

FOUCAULT TODAY

Paul Rabinow and Nikolas Rose

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PAUL RABINOW

AND

NIKOLAS ROSE

(EDS)

***THE ESSENTIAL FOUCAULT: SELECTIONS FROM THE
ESSENTIAL WORKS OF FOUCAULT, 1954-1984***

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INTRODUCTION

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We do not undertake analyses of works because we want to copy them or because we suspect them. We investigate the methods by which another has created his work, in order to set ourselves in motion...

Paul Klee ¹

A critique is not a matter of saying that things are not right as they are. It is a matter of pointing out on what kinds of assumptions, what kinds of familiar, unchallenged, unconsidered modes of thought the practices that we accept rest... We must free ourselves from the sacralization of the social as the only reality and stop regarding as superfluous something so essential in human life and human relations as thought.

Michel Foucault ²

How should we read Michel Foucault's work today?³ His writing spans a period from the early 1950s – his *Mental Illness and Psychology* was published in 1954 – to his death in 1984. Many biographers and historians of ideas have looked backward, and tried to understand his thought in terms of his life and its historical context. But in this Introduction to some of Foucault's most important shorter writings – course summaries, interviews and lectures - we look forward and ask a different question. What does Foucault's thought offer for the analysis of our present and our future? This is not a matter of seeking to define a singular approach or a unique methodology which we can then apply to our current concerns. Foucault would, undoubtedly, have been wryly skeptical about the growth of 'Foucault studies' and the related attempt to discipline his thought and turn it into an orthodoxy. The texts collected here certainly do not invite this kind of treatment: they set out to open things up, not close them down; to complicate, not simplify; not to police the boundaries of an oeuvre but to multiply lines of investigation and possibilities for thought. They are not aspects of a single project, but fragmentary - experiments, interventions, provocations and reflections. Foucault, in these explorations, is constantly asking himself questions about the nature and implications of his work: what I have been doing, where am I going, where have I been, where are 'we' today, who is the 'we' of whom I write, who might be a future 'we', what might be the role of thought or the work of writing and thinking in clarifying and transforming who we are? Thus, the power of these texts does not lie in the illustration of 'Foucaultianism', but rather in the way in which they show us the

thinking in motion of one of the most innovative intellectuals of the twentieth century. As one reads these texts, one finds that Foucault's thinking is sometimes contradictory, sometimes reinterpreting texts of the past against their apparent nature, sometimes suggesting new and untried investigations, sometimes jumping in completely unexpected ways. Our hope is that, as readers engage with this critical thought on our present, and on ourselves in the present, their own critical thought might be set into a similar and productive motion. That, we think, would be the most fitting legacy to the creativity of Foucault today.

PART ONE: Using Foucault.

Field work in philosophy

To use a term from Paul Klee, Foucault ‘rendered visible’ certain aspects of our experience in profoundly new ways for a whole generation of thinkers. Prisons, schools and asylums now appeared less than obvious responses to the need of crime control, the treatment of mental illness or the requirements for mass education, more as strange inventions, apparatuses whose micropowers made possible the creation and disciplining of human capacities in novel ways. The belief that our psyche and our desires lie at the very heart of our existence as experiencing human creatures now turned out to be, not a foundational point that can ground and justify our demands for emancipation, but the fulcrum of a more profound subjectification. Of course, some of these things had long been recognized, but somehow they were obscured by the reigning conceptual grids, in particular the relations that they proposed between truth and power and between power and subjectivity. In identifying power effects with the distortion of truth – notably by means of the concept of ideology – and domination with the suppression or deformation of subjectivity - these grids undoubtedly showed us important things about the working of capitalism, patriarchy, racism and the like. But they were increasingly unhelpful in visualizing the detailed workings of the forms of thought and practice that shaped our contemporary existence and experience [– ways of thinking and acting that worked by producing truth and producing the kinds of human beings who took themselves as subjects.]⁴ Foucault enabled us to see different kinds of relations between truth and power, in which power was a matter of the production of truth, and truth was itself a thing of this world, intrinsically bound to apparatuses like the prison, the hospital, the school and the clinic for its production and circulation. And he enabled us to visualize different kind of relations between practices that sought to know and manage human individuals and the emergence of conceptions of ourselves as subjects with certain capacities, rights and a human nature that can ground all sorts of demands for recognition. This was not achieved by an exercise in philosophy or social theory of the traditional sort, but by a kind of ‘field work in philosophy’ – that is to say, by a meticulous investigation of particular practices, technologies, sites where power was articulated on bodies, where knowledge of human individuals became possible, and where souls were produced, reformed, and even, sometimes ‘liberated’. In inventing the tools and the insights that made these relations visible, the very words themselves which are now so familiar – truth, knowledge, power, technology, discourse, practice – were given a new sense and made to do conceptual work that they had not done – that had not been done – before. And in anatomizing the detailed ways of thinking and acting that made up our present, and constituted ourselves in that present, Foucault asked us to consider the possibility that we might invent

different ways of thinking about and acting on ourselves in relation to our pleasures, our labors, our troubles and those who trouble us, our hopes and aspirations for freedom.

Politics and power

Today it seems self-evident that sexuality and gender, medicine and illness, the prison and punishment, psychiatry and psychiatric reform, social insurance and social security, are ‘political’ issues: they are aspects of the ways in which we are governed, they involve asymmetrical relations of power, and they are subject to contestation. But it is easy to forget how recently this view of the scope of politics became common sense. A critical work was required – not least on radical politics itself – to recover the sense of the political significance of these issues. It was carried out in different places by many movements and individuals – by feminists, by prison reformers, by the anti-psychiatry movement, by welfare activists and many others. In prioritizing these issues for analysis, Foucault was undoubtedly stimulated by the ways in which these movements problematized such practices although his debts to some were sometimes left unacknowledged. However his empirical work, for example his studies of the politics of medicine and health in the eighteenth century, showed that no simple lines could be drawn between reformers and reactionaries, between those ‘on the side of power’ and those ‘on the side of resistance’.⁵ Even in questions of punishment, as for example in attempts to identify particular dangerous individuals and understand their motives, these studies made it more, rather than less, difficult for the intellectual to make political judgments as, say, between those who sought retributive punishment based on the horror of a criminal act, those who sought to understand and reform the criminal as a sick individual and those who sought to fictionalize infamy and make transgression the basis of a literary apparatus.⁶ No wonder, then, that his analyses did not try to arbitrate on political strategies or radical objectives in any of these areas - - his unwillingness to be overtly prescriptive made his work an irritant to much radical thought. His distinctive contribution was different and longer lasting - - it was to question the very constitution of these domain – sexuality, criminology, psychiatry, social security - and the ways in which they had come to define the territory and limits of what we must accept and what we could contest and transform. To the extent that these domains had, in part, been constructed through a work of thought, thought could reveal their contingency and fragility – and hence the possibility of their transformation.⁷

Concepts and creativity.

