Referring to the emergence of the category of perversity in the medical and juridical expertise, in *Abnormal* Foucault argues that «the constellation of notions which relate to perversity enables medical notions to function in the field of juridical power and, conversely, juridical notions functioning in the field of medical power […] It functions as a switch point, and the weaker it is epistemologically, the better it functions»¹. These sentences provide a clue of Foucault’s reflections on normalization and, together, the regimes of truth at stake in the economies of power and knowledge. Indeed, in that passage Foucault stresses that the question of medical, juridical and epistemic categories cannot be addressed than by investigating the “field” of powers-knowledges in which they are at play. Secondly, in those words he reminds us that the normative force of categories does not rely on the epistemic referent itself; rather, it functions precisely because of its political nature which enables different domains of knowledge being translated or integrated into a new regime of truth, and reorganized according their polyvalent tactic².

Moreover, as Foucault notices in *The Will to Knowledge*, the economy of power implicates also a certain politics of the visible, that functions distributing bodies in space and tracing an economy of (accepted and non-accepted) irregularities. By “economy of power” Foucault seems to indicate a regime of multiple distributions and repartitions articulating with the production of specific subjectivities. Indeed, this analytical attitude is well encapsulated in Foucault’s definition of the norm as a “political concept” – drawing on and revising Canguilhem’s formula that sees the norm as a “polemical concept”. Starting from this background, scholars have coined the notion of “political epistemology” to retrace and stress

the historical emergence and the normative force of not so much epistemological categories as the regime of truth which underpin fundamental experiences, fields of knowledge and governmental technologies like sexuality, medical expertise. It could be rephrased as the battlefield of a politics of truth, whose evidences and epistemic pillars need to be unfolded as the temporary outcome of power relations. But political epistemology does not stop at this task: it aims at bringing into focus the lines of fragility and the instabilities which percolate the supposed solidity of a given regime of truth. In other words, how destabilizing a field of intelligibility by reversing, reinvesting or appropriating it, is in a nutshell the goal and the response mobilized by political epistemology up against normative fixed subject-positions. This is the theoretical space in which this intervention situates for interrogating together Judith Butler and Michel Foucault on the power of normalization and the production of “bordered” subjectivities. In fact, this contribution does not (only) aim at tracing affinities and discontinuities between the two philosophers but at working with Butler and Foucault for unpacking the normative and contested terrain of the power of partitioning conducts, producing “profiles”. For this purpose, I suggest, it is necessary to sift the ways in which, regimes of truth, powers of normalization and production of subjectivity relate each other. In this context, the works of Butler and Foucault represent the main theoretical coordinates along which building the analysis. However, the use of the two authors that I propose here has not purpose of corroborating empirical analyses with a pre-existing conceptual grid, nor of “applying” their theories and tool-boxes. Rather, the choice to mobilize some of their reflections on the power and the functioning of norms and categories depends on the analytical gazes that those works enable to assume for shedding light on fundamental issue.

The “Field” and the “Scene”

According to Foucault’s analyses on the power of norms, each norm has not only a regulative function but also a productive one, tracing the effective conditions through which mechanisms of normalization are put

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into place: the norm disciplines and regulates, the norm qualifies and corrects the conducts. And it is precisely in this sense that the operation of the norm can be regarded as eminently “positive”: the norm starts with and puts into place mechanisms of partition and discrimination\(^4\), but the norm also shapes and distributes irregularities. The norm produces: this assumption has been in part questioned, or at least complicated, by Foucault in *Security, Territory, Population*, where the French philosopher explains that the rationale which sustains dispositives of security and technologies of government does not posit the norm as first: indeed, the norm is the result of processes of normalization, namely of an average around which social phenomena should be maintained and managed. Nevertheless, it remains that when a norm is at play it gives rise, in connection with other norms, to a certain “epistemological organization” of the subjects’ experiences.

However, from the standpoint of political epistemology it is important to notice that for Foucault that very epistemological organization actually refers to a strugglefield: «crime became an important issue for psychiatrists because what was involved was less a field of knowledge to be conquered than a modality of power to be secured»\(^5\). This is not to say that knowledge is an expression or a concealment of power relations: to the contrary, in Foucault’s view knowledge is part of that strugglefield and it contributes to trace a field of power relations. Butler concurs on this point, stressing the twofold force of the norms in acting both as regulatory law and as a normative operator producing the very bodies it governs: the norm simultaneously individualizes and makes individualization possible, working as a principle of comparison. That said, from the standpoint of political epistemology the productive force of norms has to be addressed in relation to the “field” of power-knowledges in which it operates and that it contributes to create. In fact, the norm works in function of a certain economy of power and, simultaneously, as the constitutive element which makes that economy concretely operative in tracing different partitions. The spatial notion of “field”, I suggest, is a stable explicit or implicit occurrence in the work of Foucault, often articulated in terms of “disposi-

\(^4\) See *Abnormal*, where Foucault argues that the normative function of psychiatry to work as a discriminant.

“figures” or of “regime”: what the working of norms produces is ultimately a certain field of intelligibility and of political intervention — sexuality, abnormality, illegality. Thus, Foucault pushes us to investigate the ways in which norms craft and multiply medical-juridical categories within the economy of power in which they play. If Butler deals with the emergence and the exclusionary functioning of (sexual) identities, Foucault actually brings attention to conducts, as the correlate of strategies that invest and cross that make them as object of power and knowledge.

