

# PLÉYADE

## REVISTA DE HUMANIDADES Y CIENCIAS SOCIALES

número 25 | enero-junio 2020

online issn 0719-3696 / issn 0718-655x

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**Critical Possibilities on Social Research:  
the Abortion *Dispositif* from a Feminist  
Perspective**  
*Posibilidades para la investigación social  
crítica: el dispositivo del aborto desde una  
perspectiva feminista*

*Lieta Vivaldi*

INTERNATIONAL INSTITUTE FOR PHILOSOPHY AND SOCIAL STUDIES

**Abstract**

Taking the case of abortion, this article unveils by considering the contributions of critical theory to the methodology of social sciences in general. It expounds and defends the value of some key methodological insights of feminist theory articulated around the notion of dispositive, as a tool of critical theory. This methodological and epistemological critique is part of a wider and ongoing debate with more “traditional” conceptions of methodology for social sciences. In this paper, the notion of dispositive is considered as a tool to articulate that rewriting, embodied, and articulated in the case of abortion as *dispositif*. This argument borrows some aspects of Foucault’s methodology to trace the discourses and subject positions surrounding the abortion *dispositif* as a form of biopolitics in which a tangle of lines of power/knowledge cohabit. In this framework, feminist discourses have an impact on both women and governmentality – that is, in the rationality of power. In studying the prohibition of abortion, the ways in which people understand the prohibition are considered in both legal and ethical sense. Beyond the descriptions of the various ways in which people cope and make sense of the regulation, Foucault invites us to pay attention to the ways in which these understandings of the situation (and these ways of dealing with the present) collectively model or produce such present situation.

**Keywords:** Abortion; Feminist Methodologies; *Dispositif*, Foucault; Deleuze.

## Resumen

Tomando el caso del aborto como eje alrededor del cual se desarrolla el presente ensayo, se consideran las contribuciones de la teoría crítica a la metodología de las ciencias sociales. Se expone y defiende el valor de algunas ideas metodológicas clave de la teoría feminista, articuladas en torno a la noción de dispositivo, como herramienta de la teoría crítica. Esta crítica metodológica y epistemológica es parte de un debate más amplio y continuo con concepciones más “tradicionales” de la metodología de las ciencias sociales. En este artículo, se considera la noción de dispositivo como una herramienta para articular esa reescritura, encarnada y articulada en el caso del aborto como *dispositif*. Tomo prestados algunos aspectos de la metodología foucaultiana para rastrear los discursos y las posiciones de los sujetos que rodean el dispositivo del aborto como una forma de biopolítica en la que conviven una madeja de líneas de poder/conocimiento. En este contexto, los discursos feministas tienen un impacto tanto en las mujeres como en la gubernamentalidad, es decir, en la racionalidad del poder. Al estudiar la prohibición del aborto consideramos las formas en que las personas entienden la prohibición tanto en sentido legal como ético. Más allá de las descripciones de las diversas formas en que las personas hacen frente y dan sentido a la regulación, Foucault nos invita a prestar atención a las formas en que estas maneras de entender la situación (y estas formas de lidiar con el presente) modelan o producen colectivamente tal situación presente.

**Palabras clave:** Aborto; Metodologías feministas; *Dispositif*; Foucault; Deleuze.

## Introduction

One of the key ideas in feminist epistemology is that it matters which position one is producing knowledge from. Our social standpoint/perspective shapes what we know (empirical research), how we know (methodology), and the meaning of our knowledge (philosophy). Feminist approaches to epistemology argue that modern science and philosophy have traditionally not paid enough attention to social or political (and thus, gendered) contexts of knowledge production. Moreover, in a deeply stratified society there cannot be “disinterested” knowledge; on the contrary, the technical is political. Knowledge-practices are also political practices because they partake in a thoroughly political world. As such, every form of knowledge enacts certain perspectives and contributes to shaping the world in particular ways. As Sandra Harding puts it:

Science is politics by other means, and it also generates reliable information about the empirical world. Science is more than politics, of course, but it is that. It is a contested terrain and has been so from its origins. Groups with conflicting social agendas have struggled to gain control of the social resources that the sciences—their “information,” their technologies, and their prestige—can provide. For those who have suffered from what seem to be the consequences of the sciences, their technologies, and their forms of rationality, it appears absurd to regard science as the value-free, disinterested, impartial, Archimedean arbiter of conflicting agendas, as conventional mythology holds.<sup>1</sup>

In other words, what – and how – we know depends largely on how we are socially positioned. It matters from which standpoint one is producing knowledge. All standpoints are partial perspectives; they are both enabling and limiting (although there might be some of them that are more limiting than others). Established scientific methodology, devices from the unmarked standpoint of white masculinity, or what has been termed the “view from nowhere”,<sup>2</sup> provides a perspective premised on what Harding calls “objectivism” or “weak objectivity”: the idea that science has to be objective in order to critically examine evidence in a value-free, impartial account of the world. Instead, Harding’s “strong objectivity” argues that this is not being objective enough. If objectivity requires the critical scrutiny of all the evidence, then one must also include the social positioning of the researcher to the scrutinised evidence. Thus, marginalised social positions can provide an epistemological advantage in that they can experience and more easily appreciate the limitations

<sup>1</sup> Sandra Harding, *Whose Science? Whose Knowledge? Thinking from Women's Lives* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991), 10.

