</sup> Françoise Proust, "The Line of Resistance," *Hypatia* 15, no. 4 (2000), 23.

This act did indeed belong to the virtual as well: this is perhaps what we may call an “event,” something that could not have been fully imagined in advance because of the existing rules of the game, but that existed in the virtual as the radical possibility of the absolutely new which is able to repattern the system and restructure the virtual.<sup>35</sup> The event, as radically unexpected resistance, compels power to improvise its counter-action: it is unprepared to control and defy a frog on the chessboard. Thus, power relations are more likely to be reversed once resistance catches power by surprise, namely when power is unprepared as it was not able to anticipate the occurrence of that resistance. Therefore, the ultimate dream of resistance corresponds somehow to its paradox: resistance desires not to be recognized as such. If power fails to recognize the emergence of a resistance in virtue of its radical novelty, resistance can grow to the extent that it becomes able to revert the relation of power. Jacques Lacan’s *Seminar on the “Purloined Letter”* may offer an interesting insight to grasp the dynamic of this process. In Poe’s story, the police thoroughly search the Minister’s apartment for a stolen missive. However, this search has nothing to do with what will be found or not found.

The object of the quest is in fact defined by the subjective expectations which are brought to the quest. [...] In this case these expectations are determined by an imaginary identification with the ‘criminal mind’, which is assumed to have concealed the letter in the most unlikely and inaccessible hiding-place. The letter remains undiscovered therefore simply because, even as the police held it in their hands, it did not correspond to the description that they had.<sup>36</sup>

Paraphrasing Lacan, the letter here represents the non-objectifiable alterity of resistance. Its relation to the multiplicities of the virtual excludes its ultimate predictability: resistance resists its anticipation. Obviously, there are several outcomes that are highly likely to occur and those are the ones which power will be better equipped to confront. Through “an imaginary identification with the *resistant* mind,” power will easily anticipate those modalities of resistance that are most likely to be adopted by its counter-part. The letter can be expected to be hidden in a safe or in a secret drawer. It will not be anticipated to be framed and hung to the wall. It is exactly through an absolute new resistance (exposing what you are supposed to hide, for instance) that power fails to recognize resistance as such: in this way, a power relation is more likely to be reverted.

We could introduce a relevant example: employees of a company obtain permission from management to arrange a weekly meeting after work-time. The meeting is thought to be an informal personnel party where employees get to know each other and share some drinks. The management is positive about this initiative but seldom attends these meetings. Little by little, some employees begin to share their complaints against the working conditions: as these parties have effectively contributed to establish a certain *esprit de corps*, those complaints circulate easily and end up in the formulation of a precise series of demands. The employees’ uni-

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<sup>35</sup> Bogue, “Playful Fold of the Self” 13.

<sup>36</sup> Peter Dews, *Logics of Disintegration. Post-Structuralist Thought and the Claims of Critical Theory* (London: Verso, 1987), 98.

tary front enables them to exert a sheer resistance. Management, on the other hand, is all of a sudden confronted with an opposition they had not expected to get. Accordingly, management is unprepared to struggle adequately against the employees' demands. If it had recognized the potential threat of resistance in those meetings, management would not have authorized them. On the other hand, by not being recognized as such (not even by most of the employees), resistance is able to freely grow to the extent that its force suffices to overthrow the specific power relation at stake.

### **Active and reactive forces: a qualitative distinction between power and resistance**

As I showed in the previous section, the primacy of resistance derives from its privileged relation to the outside/virtual. Nevertheless, there is an ambiguity within this conception that demands a further refinement of the concept of resistance. Power and resistance ultimately share a common nature insofar they both are nothing but forces. A difference in the vectors that represent them (in terms of intensity and direction) would not suffice to justify the claim of the superiority of one over the other on the basis of a proximity to the virtual. What is needed is rather a qualitative distinction between forces of resistance and forces of power. The hierarchization of forces that allows distinguishing power and resistance is modulated through the Deleuzian presentation of Nietzsche's distinction between active and reactive forces. Active forces are creative, affirmative, transformative and self-directed, whereas reactive forces are forces of adaptation or conservation. Paul Patton includes in the two series an additional criteria of distinction: active forces are "superior forces that dominate," while reactive forces are "conditioned or constrained by superior forces."<sup>37</sup> Within the ontological framework adopted in this article, the definition of active forces as those which dominate over others is highly problematic as it would ultimately imply an equivalence between power and active forces. On the contrary, the defining features of the active must necessarily be those related to the becoming: its being affirmative, creative and transformative. Therefore, it is more properly resistance that fits these criteria. Patton somehow acknowledges this point by affirming that "reactive forces may get the better of active ones, but they do not thereby become active, for the reason that their mode of operation is not the same,"<sup>38</sup> *de facto* revoking the initial equivalence of power and active forces. The qualitative difference between power and resistance lies precisely in this distinction: resistance is the active force in the relation. Its creative and affirmative potential obliges power to react to its exercise. Power adapts itself to the specific resistance it anticipates to encounter. Its exercise is reactively measured upon the coordinates of the force exerted (or expected to be exerted) by its adversary. Who would possibly use a tank to exert power over a rebel schoolchild?