The “figures” and the “characters” described and taken into account by Foucault in Abnormal and in The Will to Knowledge emerge as the outcomes of specific political technologies, knowledges and transformations. From this perspective, the destabilization of the political “stable signifiers” mentioned by Butler requires first of all to unsettle both political technologies and the discursive regime that sustain them: the “troubling of categories” does not necessarily shake the “field”, namely the economy of power/knowledges in which those categories are at play, unless the “chain of equivalences” and the epistemic “evidences” of that field are not in turn troubled. For this reason it is less the subversion of categories in itself that is at stake in Foucault than the epistemic and political constellation upon which they are predicated. In fact, in Foucault’s analyses of the medical-juridical continuum and of technologies of normalization we see that the emergence of epistemic categories or their abandon depend on two related processes: on the one hand, on the settling of new conceptions and logics through which a given object of government is framed; and on the other hand, on the technologies of power responding to certain social conducts/actions. For instance, the fact that in the XIX century “there appear in the field of legal psychiatry new categories, such as necrophilia, kleptomania and exhibitionism” was the correlate effect of a new conception of mental illness as a set of complex and polymorphous processes making possible that “the whole field of infractions could be held together, in terms of danger”.

Against this background, one could interrogate the ways in which Butler and Foucault conceive of the relation between norm and subjectivity, namely the leeway for resistance that subjects could play with. One of the main criticisms against Foucault concerns the supposed impossibility

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6 Foucault, The Will to Knowledge, pp. 147-149.
7 Foucault, Dangerous Individual.
of a space of the outside in relation to the norms: the peculiar character of normative power consists in percolating and investing all conducts and spaces. For instance, as Foucault explains in *Abnormal*, the field of “abnormality” is produced precisely through the working of the norm, and for this reason, as he shows in *The Will to Knowledge*, normative power operates rather by distributing conducts around the norm. Any space of the outside seems to be precluded. If we switch the attention to the way in which Butler comes to grip with this impasse – that she also notices in *Gender Trouble* – we see that she focuses on the way in which “the force of regulatory law can be turned against itself” in the process of reiteration that each norm requires in order to be enforced. But how does the mechanism of subversion and resignification work to the extent that subjects are, following Butler, constituted from the outset by a social world they never choose? And from the standpoint of political epistemology, how could one destabilize or reverse identity categories?

If on the one hand Butler insists that terms are never fully tethered to a single use on the other hand it remains unclear how the political resignification of identities and categories could effectively work, since the norm does not apply to bodies but shape them from the very beginning – for instance as gendered bodies. In this regard, the theoretical move undertaken by Butler consists in displacing the very terms of agency and autonomy which usually underlie reflections on political subjectivity. Indeed, rephrasing Butler, the subject postulated in acting a subversion of identity categories is not a subject who stands back from identifications choosing how to play simultaneously with some of them disengaging from some others: rather, it is an ambivalent site resulting from the imbrications of different and conflicting normative categories, acquiring a coherence through the iterability of those very norms. What Butler seems to suggest is the possibility for the subject to remake the functioning of identity categories, starting precisely from the different determinants that simultaneously, and combining each other, form a temporary subjectivity.

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8 Referring to the power of norms, Foucault argues that «it does not have to trace the lines that separates the enemies of the sovereign from its obedient subjects; it effects distributions around the norm» (Foucault, *The Will to Knowledge*, p. 144).


Going into detail, it is precisely due to the ambivalent correspondence between language and the materiality of the body that the effective positions of subject exceed from the designations and the referents through which is mattered by regulatory norms. This is strictly related to the way in which Butler thinks of the emergence of the subject, and also of the body as always constituted and sustained in language: «the body is alternately sustained and threatened through modes of address […] To be addressed is to have the very term conferred by which the recognition of existence becomes possible»\(^{11}\). From this perspective what is posited as primary is the scene of address in which subjects are not simply recognized or in which could lay claim, but rather as the condition of possibility which materially structures the production of the subject. “Scene” (of address), more than a “field” of knowledges, techniques and powers, since it presupposes on the background the frame of recognition and interpellation as constitutive processes through which subjects become what they are. In this sense, although Butler criticizes and dismisses analyses built on personification of power – as an instance which acts – it remains that subjects are supposed to subvert from within the functioning and the effects of norms always through processes of resignification, up against normative frames with precede them.

**Which Subjects, Which Norms? An Analysis of the Two Temporalities of the Norm**

Therefore, it is not a question of a subject that resists or refuses certain identities, since there is not something like an outstanding subjectivity upon which norms and categories are “attached”. To the contrary, the act of shaping and “mattering” exercised by norms is coextensive to the very emergence of subjectivity and also of bodies\(^{12}\). On this point Foucault would concur with Butler that the norm is not exterior to the field of application. Nevertheless, while Foucault gives prominence to


\(^{12}\) «The irreducible materiality is constructed through a problematic gendered matrix […] and if the constituted effect of that matrix is taken to be the indisputable ground of bodily life, then it seems that a genealogy of that matrix is foreclosed from critical inquiry»; J. Butler, *Bodies that Matter* (New York: Routledge, 1993), p. 29.
the techniques and knowledges that materially distribute or partition or allocate bodies in space, Butler associates the work of the norm with symbolic significations through which bodies come into being\textsuperscript{13}. The crafting of the subject as traced by Butler seems situating between two poles. On the one hand, and differently from Foucault, the “force of the law” is ultimately posited as what stage the constitutive lack in the subject – that Butler takes into account drawing on and in part differentiating from Zizek – through an exclusionary symbolization. On the other hand, the materiality of bodies always «takes place through a signifying process», and consequently there is no a subject behind or beyond the norms to discover or to address\textsuperscript{14}.