Foucault’s concepts create new options for thought and new possibilities for action. Take, for example, governmentality.⁸ Of course, the topics of state, government, administration and citizenship had been the subject of whole

libraries of historical investigation, and whole bookshops of radical critique. But when these were viewed from the perspective of governmentality they were placed within a more general field of endeavors by authorities to conduct the conduct of their human charges towards certain ends, some of which become the subject of political argument, the responsibility of political rulers and the apparatus of state. The growth of the apparatuses of the state, the development of the disciplines of administration and the civil service, the rise of professionals is intrinsically linked to projects, plans and practices to conduct the conduct of subjects, whether these be citizens, voters, parishioners, patients, clients or consumers. This was not a matter of the spread of the tentacles of the State through the spaces of everyday life. Far from it -- Foucault initially forged the concept of 'governmentality' in an attempt to understand the characteristics of liberalism as a mentality of government that started from the presupposition that society existed external to the state, and constrained itself by limiting the scope of legitimate political power, subjecting it to a range of constraints, and constantly requiring it to justify itself.⁹ From this moment on, the play between the inside and the outside of politics, between public and private, between government and freedom, was central to government. And, from this perspective, the analysis of issues of state and politics, of political authority itself, took on a different shape: curiously the key critical dimension now appeared as an ethical one. This was not because they now had to be addressed within ethical theory, but because they all involved issues of who should govern us, how should we be governed, what should be governed and to what ends: that is to say, they raised the question of who 'we' -- the governed -- were as the subjects of these kinds of practices and the kinds of lives we have come to lead. We now must investigate the powers of the State and of its apparatus of rule in relation to all those many transactions where our own concerns with our own lives have also become the concern of others -- not just explicitly political agencies, but also all those other authorities -- religious, medical, commercial, therapeutic -- who whisper in our ears and advise us how to act and who to be. Both the demands that led to the 'governmentalization of the state' in the twentieth century, and the criticism of this expansion of the scope and role of state powers in the last decades of that century, now appear as linked to strategies, tactics and contestations over the inculcation of the arts of existence to be exercised by individuals, families and communities themselves. And, in a way that is disturbing to many, we can now recognize that the precepts, norms and values disseminated in these practices of government have made us the kinds of persons we take ourselves to be.

Or take, for example, the concept of biopower.¹⁰ So much had been written on health and illness, on statistics, the census, epidemiology and demography, on the science of race, eugenics, population, abortion and dilemmas over new reproductive technology. Yet, strangely, no-one had grouped these diverse

domains under a common term. Biopower names and groups together these concerns with the management of the phenomena that characterize groups of living human beings. It relates the exercise of this form of power to varying conceptions of the nature of human individuals and collectivities, their apparently biological variability – race, fertility, gender, constitution - and the ways in which these characteristics can be shaped, managed and selected in order to achieve political objectives. It shows how this problem of the government of living populations produces specific dilemmas for liberalism as a principle for the rationalization and exercise of government based on a conception of autonomous legal subjects endowed with rights, and free enterprise of individuals. And it casts new light on the relations between the liberal government of the metropolitan territories and the exercise of colonial government over populations conceived of as naturally, racially, biologically, constitutionally, morally and ethically distinct. Reframed in the context of biopolitics, each of these issues – the government of racial difference in the colonies, the management of public health, the design of hospitals and sewage systems, concerns about the falling birth rate, female fecundity or the location of cemeteries - morphs. While the empirical detail concerning each stays recognizably the same, the configurations amongst them becomes oddly different. New relations, dangers, promises, apparatuses, stakes, quandaries come into view and we can see how our present took shape through successive attempts to resolve them. Looking back, how could we not have seen that life itself has been fundamentally at stake in our politics and in our ethics? How could we have avoided recognizing the political consequences of the fact that we humans have come to understand ourselves as living beings whose very vitality, longevity, morbidity, mortality can be managed, administered, reformed, improved, transformed, and has a political value? From this point on, it will be impossible to pose the question of our existence as political creatures without simultaneously having to think about the ways in which our politics has become a matter of life itself. And, reciprocally, it will be impossible to understand the politics of life without addressing the way in which life itself has entered into knowledge, and the changing ways in which its specificity – as vitality, as organic machine, as code... – has been understood.

Knowledge and objects

This question – of the knowledge of life and the government of life – enables us to stress another key point. To analyze the circuits that link knowledge to practices of normalization, cure or government is not to reduce truth to a mere effect of such practices – to suggest that truth is merely a legitimation or functional support for power. If Foucault had proposed this, he would not have spent so much time and effort describing the complex circuits and relations between our knowledges of ourselves as living beings and the practices that made those knowledges possible and which they have engendered. ¹¹

Knowledges – even those of the positive sciences which take the human being in its living, acting, desiring, transgressing, sickening and dying reality as their object - are governed by certain rules which establish what can be said truthfully at any one time, the criteria of evidence, the forms of proof and even the very object of which they can speak. Life, today, is not what it was for Xavier Bichat writing at the start of the clinical experience in medicine in the late eighteenth century, for Claude Bernard establishing experimental medicine in the nineteenth century, nor even for Kurt Goldstein whose monumental study of the organism was published in the 1930s. Madness today is not what it was for Thomas Willis when he treated the madness of George III, nor for Philippe Pinel when he struck the chains from the inmates of the Salpêtrière, nor even for Jean Delay and Pierre Deniker, the discoverers of the first modern psychiatric drug, chlorpromazine, in the 1950s.¹² In the discourses regulated by the norms of truth – which are those that **primarily** concerned Foucault - it is a matter of investigating the conditions that establish, at any one time, the relation between true and false which is, on the one hand, intrinsic to the sciences and their history, and, on the other, essential to the ways in which human beings have come to govern themselves and others.