<sup>2</sup> Thomas Nagel, *The View from Nowhere* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986).

of dominant positions (which are historically, though wrongly, taken as “natural” and “neutral”). As Donna Haraway has shown in *Situated Knowledges*, knowledge is produced by bodies, that is, through bodies. And it matters which bodies produce knowledge. Scientific claims often perform a “God-trick”: they provide a “view from nowhere”, a disembodied account that takes no account of its own situated perspective. “Feminist objectivity means quite simply *situated knowledges*”.<sup>3</sup>

Taking the case of abortion as the axis around which the following contribution unveils, I consider the contributions of critical theory to the methodology of social sciences in general. I would like to expound and defend the value of some key methodological insights of feminist theory articulated around the notion of *dispositif*, as a tool of critical theory. This methodological and epistemological critique is part of a wider and ongoing debate with more “traditional” conceptions of methodology for social sciences. Some, for instance Spivak,<sup>4</sup> have suggested that this kind of contributions should take the form of a rewriting, and not just a progressive, or partial, or intermittent form of compensation (or justification) of those “traditional” theories of the world or of consciousness that are foundational to critical theory, and that are blind or silent about key feminist insights. I will consider the notion of *dispositif* as a tool to articulate that rewriting, embodied and articulated in the case of abortion as *dispositif*.

I am not looking for the origins of contemporary discourses about abortion in Chile, but I am seeking to find those moments or those institutions within which I can observe the different lines of power/knowledge attempting to influence how abortion is understood, governed, and experienced. This resonates with Deleuze’s idea that “the lines which make up the apparatuses demonstrate continuous variations. There are no more universals – that is to say, there is nothing except lines of variation. The general terms are the co-ordinates which have no meaning other than to make possible the estimation of a continuous variation”.<sup>5</sup>

Abortion has been and remains a key site for feminism in Chile: it not only refers to a basic right of women to decide over what happens to their own bodies, but it is also a key site insofar as the body is more generally the locus of social control and discipline as well as of resistance. Moving away from an abstract debate on the morality and legality of abortion, an approach that takes on abortion as a sociological issue needs to consider the heterogeneity of intersecting lines that constitute it. I am particularly interested in the way in which feminists have organised themselves “clandestinely”, due to the illegality of abortion. Feminists

<sup>3</sup> Donna Haraway, “Situated knowledges: The science question in feminism and the privilege of partial perspective”, *Feminist Studies* 14, no. 3 (1988): 581.

<sup>4</sup> Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, “Feminism and critical theory”, *Women’s Studies International Quarterly* 1, no. 3 (1978): 241-46.

<sup>5</sup> Gilles Deleuze, “What is a *Dispositif*?”, in *Michel Foucault, Philosopher*, T.J. Armstrong ed. and trans. (New York: Routledge, 1992), 166.

have created effective communities of care and solidarity networks that spread information about abortions with pills (misoprostol), offer support to women who decide to have an abortion throughout the process, and some groups also monitor the implementation of the recently-approved Abortion Act (2017). Their creative ways of shaping existences certainly go beyond the subject of law, offering new possibilities for resistance. In this context, I will defend the role of feminism as an exercise of freedom in terms of resistance, a key mode of challenge to State power as well as a negotiation of power.

To do so, I will approach the contemporary abortion debate through different analytic points of entry. I borrow from aspects of Foucault's methodology to trace the discourses and subject positions surrounding the abortion *dispositif* as a form of biopolitics in which a tangle of lines of power/knowledge cohabit. In this framework, feminist discourses have an impact on both women and governmentality – that is, in the rationality of power. In studying the prohibition of abortion, we consider the ways in which people understand the prohibition in both legal and ethical sense. Beyond the descriptions of the various ways in which people cope and make sense of the situation, Foucault invites us to pay attention to the ways in which these understandings of the situation (and these ways of dealing with the present) collectively model or produce such present situation.<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, as Vikki Bell has highlighted, scholars working on Foucault should not be confined to “any particular way to conduct research, but we are always prompted to see how people adopt rationalities and logics, how they negotiate them in specific domains of life, and how they are changed by them individually and collectively”.<sup>7</sup>

## ***Dispositif* and Performativity**

In the case of abortion, there is an intersection of political, judicial, disciplinary, and sexual discourses constituting a *dispositif* or apparatus. Reproductive policies are a paradigmatic example of the intersection of biopower's two poles: disciplinary power (the government of individuals) and biopolitics (the State's government of populations). When reflecting on the concept of *dispositif*, Foucault said:

What I'm trying to pick out with this term is, firstly, a thoroughly heterogeneous ensemble consisting of discourses, institutions, architectural forms, regulatory decisions, laws, administrative measures, scientific statements, philosophical, moral and philanthropic propositions – in short,

<sup>6</sup> Vikki Bell, “Studying provocations, the researcher's care for what exists. Interview with Vikki Bell”, in *Studying the Agency of Being Governed: Methodological Reflections*, S. Hansson, S. Hellberg, and M. Stern eds. (New York: Routledge, 2015).

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 58.