Instead, this is only partially true in Foucault, where the productive function of the norms does not coincide with the very existence of the bodies. Indeed, a recalcitrant materialism underlies Foucault’s descriptions of disciplined bodies, both in Discipline and Punish and in The Will to Knowledge\textsuperscript{15}: «deployments of power are directly connected to the body – bodies, functions, physiological processes, sensations and pleasures, far from the body having to being effaced\textsuperscript{16}. The body is at the very core of power technologies, invested by them, or better «they can get through to the very depth of the bodies, without being relayed by the representation of the subject\textsuperscript{17}. However, this is not to indicate a nature altered by power or a body that needs to be liberated: indeed, Foucault shifts the attention from the existence of the bodies to the way in which they are produced as subjects through the working of political technologies that constitute them as objects of government. Highlighting the materialism which sustains Foucault’s description of bodies invested by power’s technologies does not mean postulating a nature in the end: to the contrary, as Pierre Macherey points out, normalization does not apply to a given

\textsuperscript{13} The signifying act delimits and contours the body that it then claims to find prior to any and all signification. This is not to say that the materiality of bodies is simply and only a linguistic effect which is reducible to a set of signifiers. Such a distinction overlooks the materiality of the signifier itself.

\textsuperscript{14} Butler, Bodies that Matter, p. 68.

\textsuperscript{15} In The Will to Knowledge Foucault talks about a proliferation of political technologies that invest the bodies, the way of eating, of living and the whole knowledge of existence.

\textsuperscript{16} Foucault, The Will to Knowledge, pp. 150-152.

nature but it makes the materiality of bodies open to transformation, thus producing a sort of second nature, a paradoxical unnatural nature. Close on this point to Butler’s argument on the instabilities produced through the reiteration of the norm, the “nature” which stems out from the mechanisms of normalization is «an unstable condition which glean its own substance from its own instability»\(^{18}\). The norm is responsible for the becoming normal and natural of its own exercise/functioning. In some way it could be argued that from a Foucaultian perspective the stake of political epistemology concerns the economy of subjectivity through which bodies are produced as irregular conducts, productive subjects, hysterical women, pathologic sexualities… It is not the body as such that is the object of Foucault’s political investigation, but the economy of powers through which, historically, bodies become other than bodies; that is to say, they become objects of government as (irregular) conducts or as disciplined bodies.

This aspect leads me to suggest that two different temporality of the norm are taken into account by Foucault and Butler: while in Butler’s works is unfolded what I would call an ontogenetic temporality of the norm – which is at stake in the very production of the body, first of all as feminine or masculine – Foucault traces a historical and genealogical account of the ways in which bodies have been governed over the centuries and in different spaces. For instance, the heterosexual norm is critically scrutinized by Foucault in *The Will to Knowledge* from a historical point of view, marking the moment when the dispositive of sexuality, in which the very heterosexual normative desire should be placed, comes out. To the contrary, in Butler the performative character of heterosexuality is posited as one of the first normative partitions which organize and shape bodies from their very inception: even though Butler admits the historicity of the norm, the heterosexual paradigm is denaturalized not through a historical-genealogical perspective but as a product of discursive regimes and regulatory practices instantiating the binary relation between genders\(^{19}\). The operation of the norm which interests Foucault always entails to take a certain margin and distance from the production of the body – as life invested by power – bringing instead attention to the forms of subjectivity which define certain singular conducts (the perverse adult, the criminal,


the onanist child, the hysterique woman). Although Foucault stresses that since the late XVIII onward life itself has become the object of power and of political technologies, then he actually deals with the mechanisms and the effects of normative power working at the level of conducts, or better in analysing how they produce subjects as conducts and as objects of knowledge and government.

The Desirability of Categories and the Bridling of Norms

Butler’s concern with “citational practices” required to the norm its enforcement seems leaving more room for subverting identity categories than Foucault’s account. Actually, differently from Butler, the effects of subjectivation produced by normative power are never framed by Foucault in terms of identity: as it is well-known Foucault always deliberately escapes the paradigm of (political) recognition, and what he tries to bring out are the forms of subjectivities that normative power put into being – how subjects are materially performed as deviant conducts or perverse sexualities – beyond any effects of representation. In fact, on the one hand Butler challenges politics of representation postulated in feminist discourses, which represent women as the subject of feminism while this latter «is actually discursively constituted by the very political system that is supposed to facilitate its emancipation»; concluding that «juridical power inevitably produces what it claims merely to represent».

On the other hand, Butler does not fully get rid of the juridical frame, positing recognition as a central stake that relies on the fundamental vulnerability

\[20\] On this point see also M. Foucault, *Sex, Power and the Politics of Identity*, in *Foucault's Live*, pp. 291-296, where Foucault clearly opposes creation and inventiveness of different ways of life with the question of identity – how to adhere to certain categories or to belong to a given culture. In fact, one of the distinctive elements characterizing the production of different ways of life is the impossibility to plan in advance the effects and the consequences of these new modes/practices one engages in. Eventually, Foucault argues, identity emerges as a correlate outcome of new relationships – which are not exclusively “social”, since they do not involve people only as social beings.

\[21\] Butler, *Undoing Gender*, p. 3. Indeed, as Butler clarifies «gender is not a noun, but neither it is a set of free-floating attributes, for we have seen that the substantive effect of gender is performatively produced and compelled by the regulatory practices of gender coherence» (p. 34).
of the structure of the self. If for Butler the question is how subjects are performed and seen by power, Foucault concentrates rather on the first aspect – how subjects are effectively produced as conducts – ousting at the same time the juridical referent that, as he remarks in *The Will to Knowledge*, still persists in Western political thought. Indeed, the frame of recognition reinstates the centrality of the law in partitioning and producing subjects. Foucault conceives of juridical matters as compensatory mechanisms which sustain and enforce technologies of government and discipline, operating a sort of translation, since they come to present power as an instance which acts upon subjects. The “inadequacy” of the couple law-representation depends first of all on historical reasons: this is not to say that the norm is an invention of the XVIII century, but the fact that society has been redefined by the norm, Foucault contends, entails different mechanisms of surveillance, technologies of control and, most of all, an incessant visibility.