Then and now

Does that mean that in the texts collected here – or in any others of Foucault's writing – one will find the last word on topics such as biopower, governmentality or the changing relations between life and knowledge of life. The answer is 'no.' After all Foucault wrote before the collapse of the Soviet empire, before the 'New World Order,' before the internet, before the genome project, before global warming, before genetically modified organisms, before pre-implantation diagnosis of embryos, before 'pharmacogenomics.' So it would be futile to search the texts to find his detailed or substantive insights into these configurations. This is not only for the obvious reason that these events post-dated his death. Even were he alive today, and although his work was attuned to immediacy and actuality, it was not his practice to deliver evaluations of current affairs. Readers may take *Discipline and Punish* to be a critical history of the prison system at the time it was written - the 1970s - or *Madness and Civilization* as an analysis or critique of the psychiatry of the late 1960s. Undoubtedly, these books are motivated by precisely these conjunctures. But Foucault's diagnosis of the present does not proceed by attempting a comprehensive analysis of these practices as they exist today, but by seeking the conditions that have made these practices possible and established the grounds on which they depend for their intelligibility – for example, the very idea of the mental patient or of the criminal. *Madness and Civilization* may help us think critically about the psychiatry of the last quarter of the twentieth century, but this 'rendering visible' is achieved by a study that terminates in the nineteenth century – a study that hardly mentions that societies in Europe and North

America were already dismantling many of the premises of psychiatric systems based upon confinement in the institution of the mental hospital. Similarly, *Discipline and Punish* barely mentions the prison system as it existed in the 1970s, and was written at the very moment when control practices based on the identification, incarceration and normalization of the deviant individual were already being incorporated within wider circuits for the management of troublesome conduct. Each of these studies started from a point where some of the given-ness of established ways of thinking and acting was already coming into question. But rather than addressing this configuration of problems and solutions directly, Foucault used history to help grasp the way in which this configuration had come into existence and to diagnose some of the fault lines ingrained within it. These works did this by mapped the contingent pathways along which the taken-for-granted possibilities and limits of our present have come into existence.

For example, *Madness and Civilization* is an analysis of the way in which the very territory of twentieth century psychiatry came into existence – the unification of its subjects, objects and problems within institutions and practices in which the varieties of madness shared a purely negative ethical value.¹³ But from the problem spaces of twenty first century psychiatry, we might well trace a different genealogy. We would follow different pathways to diagnose the tangled field where the boundaries are blurred between institution and society and between madness and sanity, where mental disorder is no longer a uniquely a question of unreason, where mental ill health is not merely an economic burden on the nation but a vastly profitable market for the enterprise of psychopharmaceuticals. Nevertheless, in addition to their specific historical and ethical insights, the abiding value of texts such as *Madness and Civilization* and *Discipline and Punish* lies in the way they exemplify a certain ethos of investigation. For to do the history of psychiatry or the prison, for Foucault, is not to write a history of psychiatrists or penal reformers said or did, or even a history of their institutions. Specifically, these studies show that such practices, persons and institutions gain their sense only from their location within a much wider nexus of relations of knowledge, power and the production of subjectivities. But more generally, these texts teach us something about the role of history in critical thought. For a certain use of history was central to the critical work of thought that Foucault practiced. Foucault's recourse to history shares something with social history, but he was not, in fact, writing history. This is even more important to recognize, now that that categories like archaeology and genealogy have part of a repertoire of received concepts and historicizing has become a routine tactic of critical argument. Whilst the displacements of method entailed in this different use of historical materials frequently upset historians, Foucault's studies are not intended to replace conventional ways of practicing the discipline of history. Indeed, some of their

power arises out of their tension with these other ways of making use of historical material.¹⁴ Whilst Foucault repeatedly turns to the past to understand the present, this is not an obsession with the past in Nietzsche's sense that Europe was sick from such an historical obsession. But nor is it a relentless presentism, in which all that has gone before is merely put in the service of our own concerns – we don't need George Orwell to remind us that there are dangers in such a motivated rewriting of the past with all the obliterations of the inconvenient that it entails. If Nietzsche's genealogy of morals was an attack on Christendom and European complacency, Foucault's genealogies have a different point of attack and use different techniques. But what they share is the concern to disturb and trouble our own conventions – whether of truth, of politics, or of ethics – through a gray and meticulous labor of detail on the paths that we took – and the paths that were not taken – in putting together the objects, subjects and values that seem so natural and precious to us.¹⁵

We cannot assume that this recourse of critical thought to history can simply be repeated in order to address the issues that concern us today and in the future. In his relation to Nietzsche, Foucault demonstrates that genealogy has to be invented anew as situations change. So perhaps the detailed and meticulous labor that needs to be done to unsettle our conventions must find other forms, other points of action on our present. These might be comparative, conjunctural or ethnographic, or they may take a form that has yet to be invented or named. Thus, the practice of criticism which we might learn from Foucault would not be a methodology. It would be a movement of thought that invents, makes use of, and modifies conceptual tools as they are set into a relation with specific practices and problems which they themselves help to form in new ways. When they have done this work, without regret, they can be recycled or even discarded.

Dispositif

One of the most powerful conceptual tools introduced by Foucault is that of 'apparatus' or *dispositif*. Social theory had tended to work in terms of institutions, classes, and cultures and, in a distinct register, in terms of ideas, ideologies, beliefs and prejudices. But in introducing the concept of apparatus, Foucault cut reality in a different way. In cutting across these categories, new and rather different elements, associations and relations can be seen. This is not to say that class relations and the like disappear. Rather, Foucault practices a style of research which analyses the articulations of these grand complexes in the mundane practices of the prison, the hospital, the school, the courtroom, the household, the town planner and colonial governor. The new problems and connections that come into view, precisely because of the level of detail at

which they are described, seem to become more amenable to action and transformation.