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the said as much as the unsaid. Such are the elements of the apparatus. The apparatus itself is the system of relations that can be established between these elements (...) whether discursive or non-discursive, there is a sort of interplay of shifts of position and modifications of function which can also vary very widely (...) I understand by the term ‘apparatus’ a sort of – shall we say – formation which has as its major function at a given historical moment that of responding to an urgent need.<sup>8</sup>

The *dispositif* or apparatus is composed of lines that are lines of power/knowledge. Indeed, according to Deleuze’s elaboration of the notion, a *dispositif* is precisely that: a tangle of lines, a multilinear ensemble:

It is composed of lines, each having a different nature. And the lines in the apparatus do not outline or surround systems which are each homogeneous in their own right, object, subject, language, and so on, but follow directions, trace balances which are always off balance, now drawing together and then distancing themselves from one another. Each line is broken and subject to *changes in direction*, bifurcating and forked, and subject to *drifting*. Visible objects, affirmations which can be formulated, forces exercised and subjects in position are like vectors and tensors. Thus the three major aspects which Foucault successively distinguishes, Knowledge, Power, and Subjectivity are by no means contours given once and for all, but series of variables which supplant one another. It is always in a crisis that Foucault discovers new dimensions, new lines.<sup>9</sup>

A *dispositif* is a “tangled ensemble” within which one is placed and positioned, so that it is always from within the *dispositif* that one must begin one’s research by looking at, hearing, and seeing these different and changing lines of power/knowledge. There is no origin that we should trace but rather one must elect certain places – such as certain institutions – from which to consider how the issue of “abortion” is constituted. It is important to emphasise that the *dispositif* is formed by lines of power/knowledge that are also “lines of lights” in the sense that they allow one, as a researcher, to see other lines or discourses because “they are machines which make one see and speak”.<sup>10</sup> The *dispositif* enables and limits ways of seeing and understanding. However, there are ways of challenging its lines because discourses and events can prompt changes, and those changes are reflected in the way we act, see, talk, and think – in this case, about abortion. I am looking at specific lines

<sup>8</sup> Michel Foucault, “Confession of the flesh”, in *Power/knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972-1977*, C. Gordon ed. (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980), 194-195.

<sup>9</sup> Deleuze, “What is a *Dispositif*?”, 159.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 160.

of power/knowledge or discourses and associated events that form the abortion *dispositif*. When reflecting on his work, Foucault said that:

The point of all these investigations concerning madness, disease, delinquency, sexuality, and what I am talking about now, is to show how the coupling of a set of practices and a regime of truth forms a *dispositif* of knowledge-power that effectively marks out in reality that which does not exist and legitimately submits it to the division [*partage*] between true and false.<sup>11</sup>

Accordingly, the point here is to interrogate the *dispositif*, to understand this “tangle” of different lines that intersect creating new ways of seeing. Therefore, I am looking at these different aspects as selected points of entry: key discourses, debates around changes in legislation, and visual representations. This *dispositif* constitutes abortion: it makes it possible to think about abortion and its context, and key figures are made around it as truth claims.

As we will see, the case of abortion encompasses an array of heterogeneous elements, both discursive and non-discursive; moreover, they shift in position, value, and meaning. In tracing the shifting positions and new relations, it is key to recognise the directions taken in these dynamic systems of relations, not least because the process of subjectification, the subject’s coming into being, occurs in the midst of this social apparatus or *dispositif*.<sup>12</sup> Indeed, the concept of *dispositif* is like a diagram to explore how the subject is constructed and deconstructed. My interest here dwells on both points, as they are embodied in the context and activity of different actors involved in the abortion debate.

If knowledges, power, and subjects only exist as pluralities and never achieve a fixed identity that transcends its multiple historical forms, we should talk not of knowledge but of forms of veridiction, not of power but of governmentality, and not of subjects but of a praxis of the self. As knowledge and power are intimately linked and co-determined, the human subject engages in games of truth, “whether they be truth games that take the form of science or refer to a scientific model, or truth games such as those one might encounter in institutions or practices of control”.<sup>13</sup> In this way, different subjects are constituted in different games of truth. For instance, in judicial practices, truth establishes by the authority of the Church or the State through the collection of testimonies and the assertion of

<sup>11</sup> Michel Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at The Collège De France, 1978–79* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 19.

<sup>12</sup> Deleuze, “*What is a Dispositif?*”, 161.

<sup>13</sup> Michel Foucault, “The ethics of the concern of the self as a practice of freedom”, in *The Essential Works of Michel Foucault, Volume I, Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth*, P Rabinow ed., Robert Hurley et al. trans. (New York: The New Press, 1997), 281.

facts; a disciplinary practice establishes truth through its different mechanisms of examining and vigilance.

In this sense, I believe that a particularly crucial aspect of the abortion *dispositif* that becomes manifest is that women's bodies gathered in disciplinary regimes are objectified in the sense of being subjected to a regime of truth: "the operations of disciplinary power become the conditions of possibility for a scientific knowledge about the population there constituted".<sup>14</sup> Becoming disciplined in this way is precisely what makes it possible for a scientific knowledge of the human group subjected to the processes of monitoring, recording, and measuring the body and its actions. That is, disciplinary regimes not only monitor, record, and measure individuals but also, in the act of doing so, treat them as "cases" and thereby open up the possibility of construing a knowledge of the group, its "types", and a whole discourse of variation from a "norm" which is itself constituted through the development of such knowledge.