By arguing that the norm follows from the law, Foucault engages in a historical and genealogical account, not for positing a succession law-norm but to investigate ways in which the law has been deeply invested and reorganized in the light of the social extension of the norm. Instead, it seems that in Butler the norm is defined and is at play within an invariable frame of law: although the historical dimension of the norm is stressed, the juridical matrix is assumed as the still operative principle that informs any other mechanism. Moreover, it is not in terms of identity categories that Foucault copes with the mechanisms of normative power: he gazes at the effects of subjectivation that do not concern how subjects stay before law but, rather, how they are constituted in the materiality of their conducts. However, conducts and not bodies: or better, the effects of normative power that Foucault brings into focus refer to the shaping of subjects according to the twofold sense of the meaning,

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22 Drawing on Hegel’s *Phenomenology of the Spirit*, Butler reframes the issue of recognition distinguishing between the self, as always entangled with the others and exposed to vulnerability from the very beginning, and the subject, that in Western philosophical tradition is conceived as a self-autonomous instance.

23 To be more precise on this point, it should be stresses that for Butler identity itself and its internal coherent is the result of regulatory practices of gender formation, that assure a certain stability and intelligibility to it (see Butler, *Bodies that Matter*, pp. 22-23). However, despite it is the correlate referent of normative practices, in Butler’s account the issue and the struggle over identity are at the core of gender politics.
namely subjectivation and subjection as two coextensive and inextricable processes. Foucault’s analyses on normalization and normative categories are never detached from an inquiry on the transformations of the political technologies and the “field” (the economy of power and knowledge) in which those processes situate. And it should not pass unnoticed that the first occurrence of the notion of “government” appears in the second Lecture of Abnormal – so, well before the reflection of the pastoral power and the reason of state – for describing the positive technology of power “invented” in the XVII century, through which new conducts or social classes came into being and certain subjects started to be object of medical knowledge. «The Classical Age developed therefore what could be called an “art of governing” in the sense in which ‘government’ was then understood as precisely the “government” of children, the ‘government’ of the mad, the ‘government’ of the poor, the ‘government’ of workers […] The Classical Age refined a general technique of the exercise of power»

The shaping of conducts or the emergence of new epistemic-medical categories is taken into exam by Foucault as the mark of reinvestments, transformations and reorganizations at the level of technologies of power, and as a response to conducts, movements and practices which, at some point, have become unbearable.

The Power’s Function of Doubling and the Uneven Forms of Subjectivities

What are precisely the effects of subjectivation and knowledge produced by power of normalization? In a nutshell, normalization gives rise to process of “doubling”, meaning by that two overlapping but distinct things that I introduce leaving space to Foucault’s descriptions. First

24 Foucault, Abnormal, pp. 48-49.
25 In Discipline and Punish Foucault remarkably analyses the new criminal conducts which started to be sanctioned at the end of the XVIII century, arguing that with the ascent of the bourgeoisie the crimes against private property became the main target of the penal system. Foucault underlines that this was not merely the outcome of power’s new policies and rationale: rather, the criminalization of those forms of irregularity was a at the same time the response to the shift of criminal actions towards thefts and to the increase of labour vagrancy, in turn effect of the more and more strict property law. See M. Foucault, Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison (New York: Vintage Books, New York 1977), pp. 81-85 and pp. 302-303.
scene, Twenties of the XIX century, France, court juries deciding on a crime committed by a person declared “mad”. A fundamental changed occurred in the penal law, mad and crime were not considered anymore as two incompatible phenomena, and the person in question is sentenced to stay in a psychiatric hospital. The medico-juridical continuum, Foucault contends, was created: «it became possible to pass sentences that were not modulated according to the circumstances of the crime but according to the description, assessment and diagnosis of the criminal himself [...] This technique of dual qualification organizes the realm of that very strange notion of ‘perversity’ [...] that will dominate the entire field of this double determination»\(^{26}\). Second scene, second half of the XIX century, still in France, psychiatric expertise judges upon conduct to medicalize: the family, the school, the neighbourhood and the house of correction. This is now the object of medical intervention. Psychiatry thus doubles these elements, goes back over them, transpose them and pathologize them, Foucault explains referring to the extension of the psychiatric knowledge.

The exercise of the power-knowledge analysed in these scenes by Foucault has as its major outcome the production of a “double” of subjectivity and a “coupling” of knowledge: the power of discipline and the power of normalization “double” subjectivities producing new figures, irregular conducts or behaviours to medicalize, and multiplying sexual categories\(^{27}\). And simultaneously, those technologies of power “couple” the existing objects of knowledge and intervention, integrating them in new political fields of expertise. It is precisely this doubling that should be challenged and, from time to time, unsettled at its point of application. Rephrasing it in the terms of political epistemology, the stake is to destabilize the emergence of a new domain of power-knowledge associated both with the consolidation of a regime of truth and with the production of new (irregular and pathologic) conducts. How to disconnect subjectivities from the regime of truth in which they emerge as an object of knowledge and government? This is, after all, one of interrogations which percolates The Birth of Biopolitics, in the face of the rise of a technology of power – neoliberalism- characterized by a regime of veridiction which governs subjectivities as human capitals. Instead, in Butler’s work to be at issue is

\(^{26}\) Foucault, Abnormal, p. 75.

\(^{27}\) M. Foucault, The Social Extension of the Norm, in Foucault's Live, pp. 196-199.
less the process of doubling than the emergence of subjects as gendered or vulnerable identities; and the instability of coherent identities produced by regulatory practices is ultimately constitutive of normative mechanisms. The effect of “doubling” painstakingly described by Foucault is what for Butler constantly fails to happen; or at least the possibility for the doubling to take place remains open to the effect of reiterative practices. Indeed, it is not the simple acting of the norm which grants the continuity and the unity of the experience of gender – but the same discourse can be extended also to other categories): it is only through iteration that binary epistemic oppositions and chains of signifiers (gender, sex, desire) could effectively work. After all, also in the case of performative acts, the binding effect of the speech acts depends on the citation of existing laws: «it is through the invocation of convention that the speech act of the judge derives its binding power».