Foucault's first use of the term, if not exactly the concept, 'dispositif' was in 1975 in an interview following the publication of *Surveiller et Punir*. After many years working through the voluminous documentary archives around the prison, the hospital, schools and the like, he had learned, he told his interviewer, that it was not necessary to search for anything hidden when it came to the intentions and projects of the XIXth century bourgeoisie. In its classical manifestations, the bourgeoisie was lucid and cynical; they knew what they wanted to accomplish and wrote about their plans with great explicitness. The level of reality that counted was on the surface and it was directly accessible. There was no need to contrive the kinds of sophisticated 'symptomatic readings' that were associated with a certain interpretation of Marx' method or the text of *Capital*, to penetrate beneath what was said and written to reveal hidden interests, the structure of sign systems, what was being repressed or projected.¹⁶ "Substitute the logic of strategies for the logic of the unconscious;" Foucault calmly advised as if his approach was uncontroversial, "replace the privileged place accorded to the signifier and its semiotic connections with an attention to tactics and their apparatuses."¹⁷ He appears to be taking the term 'apparatus' in its ordinary French usage that refers to tools and devices. In the 1976 introduction to a collective work on the Politics of Health in the XVIIIth century, the product of his working seminar at the Collège de France, Foucault used the concept as well as the term: "The biological traits of a population became pertinent elements in its economic management, and it was necessary to organize them through an apparatus that not only assured the constant maximization of their utility but equally their subjection."¹⁸ Foucault uses the word apparatus to mean a device oriented to produce something – a machinic contraption whose purpose in this case is control and management of certain characteristics of a population. In the collective report on the seminar's work, there is a sustained empirical demonstration of what a strategic assemblage looks like. This shows how, and in what ways, an apparatus composed of a grouping of heterogeneous elements had been deployed for specific purposes at a particular historical conjuncture. The politics of health in the eighteenth century was a politics of apparatuses.¹⁹ It was a politics of strategically chosen targets. It was an articulation of technologies aimed at first specifying (and to that extent creating) those targets and then controlling (distributing and regulating) them.²⁰

When questioned about his use of the term 'dispositif' in 1977. Foucault responded by underscoring that the defining aspect of apparatuses was their grouping of heterogeneous elements into a common network (*réseau*).²¹ The apparatus was "a resolutely heterogeneous grouping composing discourses,

institutions, architectural arrangements, policy decisions, laws, administrative measures, scientific statements, philosophic, moral and philanthropic propositions; in sum, the said and the not-said, these are the elements of the apparatus. The apparatus itself is the network that can be established between these elements.”²² The elements composing or taken up in a network apparently could be anything. Foucault saw the elements in an apparatus as joined and disjoined by a strategic logic and a tactical economy of domination operating against a background of discursive formations. He identified the apparatus as characterized by changes in the position of its elements, the multiplying modifications of its functions, and an overall articulated strategic intent, albeit an appropriately flexible one. The apparatus embodied a kind of strategic *bricolage* articulated by an identifiable social collectivity. It functioned to define and to regulate targets constituted through a mixed economy of power and knowledge.

As his studies of the birth of social medicine show – and as also spelled out in *Discipline and Punish* - these strategic assemblages are initially formed as responses to crises, problems or perceived challenges to those who govern.²⁴ The apparatus is a specific strategic response to a specific historical problem. But such an initial response to a pressing situation can gradually have a more general rationality extracted from it, and hence be turned into a technology of power applicable to other situations. What may have begun, for example, as a rather ad hoc assemblage of ways of thinking and acting, making use of elements that were to hand, linking them in new ways and turning them to new ends, in order to attempt to deal with a problem such as that of urban crime may turn into a way of thinking and acting applicable to other problems and populations, at other times and in other places. The apparatus can be rationalized and the techniques turned into a generalizable technology. Further, despite the initial intention that an apparatus will respond in a targeted way to a particular problem to achieve a specific strategic objective, diverse and unplanned effects can and do result. These too can play a role in extending the network of the apparatus. For example, the creation of a delinquent milieu in the city was not planned by prison reformers but arose as an unanticipated effect. It soon became part of the larger problem of urban policing and, as it turned out, not only did this not destroy the strategic utility of the apparatus but to an extent came to be used to extend it. This claim, of course, does not mean it worked ‘even better,’ if by that one means it achieved the explicit goals laid out by the forces of order.²⁵ But it did work if by that one means that an ever wider game of order -- that is to say, a whole rationality -- and an ever wider set of projects of reform -- that is to say, a whole technology -- came to be cast within these terms.

Problematization

The term ‘problématisation’ first appears in *Discipline and Punish* and then with increasing frequency in Foucault’s later work. During the mid 1970s, Foucault was rethinking the Nietzschean grid of warfare as the basic trans-historic, metaphors of life, knowledge and power, developing the concept of governmentality and beginning his analysis of liberalism as a mentality of government that depended upon, created and constrained free subjects. Foucault here began to take up the question of thinking as an activity, one that similarly involved both constraint and freedom.²⁷ This crucial reframing of thought and of politics has been lost on many Anglo-American commentators (both favorably and unfavorably disposed to Foucault) who have refused to accept the implications of Foucault’s discovery that power was not external to freedom. This interplay of enabling capacities and constraining powers, of the obligation to limit power but also of modes of inflecting it, gained a saliency not only as an analytics but equally as a perpetual practical (political and ethical) problem. It was within the frame of these developments that Foucault began to articulate, albeit in a preliminary fashion, the concept of problematization.

The most direct and explicit presentation of ‘problématisation’ took place in a discussion in Berkeley in 1983, presented in a different form in the second ‘Preface’ that was actually published with *The Use of Pleasure*. Would it be possible, Foucault wondered, “to describe the history of thought as distinct from both the history of ideas (by which I mean the analysis of systems of representation) and from the history of mentalities (by which I mean the analysis of attitudes and types of action (*schémas de comportement*)). It seemed to me that there was one element that was capable of describing the history of thought – this was what one could call the element of problems or, more exactly, problematizations.”²⁸ In part, the concept of problematization was forged in distinction to the traditional sense in which the history of ideas meant the history of philosophic doctrines: as, for example, Foucault’s mentor Jean Hyppolite had practiced it in his work on Hegel. In part, the concept distinguishes Foucault’s analytics from the analysis of representations as semiotic systems as undertaken, say, by Roland Barthes and taken up by Anglo-American cultural studies. And, in part, it distinguishes his thought from the many French historians and anthropologists, who were seeking the underlying system of codes that shaped a culture’s thought and behavior: the object of an analysis of problematizations is not ‘culture’ at all, at least in the sense that had concerned the social sciences.