Moreover, the rise of new forms of objectification (provided by psychiatry, psychology, pedagogy, criminology, etcetera) carries new forms of subjectification. It is in this sense that "the folding of power into the body is therefore, and simultaneously, an objectification and a subjectification".<sup>15</sup> Furthermore, this knowledge normalises in the sense that individuals are not only compared against one another but, as disciplinary forces extend their reach, individuals begin to compare themselves with a normality that has been scientifically generated. Thus, there is a difference between the law and the norm: while the law discriminates between what is allowed and what is forbidden, separating those who do not conform to it, the norm functions instead by comparing the adjustment to the ideal, because it seeks to homogenise. As Beatrice Han has pointed out, subjects are individuated but without individuality,<sup>16</sup> because their individuality is understood only in relation to a norm.

Alongside the concept of *dispositif*, the concept of performativity also plays a crucial methodological role. Performativity refers to "the embodiment of normative ideals via a process of mimesis whereby the body is rendered culturally intelligible".<sup>17</sup> Or, in the words of Butler:

The performance of gender retroactively produces the effect of some true and abiding feminine essence or disposition, so that one cannot use an expressive model for thinking about gender. Moreover, (...) gender is produced by ritualised repetition of conventions, and that this ritual is

<sup>14</sup> Vikki Bell, *Culture and Performance: The Challenge of Ethics, Politics and Feminist Theory* (Oxford: Berg, 2007), 14.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibidem.*

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 100.

socially compelled in part by the force of a compulsory heterosexuality.<sup>18</sup>

Subjects are constituted within a certain *dispositif*, and it is crucial to explore the way in which the performativity of normative power works, reinforcing and challenging these lines of power/knowledge, through repetition and displacement as part of the process. According to Bell, “via Butler’s work, the concept of performativity has become a tool of analysis by which to interrogate differentiated subject formation within practices that sustain lines of power and power-effects”.<sup>19</sup> The notion of performativity also allows us to see the contingency of gender and identity in general.

Furthermore, Leticia Sabsay highlights the citational character of performativity (the enforcement of repetition refers to the lack of a foundation and the absence of an origin), and how it signifies some key issues for gender theory: “Gender is not founded on a prior rule or ground: rather, it is established by repetition. Because it has no foundation, it is established again and again, and it is never established once and for all. Hence, the necessary openness of any assumed gender position that forms part of performativity”.<sup>20</sup>

This iterability or citational character of performativity (underscored also by Derrida) should be complemented by the insights of the Foucauldian *dispositif*: with its “inadvertent consequences”, “unexpected convergences of discourses”, and certain teleological aim of power that can be defeated or subverted.<sup>21</sup> Indeed, the *dispositif* offers the possibility of displacement:

For the “pessimistic” account of the subject as a trained and disciplined body in Foucault’s sense, or as constituted under conditions of duress and made possible only through its attachment to power, in Butler’s sense, contains also the possibility of new entanglements of power, ones that do not escape power relations but that institute new arrangements of the lines of the *dispositif*.<sup>22</sup>

In this sense, and on the contrary to the idea that we are determined by the lines of power/knowledge, the analysis of the abortion *dispositif* allows us to see the possibility of actual resistance and change in power relations.

<sup>18</sup> Judith Butler, *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative* (New York and London: Routledge, 1997), 144.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.

<sup>20</sup> Leticia Sabsay, *The Political Imaginary of Sexual Freedom: Subjectivity and Power in the New Sexual Democratic Turn* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016).

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 81fn.

<sup>22</sup> Bell, *Culture and Performance*, 25.

## Reflecting on My Own Position Within this *Dispositif*

As I have mentioned, I look into the *dispositif* not to find “the origins” of the abortion situation but to visualize these tangles of power/knowledge and their “games of truth”, to consider how actors try to influence what emerges within this *dispositif* as truth. It is important also to acknowledge that

untangling these lines within a social apparatus is, in each case, like drawing up a map, doing cartography, surveying unknown landscapes, and this is what he [Foucault] calls ‘working on the ground’. One has to position oneself on these lines themselves, these lines which do not just make up the social apparatus but run through it and pull at it, from North to South, from East to West or diagonally.<sup>23</sup>

In this sense, I am already within this “tangle of lines”: I define myself as feminist, but at the same time I also want to see what feminists have “achieved”, what the challenges are, how certain subjects are understood, and so on.

My previous research on abortion and my experience as an activist inevitably inform my research and are, to a limited extent, enfolded within it, especially because interviewing women in an earlier research project made me think about the way in which subjectivities are intimately connected with different discursive representations of abortion, motherhood, the foetus, and so on. I heard in those interviews the way in which possibilities for subjects are constrained or, conversely, they open up by the *dispositif*. Some interviews were conducted as part of two projects in which I participated at the Universidad Diego Portales in Chile. The first project was the production of the gender chapter in the 2013 “Informe Anual sobre Derechos Humanos en Chile”, which focused on the criminalisation of abortion under any circumstances in Chile and the impact of this policy on women’s lives.<sup>24</sup> We conducted 61 interviews with women who had had illegal abortions; with their partners, friends, and relatives to capture their experiences; and with healthcare providers who assisted them in the process.<sup>25</sup> We used thematic analysis<sup>26</sup> to identify and group the main themes of the practice of abortion in a restrictive environment. We recruited the participants through an invitation on social networks and using snowball sampling. To cover different types of experiences and contexts,

<sup>23</sup> Deleuze, “*What is a Dispositif?*”, 159.