Instability and Desirability of the Normative Categories?

To sum up, in Butler’s account the discrepancy political or identity signifiers and the effective position occupied by bodies is always at stake. Thus, incompleteness of the norm, or better incorrigibility of the discordant citational – and reiterative- practices that are necessary for the norm to be enforced but that go beyond the position and the identity relation they are expected to fill in. But why do subjects in part trouble, displace and resignify the function of norms insofar as there is no subject out of the norm? In part the answer should be found in the displacement of the notion of agency suggested by Butler and that I touched above. However, if we interrogate the reasons why the “failure” of the norm is possible, it is the complex weave of identities and relations that needs to be considered: indeed, Butler looks at subjectivity as a mobile site produced, sustained and crossed by multiple social and productive relations which go beyond the position described by the referent of the norm. By stressing the instability and the multiplicity of relations and of sites of negotiated identities forming a subject, Butler also fundamentally questions feminist claims and theories that posit woman as a self-standing category in search for recognition: «there is the political problem that feminism encounters in the

28 Butler, Bodies that Matter, p. 171.
assumption that the term “women” denotes a common identity. Rather than a stable signifier [...] gender is not always constituted coherently [...] and gender intersects with racial, class, ethnic, sexual and regional modalities of discursively constituted identities»29. And in the same wake, also the category of “queer” risks, according to Butler, to reify and freeze the troubling effect it had in the beginning, once it is assumed and mobilized as a stable referent that recodifies practices and behaviours30. Thus, it is precisely because no norm could exhaustively describe the complex site of overlapping (and sometimes conflicting) social and productive relations in which subjects are imbricated, formed by and exposed to, that norm inevitably fail in part to “accommodate” and fix subjectivities within the expected boundaries. However, just because of the constitutive instability of the working of the norm and since open-ended processes of resignification are always also part of it, in Butler’s terms political epistemology could not simply consist in destabilizing political or identity signifiers.

On this point two related issues need to be considered. Firstly, the desirability of the norms that indirectly emerges from Butler’s considerations on the unavoidable working of normative categories in shaping bodies – more than “inscribing” and marking them. In Butler’s view the political stake seems not to be the undoing of the normative field as such through which (gendered) bodies are constituted but the resignification and appropriation of those norms, their subversion with the purpose to open to other (multiple) signifiers, always aware of the exclusionary move that any category operates. This last implication is remarked by Butler, who cautions against the temptation to self-name as an act of reappropriation of norms, arguing that «if the term “queer” is to be a site of collective contestation, the point of departure for a set of historical reflections, it will have to remain never fully owned, but always redeployed, twisted, queered from a prior usage»31. In some ways, norms and identity signifiers should not never fully reappropriated since the subversive dimension subsists only to the extent that the openness and the undecidability of categories is not foreclosed, and the discrepancy between signifiers and the effective bodily positions is at play. Thus, Butler’s theory of the “failure” of the norm in reiterating its effects makes appear the ambivalent

29 Butler, *Undoing Gender*, p. 3.
31 Ibid.
issues and outcomes at stake in a queer politics, broadly conceived here as a transformative politics which aims at troubling the functioning and the meaning of existing regulatory practices. The impossibility to fully get rid of political and identity referents leads Butler to suggest/indicate a certain desirability of the norm as producer of subjects. Indeed, in the face of the ambivalent implications of a queer politics – the risk to produce new reified categories, the necessity to subvert existing binary identities – Butler seems pushing for a normative politics which envisages a certain directionality to take starting from the instabilities and the displacements generated through the reiteration of norms. And it is in this context that the quest for universality is introduced by Butler: the possibility to avoid the exclusionary mechanisms of any identity politics and of normative categories is related to a political project of radical democracy which through the mobilization of a universal that does not exclude any forms of life from the category of “human”. On this point, Foucault’s analyses diverge and follow another path from Butler, insofar as the critical account of the power of normalization is not coupled with a political project which aims at rewriting/resignifying the field of norms and categories. The quite different political and theoretical perspectives at stake in the two authors – normative politics/genealogical critique – stems from two conceptions of the relation norm-subjectivity, as well as from the possibilities to interrupt or alter the effects of norms.

**Do Norms Capture Troubling Conducts?**

Coming back to the criticism moved to Foucault, if it is true that there seems not to be a space out the norms and that, as Butler points out, Foucault does not account for what has to be excluded by economies of power to make them function, at the same time he stresses how technologies of normalization intervene for governing “intolerable” conducts. In other words, Foucault retraces how some conducts or subjectivities have been criminalized or medicalized within a certain economy of power, and how political technologies and regimes of knowledges had to reorganize their strategies. If we think about Pierre Rivière’s case or the hysterics in *Psychiatric Power*, or finally the criminalization of the small delinquency in the XVIII century, we see that disciplinary mechanisms were put into
place for responding to the “disorder” provoked by those conducts which troubled existing medical and juridical categories – making impossible any kind of judgment or of diagnosis. For instance, the construction of the criminal as a dangerous individual in the XIX century was, according to Foucault, the result of two related phenomena: on the one hand the huge development of the police network which improved the surveillance system in a capillary way, and on the other hand the multiplication of social conflicts and armed revolts in the urban context, due to the new law on property. Medical and juridical categories are created and mobilized for capturing, reshaping and governing subjectivities. And, ultimately, norms become the yardstick for evaluating individuals.