Problematization, then, named the distinctive dimension on which Foucault’s history of thought would operate. A “problematization,” Foucault writes, “does not mean the representation of a pre-existent object nor the creation through discourse of an object that did not exist. It is the ensemble of discursive and non-discursive practices that make something enter into the play of true and false and

constitute it as an object of thought (whether in the form of moral reflection, scientific knowledge, political analysis, etc).”²⁹ For an earlier generation of radical intellectuals, inspired by Marxist conceptions of critique, the role of critical thought was to disturb the naturalness, the taken for granted character of everyday life -- the nuclear family, the wage form, the commodity was to be revealed as not given, eternal but the contingent product of a set of deep but historically contingent laws and processes. In revealing this contingency, critique hopes to open these givens to political action. Foucault’s conception of problematization differs. Like Nietzsche, for Foucault the most profound thought is that which remains on the surface. To analyze problematizations is not to reveal a hidden and suppressed contradiction: it is to address that which has already become problematic. For a problematization to have formed, something prior “must have happened to have made it uncertain, to have made it lose its familiarity, or to have provoked a certain number of difficulties around it”³⁰ But, for Foucault we can always identify several possible ways of responding to the same ensemble of difficulties. For “when thought intervenes, it doesn’t assume a unique form that is the direct result or the necessary expression of these difficulties; it is an original or specific response – often taking many forms, sometimes even contradictory in its different aspects – to these difficulties, which are defined for it by a situation or a context, and which hold true as a possible question.”³¹ The task of the analyst is not to adjudicate between these, but to “rediscover at the root of these diverse solutions the general form of problematization that has made them possible – even in their very opposition... what has made possible the transformations of the difficulties and obstacles into a general problem for which one proposes diverse practical solutions.”³²

The specific diacritic of thought is not only to be found in this act of diagnosis. It also rests on the attempt to change the way in which a situation is apprehended: from seeing it as ‘a given’ which generates problems that must be resolved, to seeing it as ‘a question’ whose formation and obviousness must itself be subject to analysis. To enquire into this transformation of difficulties into problems which demand solutions is not to arbitrate between existing responses, but to ‘free up’ possibilities. The act of thinking is an act of modal transformation from the constative to the subjunctive, from the necessary to the contingent.

Critical thought adopts a particular relation to problematization. By definition, the thinker is neither entirely outside of the situation in question nor entirely enmeshed within it without recourse or options. Indeed, thought “is what allows one to step back from this way of acting or reacting, to present it to oneself as an object of thought and to question it as to its meaning, its conditions, and its goals. Thought is freedom in relation to what one does, the motion by which

one detaches oneself from it, establishes it as an object, and reflects on it as a problem.”³³ Thinking is the form given to that motion of detachment, reflection and re-problematization. For Foucault, this kind of thought is not autonomous in any of the strong senses that it has been given in Western philosophy. Thought is neither transparent, nor is it a passive waiting, nor is it an intentional act of consciousness. Thought is not necessarily coherent, it has no univocal or foundational meaning that is amenable to a complete logical clarification. Thought is not, cannot be, an external evaluation of a situation. “This development of a given into a question, this transformation of a group of obstacles and difficulties into problems to which the diverse solutions will attempt to produce a response, this is what constitutes the point of problematization and the specific work of thought.”³⁴

Subjectification

Many have suggested that in the last phase of his writing, Foucault rethought his relation to a problem that he had previously questioned and sidestepped – the question of ‘the subject.’ In part this is true, but in doing so, once again, he transmuted this question into one amenable to a kind of historical investigation:

*After first studying the games of truth (jeux de vérité) in their interplay with one another, as exemplified by certain empirical sciences in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and then studying their interaction with power relations, as exemplified by punitive practices – I felt obliged to study the games of truth in the relationship of self with self, and the forming of oneself as a subject....*³⁵

Foucault considers his aims in the preface he had originally intended to publish to the second volume of *The History of Sexuality*, but which was actually published separately.³⁶ His was not ‘a history of the self’ of the sort that has become familiar in historical sociology – it is not an attempt to write a history of the transformations of human psychology over time and space. Nor is it a concern with identity, in the way in which that question has beset the social sciences in recent decades. As one might expect, his was not a romantic or humanist wish to write the history of *who we are*. Instead, it was an attempt to develop an analytic that could make visible the vectors that shape *our relation to ourselves*. In the slight gap that opens when one moves from the question “what kinds of selves have we become?” to ‘how do we relate to ourselves as selves of a certain kind’ - in this ‘epistemology of the relation’ - history inserts itself not in our psyche but in that silent thought that inhabits the most intimate aspects of our experience of ourselves. As Foucault put it in the version of the Introduction that was published with *The Use of Pleasure*, this would be a history of the “forms and modalities of the relation to the self by which the individual constitutes and recognizes himself qua subject– of “the problematizations through which being offers itself to be, necessarily, thought –

and the practices on the basis of which those problematizations are formed.”³⁷ The human being, from this perspective is not so much an entity-- not even an entity with a history -- than the site of a multiplicity of practices or labors. And as for its interiority -- the subjectivity apparently so essential to all theories of the subject and anxieties about ‘agency’ -- perhaps it is best to follow Gilles Deleuze here, and his philosophy of the fold: the apparent depth of the human soul is less a psychological system than a discontinuous surface, a multiplicity of spaces, cavities, relations, divisions established through a kind of in-folding of exteriority.³⁸ Forms of experience arise, that is to say, on the basis of practices -- not necessarily discursive -- insofar as they are inhabited by thought: “in every manner of speaking, doing or behaving in which the individual appears and acts as knowing subject [*sujet de connaissance*], as ethical or juridical subject, as subject conscious of himself and others.”³⁹

This approach opens on to specific studies of the problems and problematizations through which human beings have been shaped in a thinkable and manageable form, the sites and locales where these problems are formed, the techniques and devices invented, the modes of authority and subjectivity engendered, and the telos of these various tactics and strategies.⁴⁰ This way of thinking about subjectification clearly reflects back upon, and re-frames, Foucault’s earlier analyses of the emergence of the thinking, laboring, living subject as the object of knowledge, and of the individual as the target of practices of punishment, pedagogy and cure. In part, these were analyses of language: of the emergence of new categories of human beings and new explanatory frameworks within scientific discourse. But if we consider the accounts given of birth of the subject of psychiatry in *Madness and Civilization*, of the birth of the patient of clinical medical reason in *Birth of the Clinic*, of the birth of the individual of *Discipline and Punish*, we can see that -- whatever some careless critics think -- these are not discourse analyses in any of the senses given to this term in Anglo-American linguistics or social science. In fact, these investigations, carried out at different times across virtually the whole period of Foucault’s work, embody the very ambitions that he makes explicit in his ‘late work’ on ethics: not analyses of discourse, but of:

‘the games of truth,’ the games of truth and error through which being is historically constituted as experience; that is, as something that can and must be thought. What are the games of truth by which man proposes to think his own nature when he considers himself to be ill, when he conceives of himself as a living, speaking, labouring being; when he judges and punishes himself as a criminal? What were the games of truth by which human beings came to see themselves as desiring individuals?’⁴¹

Such ‘games of truth’ have not arisen in some abstract space of thought, but always in relation to specific practices: the places and spaces, the apparatuses, relations and routines that bind human beings into complex assemblies of vision,

action and judgment: whether these be those of domestic existence, sexual relations, labor, comportment in public places or consumption. Language -- even as discourse -- is only one of the heterogeneous and localized intellectual and practical techniques, the 'instruments' through which human beings constitute themselves. The games of truth which make up the history of our relation to ourselves should not be studied in terms of ideas, but of *technologies*: the intellectual and practical instruments and devices enjoined upon human beings to shape and guide their ways of 'being human'.⁴²

In Foucault's studies of Greek and Roman texts on the arts of existence from the late 1970 onwards, this 'technological' aspect of the relation of self to self once more comes to the fore.⁴³ Ethics, here, is reposed in terms of the aspects of the human being that are singled out as the target of such work, the relations to authority and truth under which that work is constructed, the precise techniques for experiencing and reshaping the self that are employed and the forms of subject to which one is led to aspire. Each configuration of these relations of self to self implies a certain activity of the subject within a field of constraints -- even for the slave or for the mad, under situations where the models of selfhood are imposed from outside, a certain self-crafting is required.⁴⁴ And each crafting of a relation with the self arises out of, and entails, a crafting of one's relations to others -- be they one's superiors, one's pupils, one's colleagues, one's husband, wife or mistress, one's family or one's friends. The central values of our current ethical regimes -- the experience of freedom, the necessity for recognition, the inviolable dignity of the human being -- do not form the ground of all these ethical configurations or the universal basis for their critique -- they are the historical, local moving and always troubled resultant of the application of certain arts of existence. And this particular ethic of 'the care of the self' is not the only one possible -- there have been, and will be, other ways of understanding and relating to oneself and to others.

Pausing, moving.

In what we now know was the last period of his writing, during what turned out to be the end of his life, Foucault had been frustrated by his own inability to gain more clarity about the intellectual, ethical, aesthetic, and political problems that were troubling him. Such a situation of blockage before finding new things to explore, and new means of exploration, was not a unique one for Foucault. These moments of pause and reformulation were typically punctuated by interviews and reflections in which, and through which, Foucault situated his intellectual and auto-biographical trajectory. These declarations were often made in sweeping terms and, at times, in a manner that contradicted claims about his work that he had offered on prior occasions. The narrative clarity may well have been a fiction but it was fiction that helped Foucault to begin working

and thinking once again. And after his periods of stasis, Foucault usually succeeded in achieving dramatic accelerations in his thinking and his action. Thinking was action, and action was motion – and as a thinker and as a person, Foucault sought to be in motion. Although he had characterized the reasons for his insistence on change and re-evaluation in various ways at various moments, the most striking formulation was his quest to ‘*se dependre de soi.*’⁴⁵ To detach oneself from oneself – such a distance enables motion, and in its turn, motion enables a recurrent activity of self-detachment. In a certain practice of philosophy, as in science, change, re-evaluation, reformulation, is entirely appropriate. For one who searches, such motion lies at the heart of a life devoted to research.

Foucault’s later works are neither a final philosophic testament nor the thoughts of a person facing imminent death. Here they contrast, for example, with the last writings of Gilles Deleuze. When Deleuze expresses his surprise in *What is Philosophy?* that it had been remarkably rare for philosophers to take up the question ‘what is philosophy?’, reserved for a small cohort of thinkers who posed this question for themselves in its brute essentials only at the end of their lives, he could not have known that his friend Felix Guattari would die shortly thereafter, but he was fully aware of his own physical decline, and perhaps of the relationship (of suicide) he would adopt toward his own physical deterioration. Foucault most certainly did not know with any certainty that he was terminally ill until shortly before his death – little was known about AIDS in 1983, and the test for HIV only came on the French market in October 1984, after Foucault’s death in June. Even in 1984, in one of his last lectures at the *Collège de France*, Foucault mentioned in passing that he intended to take up a topic under discussion at a future time. Foucault’s writings from this period, therefore, do not form a final reflection made as an end approached; they are yet another turning in his life and thought.

Foucault’s ‘detour,’ as he himself named it, into the climes of the Antique world of Greece, Hellenistic, and Roman thought, lasted close to seven years. It culminated by the publication of two books, Volumes II and III of *The History of Sexuality*. It was terminated by Foucault’s death in June 1984. On one level, Foucault’s frustration turned on the issue of gaining sufficient mastery of the subject matter he was analyzing. The shift to the Ancient World was both captivating and troublesome; Foucault knew very well that he had entered into a domain many scholars over the course of many generations had spent their lives exploring. He knew as well that many of these specialists would not welcome the entry of an amateur into their domains, that his work would be received by many as an impertinent intrusion. This reception was especially to be anticipated because Foucault was raising basic questions within this hyper-investigated arena that rather curiously had been under-explored by these men and women of

knowledge. The complicated reception by historians -- largely negative although not entirely so -- of his previous work had prepared Foucault for professional spite but also, much more importantly, for the pleasures of new work that others would be enabled and emboldened to pursue. There was always a price to be paid for detours into new terrains: as a long line of modern thinkers from Nietzsche through Freud and Bourdieu have taught us, there is no *entrée libre* into the commerce of ideas. This time Foucault did not live to experience either the reception of his new books or the fate of the new figures of truth he had 'rendered visible.'

In the late 1970s and early 1980s, Foucault not only shifted the subject matter of his investigation, he also wrestled with problems about thought itself, about the manner or style of thinking, the form that one gives to thought, the relation of that mode of thinking to a form of life: what *mode d'assujettissement* was appropriate for the intellectual.⁴⁶ Foucault felt bored and trapped in Paris and he was drawn to the existential and intellectual life in the Bay Area: it was here, for example, that one can locate the kinds of experiences that led to his 1981 reflections on 'friendship as a way of life'.⁴⁷ In this period of re-examination and reformulation, in what might be termed his Berkeley and San Francisco years, Foucault posed for himself, in different ways, some questions about the very activity he had been engaging in for so long: 'what is thinking?'; 'why think?'; and, perhaps surprisingly 'what is the place of thinking in a good life?' Was it possible to develop a kind of critical thought that would not 'judge' -- so much criticism has the form of a quasi-judicial tribunal passing down verdicts of guilt or innocence on persons or events -- but would create, produce, intensify the possibilities within existence. And this, perhaps, is the challenge which his work lays down to us today.