<sup>24</sup> Lidia Casas y Lieta Vivaldi, “La penalización del aborto como una violación a los derechos humanos de las mujeres”, Informe Anual sobre Derechos Humanos en Chile 2013 (Santiago: Universidad Diego Portales, 2013), consulted on June 2020, available at <http://www.derechoshumanos.udp.cl/derechoshumanos/images/InformeAnual/2013/Cap%202020Penalizacion%20de%20aborto%20como%20violacion%20a%20ddhh%20mujeres.pdf>.

<sup>25</sup> In total, 41 women; 12 partners, friends, and relatives; and 8 healthcare providers.

<sup>26</sup> Cathy K. Riessman, *Narrative methods for the human sciences* (Los Angeles: Sage Publisher, 2008).

we contacted people from diverse backgrounds, ages, and social classes. We also interviewed members operating the *Línea Aborto Libre* (Free Abortion Hotline) to explore the feminist networks that inform women about abortions.

Another relevant project was conducted in 2015, specifically about pregnancy and foetal anomalies incompatible with life.<sup>27</sup> This time we interviewed 25 people, including healthcare professionals, women who lived through such an experience, and one partner.<sup>28</sup> In this project we also used thematic analysis and we organised the information chronologically: from the moment the woman is informed that she is having a pregnancy with foetal anomalies until after the pregnancy finishes. We included women's shock upon receiving the diagnosis, their feelings of bereavement and loss, and the clinical practices used to ease their suffering under the legal restrictions. Originally, we wanted to directly illustrate the experience of women, but it was extremely difficult to find women who wanted to be interviewed, so finally the study captured primarily the experiences of health care providers. In both projects, most of the interviews were conducted face to face and some of them via phone or skype. We chose qualitative in-depth interview as a method to provide insights into women's and health practitioners' experiences.<sup>29</sup> We also reflected in our own position as researchers. In her famous article "Can the subaltern speak?", Spivak highlights the risks when members of a privileged group, for instance scholars, make political claims on behalf of "oppressed groups". Indeed, scholars can patronise, or essentialise, the researched group and thus reinforce the oppression of the group spoken for.<sup>30</sup> In this sense, power balance between the researcher and the researched was also reflected upon during the process of the interviews and also while analysing them. Sometimes, in moments of the interview I was seen as an "expert" by women; other times I felt that they really trusted me and saw the interview as a conversation where they could freely share their experience, in some cases for the first time. In this context, some women told me that they experienced the interview as a "moment for themselves", even therapeutic.<sup>31</sup> In the case of healthcare professionals, they sometimes expressed their prejudices or problems for being interviewed by someone

<sup>27</sup> Lidia Casas y Lieta Vivaldi, "Pregnancies and fetal anomalies incompatible with life in Chile: Arguments and experiences in advocating for legal reform", *Health and Human Rights Journal* 19, no. 1 (2017): 95-108.

<sup>28</sup> 22 healthcare providers: one psychiatrist, one psychologist, nine certified nurse-midwives, one neonatologist, nine obstetrician-gynaecologists, and one sociologist, from the cities of Santiago, Valparaíso, and Valdivia. Two women and one partner – it was extremely difficult to find women who were willing to talk about the subject.

<sup>29</sup> Herbert J. Rubin and Irene S. Rubin, *Qualitative Interviewing: The Art of Hearing Data* (Thousand Oaks: Sage, 1995).

<sup>30</sup> Linda Alcoff, "The Problem of Speaking for Others", in *Who Can Speak?: Authority and Critical Identity*, J. Roof and R. Wiegman eds. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1995), 97-119.

<sup>31</sup> Ann Phoenix, "Practicing Feminist Research: The Intersection of Gender and 'Race'", in *Research Process. Researching Women's Lives from a Feminist Perspective*, M. Maynard and J. Purvis eds. (London: Taylor and Francis, 1995), 49-71.

who was not a doctor; or sometimes, especially when they had strong views against abortion, they were sceptic about my intentions or my capacity of analysing their answers. In terms of ethics, both projects were approved by the Diego Portales University Ethics Committee. To protect confidentiality, the names were not recorded, and we made a commitment not to reveal identities. All participants were fully apprised of the contents, potential risks, and benefits; were assured anonymity and confidentiality, and they gave explicit consent based on it. Consent forms were marked rather than signed. In the first project no audio recordings were made, and we just took written notes to prevent any risks of criminal investigation. In the second project we recorded the interviews and the audios were destroyed once transcribed and anonymised.

Additionally, my participation in different feminist meetings and organizations such as *Mesa Acción Aborto* (Panel Abortion Action) and *Decido y soy Libre* (I Decide and I'm Free), have been crucial in complementing my research. I also had the opportunity to be part of the audience of some parliamentarian debates, and even to collaborate in the writing of some of the presentations. I have carried out a systematic review of news about abortion during these years and analysed them according to the relevance and importance for the specific subjects that were treated. I also collected data from official sources such as governmental bodies, and secondary data from different archives.