To the contrary, Butler tends to present the norm as something which comes first: as she stresses in *Undoing Gender*, inasmuch as the coherence of the experience of subjectivity depends upon our being fully constituted, since the very beginning, from social, gendered and identity norms, there cannot be other political project than to maintain a critical and transformative relation to norms. The transformative politics that such a perspective envisages substantially refer to the possibility for subjects to occupy different places and positions than those assigned by norms: insofar as “terms are never fully tethered to a single use […] the body is that which can occupy the norm in myriad ways”33. Instead, a political epistemology which draws on Foucault would posit as its main task the destabilization of categories, with no “directionality” that could be envisaged in advanced. Thus, the issue of normative categories is not framed in terms of the performative power of linguistic determinations but, rather, as the emergence of new objects of government. But what does this act of destabilization concretely mean from a Foucaultian standpoint? I would suggest that it is in terms of a politics of truth that Foucault opens a space in that direction, starting from the consideration that any knowledge production is related to certain effects of truth. But at the same time it is precisely from those effects of truth that it becomes possible to interference with struggles, bending or integrating them in different strategies: thus, one should interrogate “these effects of truth could become implemented within possible struggles […] deciphering a layer of reality

32 Or better, for Foucault the norm simultaneously produces subjects and reorganizes conducts.
33 Butler, *Undoing Gender*, p. 179.
in such a way that the lines of force and the lines of fragility come forth.\textsuperscript{34} Such an attitude has the purpose of engendering what Foucault calls “the polemics of reality”, namely an effect of truth that instead of enforcing existing power relations and chains of equivalences introduces disconnections and possibilities of dissociation of those evidences and nexus.\textsuperscript{35} This is a polemical dimension coming out from a certain use of history that, grounding on a genealogical approach, retraces the emergence of a certain regime of truth and makes that history works in the present unsettling the supposed legitimacy of the field of truth-powers.

\textit{A Critical Account of Productive Power}

However, from the force of the norms and categories and their tangible effects, it does not follow that there is a full correspondence between our way of acting and living as entangled in normative mechanisms, and the manner in which we are told, narrated and labelled by them. And this does not mean to retrieve a fundamental kernel that escapes or exceeds the mechanisms of power. Rather, mobilizing Foucault and Butler the disconnection between how people effectively live and situate on the one hand, and the normative diagnostic definitions through which they are told on the other hand, relates to power and discourse. First of all, power. Up to now I referred to subjects produced by power or by categories to highlight how that subjects are neither out of power relations nor do they stand behind processes of subjection/subjectivation. However, is it “being produced by power” the right expression for describing how power relations work? Don’t we surreptitiously introduce again the opposition subject/power, conceiving subject as an instance shaped and struggling against power? In fact, if this is the case there would be no other leeway for individuals than trying to escape or subvert from within the identity referents “attached” to their bodies. But the specificity of a political epistemology which works with Foucault and Butler relies on the model of power relations envisaged by the two authors. Indeed, although both undermine the illusion of an autonomous subjectivity captured by powers, they attentively avoid the trap of “production” as a paradigm for describing the work-

\textsuperscript{34} M. Foucault, \textit{Clarifications on the Question of Power}, in \textit{Foucault’s Live}, pp. 255-263.

\textsuperscript{35} Foucault, \textit{The Social Extension of the Norm}, pp. 196-199.
ing of norms and of mechanism of subjection/subj ectivation. To posit that conducts are shaped by those very norms that label them as subjects to govern, or to stress that norms and categories have a productive functions instead of simply investing bodies, it does not involve conceiving of subjects as the other pole of power relations. On the contrary, Foucault’s analytics of power as well as Butler’s considerations on productivity and construction in *Bodies that Matter* aim precisely at challenging such an image of power, reframing them as the temporary outcome of strategies and relations of force. Referring to constructivism, Butler cautions against the idea that structure produces the subject, insofar as «the grammatical and the metaphysical place of the subject is retained», since, she concludes, «construction is still understood as a unilateral process initiated by a prior subject […] This view informs misreading by which Foucault is criticized for personifying power: if power is misconstrued as a grammatical and metaphysical subject[…] then power appears to have displaced the human as the origin of its activity»\(^{36}\). To the contrary, Butler argues following Foucault closely, «there is no power that acts but only a reiterated acting that is power in its persistence and instability»\(^{37}\). In this regard it is worth to remind Foucault spatial definition of power as «the name that one attributes to a complex strategic relation in a given society»\(^{38}\).

Neither for Butler nor for Foucault the productive force of norms and political technologies should be conceived as an action from which subjectivities flourish: productivity refers rather to the fact that techniques and categories of discipline and normalization do not merely subject existing conducts but have transformative effects and redistribute/reorganize the economy of knowledge and power. However, they do not “create” or “craft” subjects: the work of norms and categories is rather a more subtle and contested strugglefield that subjects do not simply resist or escape but constantly negotiate through practices that force political technologies to invent strategies of capture or reorganize the economy of exclusion. Therefore, the productive dimension constantly at stake in techniques of normalization is coextensive to the whole field of forces: the production that Butler and Foucault refer to does not spring from power as an instance which *acts upon*: «instead of this ontological opposition between power and


\(^{37}\) Ibid.

\(^{38}\) Foucault, *The Will to Knowledge*, p. 93.
resistance, I would say that power is nothing other than a certain modification, or the form, differing from time to time, of a series of clashes which constitute the social body»\(^{39}\). Instead, concerning the discrepancy between discursive categorization and the overlapping of multiple economic and social determinants, subjects can play with such a disconnection, departing in part from categories, due to the impossibility for medical or juridical categories as well as for political referents to exhaustively tell what subjects effectively are. This is not because there is a hidden nature that epistemic and discursive operations can never fully grasp: rather, it depends on the manifold and sometimes conflicting ways in which subjects are simultaneously defined, addressed and invested; and, simultaneously on how they negotiate their own conducts. Butler concurs on this analysis by highlighting the racial, class and social components which combine with the gender matrix – thus, challenging the idea that within a project of radical transformative politics one of these referents could be posited as preeminent or bearing the others. By tracing the emergence of certain conducts of government, Foucault makes us see that juridical and medical labels are the discursive crystallizations (historically determined) of strugglefields made of political technologies, knowledges and people’s movements or practice. At the same time, he brings attention to the ways in which sometimes subjects misfire mechanisms of categorization through the enactment of conducts that cannot be explained or codified within the existing frames of truth. Thus, categories and discourses cannot retain both the multiple intertwined subjectivities that we are simultaneously.