Nevertheless, it remains unclear to what extent this eminently Deleuzian conception, that Deleuze himself attributes to Foucault is actually extendable to Foucault. For instance, it has been argued that, in contrast with the creative character of Deleuze's resistance, Foucault adopts a more negative conception, interpreting resistance as a reaction to power: "the differ-

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<sup>37</sup> P. Patton, *Deleuze & the Political* (Taylor & Francis Group, 2000), 60.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, p.61.

ence between Foucault and Deleuze consists of the fact that whereas the former conceives of the forces of change in the diagram as points of resistance that escape Power, for Deleuze they are lines of flight of desire that are absolutely primary, points of creation and deterritorialization."<sup>39</sup> However, I would tend to reject this hypothesis as it fails to take into account part of Foucault's work in which he is more clearly concerned with the creative character of resistance.<sup>40</sup> As is particularly evident in his later works on the care of the self,<sup>41</sup> for Foucault the constitution of the subject entails a dimension of creative transformation that may possibly introduce the radical novelty of new alternative subjectivities: "We have to promote new forms of subjectivity through the refusal of this kind of individuality which has been imposed on us for several centuries."<sup>42</sup>

### Conclusion

To affirm that resistance comes first immediately provokes a slight sense of confusion. Resistance is normally thought to be a reaction to power and the inversion of this understanding is arguably counterintuitive. Nevertheless, as I have tried to show in this article, it is possible to refer to an ontological framework in order to demonstrate the validity of this claim. Although both Foucault and Deleuze (even though it is hard to establish whether he is limiting himself to neutrally describe Foucault's model of power or whether he is actually adding something of his own thought) have actually mentioned that resistance comes first, it would be problematic to prove that this concept could have been fully endorsed by either. They do represent a point of departure for the analysis I have developed in this article. In turn, it is not my intention to claim that the primacy of resistance is a proper Foucauldian or Deleuzian concept.

To a certain extent, the ontological framework that provides the basis for the affirmation of the main thesis of this article might be said to have a stronger propensity towards Deleuze rather than towards Foucault. However, I hold that such a framework is ultimately

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<sup>39</sup> Mansueto, *Figura Sola*, 106. (My translation)

<sup>40</sup> The idea of counter-conduct represents an essential stage between the analysis of techniques of subjection and that, developed in the 1980s, of practices of subjectivation. In his *Security, Territory and Population*, the primacy of resistance shapes Foucault's conception of politics. In a series of manuscript pages inserted between two lectures of the course, he writes in fact: "the analysis of governmentality implies that everything is political [politique]. Politics [la politique] is nothing more and nothing less than that which is born with resistance to governmentality, the first revolt, the first confrontation": Michel Foucault, *Security, Territory, Population. Course at College de France 1977-1978* (Palgrave MacMillan, 2009), 217. Nevertheless, this insight ultimately offers little help for the argument for the primacy of resistance developed in this article.

<sup>41</sup> On this point Edward McGushin, "Arts of Life, Arts of Resistance: Foucault and Hadot on Living Philosophy," in Sam Binkley and Jorge Capetillo Ponce (eds.) *A Foucault for the 21st Century : Governmentality, Biopolitics and Discipline in the New Millennium* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars, 2010); Dianna Taylor, "Practicing Politics with Foucault and Kant: Toward a Critical Life," *Philosophy & Social Criticism* 29, no. 3 (2003); A.B. Hofmeyr, "The Contemporary Pertinence of the Later Foucault. Have His Strategies of Resistance Stood the Test of Time?," *South African Journal of Philosophy* 27, no.2 (2008).

<sup>42</sup> Michel Foucault, "The Subject and Power," in Hubert Dreyfus and Paul Rabinow (eds), *Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 216.

compatible with Foucault's antagonistic model of power, even if Foucault has never actually committed himself to an ontological analysis. The privileged relation of resistance to the virtual is what essentially grants to resistance its primacy over power. The virtual is the totality of all the singular configurations of the actual that might be or might have been actualized. This infinite series of potentialities constitutes a force of resistance to the actual insofar as it presses against the borders of what there is in order to come into being and replace it with an alternative configuration. Hence, its constitutive relation with history. Resistance is what provokes a change, the emergence of a new singularity. It is the element that sets history in motion by activating its dynamicity. This creative and affirmative character of resistance permits us to establish a qualitative distinction between power and resistance. Whereas the former is, perhaps surprisingly, a reactive force, the latter is fundamentally active. This distinction might be relevant to retroactively understand what it is usually taken for granted in Foucault's model of power. The idea of field of forces might alone have sufficed to illustrate the antagonistic dynamic. If power and resistance had been considered qualitatively identical, the introduction of two distinct labels would have been superfluous or even contradictory. Thus the primacy of resistance might enable us to give a stronger theoretical foundation to what otherwise would have been little more than an intuition regarding the qualitative distinction between resistance and power.

Marco Checchi  
School of Management  
University of Leicester  
[mc452@le.ac.uk](mailto:mc452@le.ac.uk)