Feminist methodology was crucial to understanding the importance and difficulties of attempting to forge links between feminism, activism, the academia, and women's everyday lives. As mentioned, a key aspect of feminist research is the idea of situated knowledges, according to which how and what we "see" and research is always situated in embodied forms of experiences and specific socio-historical conditions. Additionally, situated knowledges

seek not the knowledges ruled by phallogocentrism (nostalgia for the presence of the one true Word) and disembodied vision, but those ruled by partial sight and limited voice. We do not seek partiality for its own sake, but for the sake of the connections and unexpected openings situated knowledges make possible. The only way to find a larger vision is to be somewhere in particular. The science question in feminism is about objectivity as positioned rationality.<sup>32</sup>

I am clearly approaching my research from within the *dispositif* and aligned with feminist perspectives. This has also given me a constant reflexivity in my own work and practices, including a monitoring and questioning – Who am I including and excluding to? What assumptions am I making and why? How am I writing about

<sup>32</sup> Haraway, "Situated Knowledges", 590.

others? – insofar as I follow Haraway, who writes that “feminist embodiment, then, is not about fixed location in a reified body, female or otherwise, but about nodes in fields, inflections in orientations, and responsibility for difference in material-semiotic fields of meaning”.<sup>33</sup>

## Genealogy as a Method

To study the *dispositif* is very challenging.

When we say that Foucault’s own approach was *genealogical*, we say that genealogy was Foucault’s way to trace the emergence of a given contemporary *dispositif*. In Foucault’s view, genealogy as a historical method reveals the radical contingency of present institutions, legislation, and prejudices, thus opening a possibility of change. Genealogy represented a shift in emphasis with respect to his previous work on archaeology, one that enabled him to draw attention to the symbiotic relationship between power and knowledge.

The genealogical analysis is a historical method that traces not exactly the origin of something but its descent (*Herkunft*). It proceeds by deconstructing and looking at the fragments that constitute the unities of reality. In this sense, genealogy investigates the heterogeneity of historical unities (ideas, facts, and processes).

Genealogy does not pretend to go back in time to restore an unbroken continuity that operates beyond the dispersion of forgotten things; its duty is not to demonstrate that the past actively exists in the present, that it continues secretly to animate the present, having imposed a predetermined form on all its vicissitudes. Genealogy does not resemble the evolution of a species and does not map the destiny of a people. On the contrary, to follow the complex course of descent is to maintain passing events in their proper dispersion; it is to identify the accidents, the minute deviations – or, conversely, the complete reversals – the errors, the false appraisals, and the faulty calculations that gave birth to those things that continue to exist and have value for us; it is to discover that truth or being does not lie at the root of what we know and what we are, but the exteriority of accidents.<sup>34</sup>

Indeed, by shifting the site of truth from deep grounds and internal essences to the exteriority of accidents, genealogy tracks the fragmentary and heterogeneous constitution of the phenomenon itself. This approach helps us to better understand the regulations and control mechanisms exerted over the body. The cultural and

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 588.

<sup>34</sup> Michel Foucault, “Nietzsche, genealogy, history”, in *The Foucault Reader: An Introduction to Foucault’s Thought*, P. Rabinow ed. (New York: Pantheon Books 1984), 81.

political institutions and the wider discourses informing the present legislation on abortion must be considered within the broader framework of economic, religious, and social factors. In this way, the current prohibition on abortion in Chile appears not only as the resultant decision of a group of politicians and members of the Church but also as embedded in a more complex net of power relations. So too, as we will see, the recent genealogy of its contemporary moment of transition reveals the entangled net of different constructions that participate in what abortion is.

Genealogy is also *Entstehung* – looking for the historical emergence of something, following its moment of arising, focusing on the force-relations generating the events. The emergence of events is a staging of clashing forces, an eruption of contradictions or outright battles, as I will show below.

Of special interest is the way in which genealogy is applied to the reading of women's bodies. As Foucault famously put it, the body appears as “the inscribed surface of events (traced by language and dissolved by ideas), the locus of a dissociated self (adopting the illusion of a substantial unity), and a volume in perpetual disintegration”.<sup>35</sup> The genealogical method enables us to read the relationship between body and history. The deconstruction of political institutions often regarded as sacred, and of metaphysical accounts that see unchanging truths behind our conception of the world, enables us to see much more clearly how the body has been moulded by different lines of power/knowledge, and their distinct rules of behaviour. In this sense, Foucault is carrying forward Nietzsche's approach presented in *On the Genealogy of Morals*.<sup>36</sup> If Nietzsche sketched several power relations (between the weak and the strong, society and the individual) as a way of explaining the emergence of our values and institutions (punishment, guilt, good, evil, etcetera), Foucault set for himself the task of *checking in detail* how the body “is broken down by the rhythms of work, rest, and holidays; it is poisoned by food or values, through eating habits or moral laws; it constructs resistances”.<sup>37</sup> This point relates directly to an inquiry into abortion and its legislation: on how the health and liberty of the body is constituted in a particular time and place, and how feminists have developed different strategies of and for resistance. In this way, we need to pay special attention to feminist organisations and to different ways to cope with the prohibition. We need to also consider the resistance of conservative groups against liberalisation, and the displacement and iteration of arguments across the political spectrum.

Furthermore, the key to the politics of genealogy, as both Wendy Brown and Vikki Bell suggest, is the commotion that the genealogical method provokes in our understanding of the histories that constrain our political possibilities. As mentioned,

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 83.