**Categories Are Not (Only) About Names**

Nevertheless, in addition to this there is a fundamental point to take into account that concerns the limits of the performative power of names and categories. And this aspect suggests, as I will explain, that a departure from categories should be taken also by those who engage in a political epistemology. In fact, in *Psychiatric Power* Foucault underlines that, ultimately, nosological classification is neither a question of categories nor of curing people but rather of discipline and controlling conducts and bodies, putting them to work: psychiatric categories «got no absolutely

\(^{39}\) Foucault, *Clarifications on the Questions of Power*, p. 260.
hold on therapy itself — are not in fact employed here at all as a classification of the curability of the different people» concluding that they serve «solely to define the possible utilization of individuals for the work they are offered»40.

After all, this emerges quite glaringly in the case of migration “profiles”, namely the categories through which people’s movements are partitioned according to a complex continuum going from “irregular” migration to “selected” mobility: illegal migrants, economic migrants, rejected refugees, asylum seekers, labour migration, skilled migrants… In the face of the multiplication of juridical status and “exceptional” cases, we should interrogate ourselves on the opportunity to address and to postulate, although critically, the epistemic field and the discursive regime of migration governmentality. In fact, it implicates not only a fostering of that regime of knowledge and truth but also a misleading understanding of the effective migrants’ conditions and of the very functioning of the mechanisms of government over migrants’ lives. That is to say, on the one hand juridical status – like refugees/illegal migrants/ migrant workers – and medical categories – like “vulnerable persons” – have concrete and dramatic effects on migrants’ lives, determining the spatial distribution of bodies and tracing conditional spaces of mobility; but on the other hand migration policies often work differently than as fixed by categories; and, moreover, the juridical status could conflicts with the effective migrants’ condition deeply influenced by economic factors. For instance, despite the formal status of refugee recognized to some migrants, the economic precariousness experienced by migrants-refugees due to the economic crisis in Europe together with episodes of racism give rise to a ‘migrant condition’ completely disconnected from the juridical and social position officially occupied by migrants. Therefore, a political epistemology approach should undertake a twofold move. This disconnection, it must be clarified, is less the symptom of a failure in the mechanisms of categorization than a way of working through discrepancies and fragmentation that one finds recurrently at play in migration governmentality; a disconnection between the regime of discourse and categories and the effective working of the mechanisms of containment, selection and bordering of migrants’ movements.

However, it is precisely starting from such a discrepancy that political epistemology finds a terrain for undercutting and tarnishing the grip and the legitimacy of the field of power/knowledge in question. In fact, the stake becomes to unsettle the chain of equivalences and the politics of truth upon which categories and referents are inscribed. It follows that it is not (only) a question of refusing or inventing single migration terminology – for instance, by replacing “clandestine migration” with “unauthorized mobility” – than of destabilizing the supposed solidity and coherence of the so called “migration regime” that sustains the effectiveness and the force of those categories. But instead of stopping at this stage, a political epistemology should explore the functioning of partitions and categorization without taking for granted the supposed effects of normalization. An interrogation which starts from a specific issue – migration – is useful also for broadly rethinking of the effects of categorization at work at present. In this regard, it is important to take a stock of Foucault’s and Butler’s analyses, questioning to what extent normalization and categorization go together, with the latter implicating the former. As far as migration governmentality is concerned, this couple of mechanisms, I suggest, is at least in part split. Or better, the working of juridical, medical and epistemic categories is neither connected up nor results in processes of normalization. Indeed, the partitioning mechanisms which are at the very core of migration governmentality tend not to produce “doubles”: migrant conducts and the plethora of mobility profiles that proliferate in the statements released by migration agencies seem not having a “doubling” effect. Actually, what is at stake are not subjects that need to binds themselves to their discourse of truth but, rather, that are requested to “accommodate” themselves within existing juridical or medical categories which set mobility profiles; and that more than individualizing they produce exceptions to those standard categories. Thus, if we investigate the kind of subjectivity that emerges from is neither postulated not demanded to produce and discovering a truth about itself. Rather, the figures which stand out (from these mechanisms of partitioning through categorization) are subjects and conducts incapable of truth; and the truth they need to endorse is already there, unfolded in the frame of discourse and categories that migrants needs to fill in. In this sense, the truth is external to the processes of production of subjectivity. Moreover, the effects envisaged are not ultimately of the order of normalization. In fact, the issue is not to redistribute irregular conducts around a certain average of tolerable/intolerable “il-
legalities”: if it is true that the migration dodgy continuum going from illegal migration to skilled migration is based on differential degrees of access to the circuits of mobility, it is fundamental to notice that one of the main goals consists in producing residual mobility profiles. These uneven conducts of mobility do not enforce the figure of the citizen-subject, by opposition (according to Schmittian logic of the external/internal enemy construction). Nor do they simply fix standard profiles through which codifying all “irregular” migration conducts. Rather, beyond all that, they tend to multiply uneven singular profiles that, from time to time, give rise to new “exceptional” cases to manage differently.