PART TWO: After Foucault.

The present and its history

[One of the] most destructive habits of modern thought ... is that the moment of the present is considered in history as the break, the climax, the fulfillment, the return of youth, etc... One must probably find the humility to admit that the time of one's own life is not the one-time, basic, revolutionary moment of history, from which everything begins and is completed. At the same time, humility is needed to say without solemnity that the present time is rather exciting and demands an analysis. We must ask ourselves the question, What is today? In relation to the Kantian question, "What is Enlightenment?" one can say that it is the task of philosophy to explain what today is and what we are today, but without breast-beating drama and theatricality and maintaining that this moment is the greatest damnation or daybreak of the rising sun. No, it is a day like very other, or much more, a day which is never like another.⁴⁸

Foucault is famous for a remark that he made in *Discipline and Punish* about the history of the present: his engagement with history, he implied, was not simply because of an interest in the past but was part of a critical project directed towards the present.⁴⁹ Of course, he is by no means the only thinker to have explicitly argued that historical investigations should be undertaken in order better to understand the present. But the catchphrase that came to characterize this approach – the history of the present – was to signal neither an historical methodology nor an historical sociology. Perhaps this difference may be understood by addressing it from two directions. The first concerns the present itself as a contemporary problem field, but one which is neither a temporal not a sociological unity. And the second concerns the critical attitude that one might properly adopt towards that present.⁵⁰

For historical sociologists, modernity is accorded the characteristic of an epoch, defined in time, and perhaps now in space as well. It has certain characteristic forms – a type of individualization, a certain forms of rationality, typical practices of control and normalization -- and a characteristic ethos -- an orientation to the future, to progress and the like. For many commentators and critics, the work of Marx, Weber, Durkheim is placed within this grid of interpretation – whether its essence is capitalism, rationalization, or organic solidarity, modernity defines not only the abstract object of social theory but also the essential features of the real social relations that that theory seeks to grasp in thought. Hence, for this latter concern, debates rage about the geographical span of modernity – is it confined to ‘the West’, is it spreading across the planet under the impulse of globalization? Similar debates rage over the criteria for inclusion in modernity – is Islam ‘pre-modern’? And, most troubling of all, since its very nature is temporal, what are the chronological limits of modernity -- are we, for instance, in ‘late modernity’? Or, perhaps, we

are on the cusp of something new, in which the modern is to be transcended, incorporated in a higher synthesis to which, for a time, many gave the name of post-modernity.

But Foucault's concern with the present does not make him a theorist of 'modernity' of this ilk. His earlier work was seen by many to participate in a kind of historical periodisation -- the very distinction of renaissance, classical and modern *epistemes* in *The Order of Things* was an analytical strategy which was likely to attract the criticism of 'epochalisation' and of course it did.⁵¹ Foucault was criticized as a theorist of systems that succeeded one another in radical discontinuity, and hence his thesis apparently raised -- but could not answer -- the question of how change between *epistemes* occurred. Whilst it is true that *epistemes* are not epochs, in the Introduction to *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, written around 1968, Foucault remarks that he found it "mortifying that I was unable to avoid the dangers [of giving the impression that the analyses in his previous books were being conducted in terms of cultural totalities]: I console myself with the thought that they were intrinsic to the enterprise itself, since, in order to carry out its task it first had to free itself from these various methods and forms of history." Indeed he says that it was in answer to questions on this very point that he came to gain a clearer view of the enterprise that he was engaged in, and from this time on he sought to distance himself from the residues of structuralism in his mode of criticism.⁵² Nonetheless, perhaps the very idea of 'systems of thought' imposed a kind of structural obligation on analysis -- that is to say, an obligation to identify structures, and to operate through the radical distinction of one structure from another. And whilst his book length analyses seldom discuss the present in any direct way, the problem of the present is nonetheless made amenable to thought by means of the distance, and the difference, established between it and that which has preceded it. We can see this in *Madness and Civilization* and its analysis of the relegation of madness to mere mental pathology (there was not always a monologue of reason about madness), in the contrasting spatializations of illness and the body discussed in *Birth of the Clinic* (it was not always the body that was the site of illness and the target of cure) or the changes in regimes of punishment and their targets so dramatically portrayed in *Discipline and Punish* (it was not always the soul that was the origin of infraction and the target of punishment).

In his essay 'What is Enlightenment?',⁵³ Foucault suggests that, across the local and partial discontinuities that his earlier works had explored, we have remained "beings who are historically determined, to a certain extent, by the Enlightenment."⁵⁴ To this extent, the questions human beings have posed to themselves in these distinct historical configurations are nonetheless recurrent: What is our time, and how does it differ from other times? What kinds of persons have we become? How can we judge good and bad? What can we hope

for? Who do we care for and how do we care for them? What must we strive for? But the task of historical investigation of our present is to diagnose the singularity with which each of these questions presents itself at any historical moment, and in doing so to reveal the peculiarity of the dilemmas through which our own world presents itself to us. To make our present itself untimely – or rather, to make our relation to it untimely: for Foucault, as for Nietzsche, what meaning could his studies “have for our time if they were not untimely – that is to say, acting counter to our time and thereby on our time and, let us hope, for the benefit of a time to come.”⁵⁵ Elsewhere, Foucault thinks of this as an “ethic of discomfort,” an ethic that can be seen as the philosophical task bequeathed to us by Maurice Merleau-Ponty:

never to consent to being completely comfortable with one's own presuppositions. Never to let them fall peacefully asleep, but also never to believe that a new fact will suffice to overturn them; never to imagine that one can change them like arbitrary axioms, remembering that in order to give them the necessary mobility one must have a distant view, but also to look at what is nearby and all around oneself. To be very mindful that everything one perceives is evident only against a familiar and little known horizon, that every certainty is sure only through the support of a ground that is always unexplored. The most fragile instance has its roots. In that lesson, there is a whole ethic of sleepless evidence that does not rule out, far from it, a rigorous economy of the True and the False; but that is not the whole story .⁵⁶