<sup>36</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morality*, K. Ansell-Pearson ed., C. Diethe trans. (Cambridge UK: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

<sup>37</sup> Foucault, “Nietzsche, genealogy, history”, 87.

the realisation of the contingency of our political *dispositifs* makes available for us “a glimpse of the real possibilities that present reality performatively denies”.<sup>38</sup> Indeed, “the key is an attention to rationales and processes of categorizing, arranging or cutting, in other words to the limits imposed and orders established, and thence to the possibilities that have been eclipsed, displaced, forgotten, neglected, rendered unliveable or unthinkable”.<sup>39</sup> Thus, the task of genealogy is not that of directing action towards a predefined goal, nor is it sketching future possibilities, but rather that of engage itself in a reflective activity inside the environment within which an “other possibility” is created or not. Genealogy is provisional rather than true, but, revealing the present’s radical contingency, it opens possibilities.

## Final Considerations

I have explored aspects of the relations of power involved in the Chilean debate regarding abortion cast in a new light. A genealogical approach leads us to regard those relations not only in relation to the economic infrastructures and the different policies and legislation, but also to “infra-governmental or para-governmental ones; to discover them in the material play”.<sup>40</sup> In other words, to go beyond the State apparatus and look into other places and institutions such as academia, feminist organisations, hospitals and clinics, the Church, and the media.

As mentioned, I understand a *dispositif* as constituted by lines of power/knowledge; a tangle or ensemble of these lines. How is one supposed to study these? It is a fair question. As I discussed above, Foucault’s own approach was genealogical. Although I am interested in the main tenets of genealogy (and share its methodological assumptions), we should also pay close attention to Foucault’s governmentality and biopolitics, that is, to power/knowledge relations as sites of collective struggle in which notions of appropriate governance of pregnant bodies are produced and reproduced.

How are we to emancipate women’s bodies from the responsibility that a reproductive reason imposes and projects on them, a rationality that biopoliticises their reproductive capacity and subjects it to forms of control and regulation? That is one of the questions that guide the argument of the recently translated book by Penelope Deutscher, and whose subtitle expresses well what has guided my own studies in recent years – “a critique of reproductive reason”.<sup>41</sup>

<sup>38</sup> Bell, *Culture and Performance*, 89.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 88-9.

<sup>40</sup> Michel Foucault, “Power and Sex”, in *Politics, Philosophy, Culture: Interviews and Other Writings, 1977-1984*, L.D. Kritzman ed., A. Sheridan trans. (New York: Routledge, 1988), 119.

<sup>41</sup> Penelope Deutscher, *Foucault’s Futures: A Critique of Reproductive Reason* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017).

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The interest and importance of the abortion case to speak of an ontology of the present, to make an ontology of the present, is that it lies at the intersection of political, judicial, disciplinary and sexual discourses, which together constitute a *dispositif* – a “device”, a “social apparatus”. In other words, reproductive policies are a paradigmatic example of the intersection of both poles of biopower: disciplinary power (or the government of individuals), and biopolitics (or the state government of the population). It is in this context that we need to consider certain key challenges open for contemporary feminism in this entanglement of power/knowledge relations. In any contemporary moment, things are of course always changing, as Deleuze argued:

the newness of an apparatus in relation to those which have gone before is what we call its actuality. The new is the current. The current is not what we are but rather what we are in the process of becoming – that is the Other, our becoming; other. In each apparatus [*dispositif*] it is necessary to distinguish what we are (what we are already no longer), and what we are in the process of becoming: the historical part and the current part.<sup>42</sup>

Data on women seeking and having abortions is incomplete, which affects estimations and projections, and the access to the experience of women is particularly challenging. Despite the scarce and insufficient data, there seems to be an increase in the use of scientific arguments or statistics precisely when a more nuanced political deliberation is needed. There is a professional as well as a political responsibility here for social scientists, not only to fill the gap in our understanding and thus contribute, directly or indirectly, to the policies aimed at the social ‘control’ of the issue; also, and crucially, it is the task to inform the wider sociocultural debate with adequate evidence and critical tools. There are political and ethical debates that should not be avoided, and the abortion debate has shown how sometimes the discussion of the “science” in relation to the problem can serve as an excuse to side-line important social, political, and ethical issues, such as women’s autonomy and reproductive rights. Particularly urgent for critical thinking is improving our understanding of the resistance to liberalising abortion, in comparison with other demands related to gender and sexuality that could materialise more easily in laws and norms. Abortion seems to cut deeper: it is a key place for feminism, and indeed it seems to be something new brewing in the *dispositif*, something “untimely” – which is both very urgent and very current about abortion, and which concerns not just

<sup>42</sup> Deleuze, “*What is a Dispositif?*”, 164.

“life and death” but also the autonomy of women (including autonomy in relational terms) and the possibility of self-definition outside the family and reproduction.

Approached through the lens of Foucauldian biopolitics as such a critical perspective, the complexity of this *dispositif* unravels feminist struggle as part of it. It offers the view of a wider *dispositif* whereby feminism emerges as a set of interventions within the different ways in which abortion is constructed. Feminism is, in this sense, a mode of constructing power/knowledge, intervening and attempting to influence the *dispositif*, and itself being influenced in turn. The system of power relations (the tangle of lines) that constitutes this *dispositif* is not a zero-sum game; it is a relational struggle, a resistance that continues and changes. And this is ongoing, as we have seen, and there are new challenges that feminists now face.