Polymorphous Relations and the Departure from Categories: Emptying and Disjoining Political Signifiers

Nevertheless, despite the different mechanisms through which categorization works in migration governmentality, Foucault’s analyses on the discourse of truth we are “attached” to and we are supposed to produce about ourselves provide us with an insightful lens for locating the possible points and levels of resistance and border interruptions. In particular there are two aspects mentioned above that could be mobilized and developed: firstly, disjunction and disconnection; secondly, the displacement and the multiplication of the forms of subjectivation. For understanding the disjunction that Foucault thinks of, his reflections on the homosexual and feminist movements allow us to hit it on the nail. In the face of sexual identities and binary oppositions (like homosexuality/heterosexuality, or masculine/feminine) the stakes consists neither in taking the side of “minority” terms – reconfirming in that way the regime of truth upon which those binary partitions are predicated – nor in stretching their exclusionary boundaries: rather, it is a question of disconnecting the categories through which subjects are assigned to a certain position, from the discourse of truth and from any identity issue. This means that the problem is not the use of those categories as such but their functioning within a certain epistemic regime. Instead, the point is how, starting from the very ways in which we

41 In this regard, the name “gay” succeeded according to Foucault in displacing and escaping the binary opposition between homosexuality and heterosexuality, “distrusting the tendency to relate the question of homosexuality to the problem of ‘who am I?’.”
are told and labelled, multiple and polymorphous forms of subjectivation could emerge. To put it differently, the issue can be posed in the following terms: how to “empty” and disjoin categories from the discourse of truth and the regulatory effects they put into place, pushing them at their own limits; to push them at the limits for opening to modes of life that “inhabit” differently those categories, or that finally starting from such a field of identification disengage and depart from it. Retranslated in Foucault’s terms, as he points out in *Friendship as a way of life*, the point is to make (some) human relationships not immediately or fully intelligible through the existing regimes of truth. Moreover, the production of new relationships or modes of life in which categories are disjoined from the regimes of truth and identity in which they were originally situated, should not be restricted to social relations: indeed, as Foucault argues, social relations depends on institutionalized and quite fixed power relations, which ultimately assign a spatial and a social position to the subjects. Instead, as also Butler contends, the goal is precisely to break or go beyond the frame and the spatial horizon fixed in advance, putting into place forms of relationship that are not necessarily or not only “social”. Therefore, a certain category through which some subjects are defined could be played as the point of irradiation and multiplication of indiscernible subjectivities that cannot be reshuffled on that identity referent. In a similar vein, in an interview with the *Ligue Communiste Révolutionnaire* Foucault pointed that «feminist movements claimed for the specificity of women to tell precisely that women are largely another thing that their own sexuality» creating rather «individual relationships, forms of existence and choices of life which go very beyond sexuality»42.

Against this background, Foucault’s ideas of producing disconnections – between the regime of truth and the plethora of categories – and of working through the gaps – between the subject-position assigned by norms and categories, and the effective one occupied and lived by subjects – give us two important cues. It could be added that, in fact, in the case of migrants, and especially of undocumented migrants, the discrepancy between the performative and normative functioning of legal categories on the one hand, and the effective life on the other, strongly influenced by economic conditions, results in a considerable gap always at stake in

migrants’ life. A discrepancy that in principle is adverse to migrants themselves, since for instance it makes that those rights refugees and migrants would be entitled to, actually are not enjoyed by them. But this disadvantage sometimes is reworked as a sort of favourable underside: just because people labelled as “migrants” or as “refugees” are at the same time socially bound according to other referents and positions. Finally, the theme of disconnection: how to disjoin the “mobility profiles” through which migrants are addressed and partitioned, from the regime of truth that sustains migration governmentality? In fact, some migrant struggles have “exploded” the terms and the boundaries of categories, laying claims that resulted “contradictory” or simply untenable according to the very law and order of migration governmentality discourse; or acting as if certain categories migrants strive for to be recognized as refugees were fully disconnected by the rationale that underpins them. Discursive claims, I said: rejected refugees at Choucha camp in Tunisia who were labor migrants of different nationalities working in Libya demanded refugee status for everybody since all of them escape the Libyan conflict. In this way, they laid a claim, an impossible claim in the face of the exclusionary logics of asylum; and at the same time they posited the untenability of the national-based principle of the Geneva Convention which relates the refugee status to the context of people’s country of origin. They did not stretch the boundaries of categories: they troubled and exploded their grounds and their rationale. But in addition to claims, there are also ways of acting in space through which migrants take or reverse a certain position, without demanding: the struggles undertaken by Tunisian migrants and by asylum seekers from Libya in the aftermath of the Arab uprisings, get into a (temporary) crisis the logics of the migration regime not trough acts of naming but through their spatial occupations across Europe. A spatial presence that can be difficulty translated in a discursive claim or in a game of nomination: rather, those practices indicate that the force of norms and categories is not just a question of name or a struggle over names. The “politics of presence” acted, more than claimed, by migrants, sidestepped and took in reverse the discursive space of categories.

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This essay consists in a reflection that starts from the temporality of the norms and that investigates the possibility of practices to subvert them: this article centres the confrontation between Butler and Foucault on these two aspects of epistemic, juridical and gender categories – through the perspective of political epistemology. That is to say, it mobilizes an approach to the production and to the performative dimension of categories that aims at highlighting the historical-political conditions of emergence, retracing the field of power relations in which they are inscribed and, finally, to destabilizing them in their evidence and solidity. Starting from this, one of the central arguments of the article concerns the different temporality of the norm that is implicit in the analyses of the two authors and, in a related way, the different possibilities of subversion and resistance that these presuppose. The aim of this article is to demonstrate that both in Butler and in Foucault the normative and performative force of categories cannot be detached from the regime of truth in which these are situated, as well as from the processes of subjectivation related to it.

Keywords: Political epistemology, Temporality of the norm, Production, Subversion, Doubling, Foucault, Butler.