Following Foucault and Deleuze, I proposed to look at the abortion *dispositif* as an ensemble in which lines of power/knowledge and practices intersect, and in which situated feminism is part of this *dispositif* as another discourse and practice. The abortion *dispositif* means that each subject belongs to these lines of discourse and practice; each of us lives and acts within them. In tracing the events of abortion, of its discourses and practices, I have proposed an analytic mapping through which we might achieve a clearer view of the feminist contributions to the debate and the challenges open for feminism. The abortion *dispositif* is an ever-changing, complex body in which heterogeneous elements map the way in which we are always becoming something else. Approaching the assemblage in this way requires, according to Deleuze, a “change in orientation which turns one’s interest away from the Eternal and towards the new. The new is not supposed to mean the same as the fashionable but, on the contrary, the variable creativity which arises out of social apparatuses (*dispositif*)”.<sup>43</sup>

To conclude, feminist work shows the importance of resisting and challenging conservative or reactionary modes of biopolitics in contemporary Chile. This is certainly illustrative on how the government of populations has effects at the level of the individual body, but also how the resistance (be it in the name of the body’s vulnerability or in the name of feminism) can challenge traditional conceptions and produce new understandings, at the level of institutions to be sure, but also at the level of women’s identity. This change of paradigm and expansion of the political and cultural imagination has been crucial as it connects abortion with a wider problematic regarding patriarchy and capitalism, with certain roles that are assigned to people because of their gender, and with a whole “administration of life” in which biopolitical power takes form in shaping women’s lives. The establishment of the Free Abortion Hotline, and further feminist organisations such as *Con las Amigas y en la Casa* or the campaign *Miso Pa Todas*, also represent feminist collective resistance. These are forms of embodied resistance and solidarity in which women

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 163.

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are willing to expose themselves to criminalisation and prosecution in order to support other women. The relation between vulnerability and resistance, thus, is key. Vulnerability can constitute a base for political organisation and resistance. The pain, anger, and loneliness associated with the abortion prohibition, with its death tolls and imprisonments, create political and social agitation, “killing the joy” of those who want to keep the status quo.

The point is to show that vulnerability is part of resistance, made manifest by new forms of embodied political interventions and modes of alliance that are characterized by interdependency and public action. These hold the promise of developing new modes of collective agency that do not deny vulnerability as a resource and that aspire to equality, freedom, and justice as their political aims.<sup>44</sup>

The vulnerability to death and to the arbitrary power of the State is not captured in a position that emphasises victimisation, or passivity. On the contrary, novel strategies of resistance take shape from there. As Butler reflects, when thinking in modes of struggles against precarity:

Feminism is a crucial part of these networks of solidarity and resistance precisely because feminist critique destabilizes those institutions that depend on the reproduction of inequality and injustice, and it criticizes those institutions and practices that inflict violence on women and gender minorities, and in fact, all minorities subject to police power for showing up and speaking up as they do.<sup>45</sup>

<sup>44</sup> Judith Butler, Zeynep Gambetti, and Leticia Sabsay eds. *Vulnerability in Resistance* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2016), 7.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 20.

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Received: 7 October 2019

Accepted: 27 December 2019

## About the author

**Lieta Vivaldi**. Coordinator of the Research Program on Biopolitics and board member of the International Institute for Philosophy and Social Studies, IIPSS (Santiago, Chile). Doctor of Sociology by Goldsmiths College, University of London, master in sociology by London School of Economics and Political Science, diplomate in gender and violence by the Faculty of Philosophy and Humanities of Universidad de Chile, and lawyer by the same institution. Currently, she runs the Programme in Gender and Law of the Faculty of Law at Universidad Alberto Hurtado, works as researcher in the Center of Applied Ethics (CEDEA) at Universidad de Chile, and as an associate researcher of the Faculty of Law at Universidad Diego Portales. Her research focuses on human rights, sexual and reproductive rights, and sociology and law, biopolitics, and feminisms. E-mail: lietavivaldi@gmail.com.

# Mapeando el capitalismo neoliberal: teorías críticas y la idea de crítica social

## *Mapping Neoliberal Capitalism: Critical Theories and the Idea of Social Critique*

*Juan Pablo Rodríguez*

UNIVERSIDAD DE OXFORD

### Resumen

Uno de los rasgos que definen la teoría crítica es la intención de producir conocimiento sobre la sociedad capitalista y sus contradicciones, guiada por un interés emancipatorio. Después de un período de relativo repliegue producto de la derrota política e intelectual de la izquierda a nivel global, ha habido un resurgimiento de la crítica de la sociedad capitalista contemporánea. En este contexto, se ha vuelto a enfatizar el potencial analítico de la categoría de totalidad social. A partir de una discusión de los temas de la utopía, el reconocimiento y el desacuerdo, y de la idea de mapeo cognitivo, este artículo propone un concepto tridimensional de crítica social como una forma de describir el intento contemporáneo de las teorías críticas por aprehender las dinámicas del capitalismo neoliberal.

**Palabras clave:** Teorías críticas contemporáneas; Mapeo cognitivo; Utopía; Reconocimiento; Desacuerdo.