To act in this way, through history on our present, to show how our seemingly timely and inescapable problems were composed, is not an act of relativization. Our questions, however contingent, remain our questions -- historical, yes, but what else could they be? So the effect of this act of thought upon thought is not to relativize thought, let alone minimize or ironize the significance of the questions that haunt our thought, but to establish a certain necessary distance from their apparently implacable immediacy, from the demand they make upon us to provide answers not questions. Such a space is necessary for us to begin to re-imagine these problems -- it is the space for what might be called freedom in thought: “a virtual break which opens a room, understood as a room of concrete freedom, that is possible transformation.”⁵⁷

To speak, here, of transformation – or of possible transformation – is to turn to the second aspect of Foucault’s attention to the present – which concerns the critical attitude one might adopt towards it. Some thoughts of Paul Klee are, once again, instructive here: he writes: “[The artist] is a philosopher, perhaps without exactly wanting to be one. And while he does not optimistically declare this world to be the best of all possible worlds, or believe it to be so bad that it is unfit to be taken as a model, he nevertheless says to himself: In its present form it is not the only world possible!”⁵⁸ And Foucault in similar vein, in his essay on Enlightenment,⁵⁹ quotes Baudelaire’s precept “You have no right to despise

the present.”⁶⁰ It is true that, at times, some of Foucault’s own statements give credence to the view that his work is infused by the same ‘hermeneutic of suspicion’ that activates the repetitive and wearying reflexes of the intellectual left: everything is dangerous, suspect the worst, we know already whose interests this serves – where this covers everything from NATO’s actions in former Yugoslavia to the projects to map the human genome. “I do not say everything is bad,” Foucault answers to an interviewer who thinks that because his analyses show that power is inescapable they might imply that improvement is impossible, “only that everything is dangerous.” It may seem that, in response to the accusation that his work is a nihilism that can only lead to stasis, his riposte is to present it as requiring the opposite: a kind of constant activism in relation to the present.⁶¹ But in fact, for Foucault, the critical role of thought is different.

On the one hand, he suggests, is not the role of thought to say “it is useless to revolt.” In extreme situations, even when power appears absolute and despotic “behind all the submissions and coercions, beyond the threats, the violence, and the intimidations, there is the possibility of that moment when life can no longer be bought, when the authorities can no longer do anything, and when, Facing the gallows and the machine gun, people revolt.”⁶² Thought here commingles with something irreducible in life – one needs no ontology to recognize it, no humanism to defend it, no Marxism to evaluate it.

On the other hand, and perhaps this is an even more difficult ethical injunction for intellectuals, neither is it the role of thought -- or at least of Foucault’s ethic of thought – to demand resistance where it is absent. It is not the role of the intellectual to say ‘it is imperative to revolt, do you not realize that your world is intolerable.’ Nor is it their role to tell all those who play a part in the practices of power – the social workers, the psychiatrists, the doctors, the bioscientists – what to do, what not to do, what to strive for, what to reject. If anything is to discourage the attempts of such practitioners to improve the practices in which they work, it would be this, for such injunctions do not recognize where they are, what they do, the dilemmas and obligations that intersect upon them.⁶³ “If the social workers... don’t know where to turn”, says Foucault in the 1970s, when questioned about the supposedly anaesthetizing effects of *Discipline and Punish* upon those in such roles, “this just goes to show that they’re looking, and hence not anaesthetized or sterilized at all – on the contrary. And its because of the need not to tie them down or immobilize them that there can be no question for me of trying to tell ‘what is to be done’. If the questions posed by the social workers... are going to assume their full amplitude, the most important thing is not to bury them under the weight of prescriptive, prophetic discourse.”⁶⁴ But, on the other hand, Foucault continues “The necessity of reform mustn’t be allowed to become a form of blackmail serving to limit, reduce or halt the

exercise of criticism.” To criticize the present without anesthetizing those who must act within it, to make conventional actions problematic without portraying them acts of bad faith or cowardice, to open a space for movement without slipping into a prophetic posture, to make it possible to act but making it more, not less difficult to ‘know what to do’ – this, it seems, is the ethic of discomfort that Foucault seeks to introduce into our relation to the present and to ourselves in the present.

Biopower.

Foucault, in *The Order of Things* identified three arenas of discourse that in their (unstable and incomplete) coalescence at the end of the Classical Age constituted the object called ‘Man’ – ‘*l’homme*.’ This figure emerges at the intersection of three domains -- Life, Labor and Language – unstably unified around (and constituting) a would-be sovereign subject. The doubling of a transcendental subject and an empirical object and their dynamic and unstable relations defined the form of this being. In 1966, Foucault undoubtedly held an epochal view of Man and of Modernity. In his conclusion, Foucault intimated the imminent coming of a new configuration in which the figure of Man would be swept away like “a face drawn in the sand at the edge of the sea.”⁶⁵ Gilles Deleuze predicted that this meant, not so much the disappearance as the transmutation of *l’homme* into a new kind of being.⁶⁶ It now appears this presage was mis-cast. Language (in its modality as *poiesis*) has not been the site of radical transformations through which this being, Man, would either disappear entirely or be transmuted.

Although Foucault did not directly return to his diagnosis of the “end of Man,” he did modify his understanding of modernity as an epoch. As we have already suggested, in his essay *What is Enlightenment?* Foucault sought to invent a new philosophic relationship to the present. Modernity was taken up here, not through the analytic frame of the epoch, but through a practice of inquiry grounded in an ethos of present-orientation, of contingency, of form-giving. Suppose, then, that we took up recent changes in the *logoi* of life, labor and language not in terms of an epochal shift with a totalizing coherence for Man, but rather as fragmented and sectorial changes that pose problems, both in-an-of-themselves as well as for attempts to make sense of what form(s) *anthropos* is currently being given. And we might get some clue to these transformations in *anthropos* from a different reflection offered by Foucault upon “*l’homme moderne*” - as a being “whose politics puts its existence in question.”⁶⁸ This suggests that an analysis of changing forms of power over life – of biopower - might provide a perspective from which we might address this larger question of the transformations in *l’homme moderne*.

The concept of biopower is introduced in a few pages in the *History of Sexuality Volume 1*: it seems to incorporate both the individualizing pole of discipline and the collectivizing pole of the politics of population, to embrace all the historical processes that have brought human life and its mechanisms into the realm of knowledge-power, and hence amenable to calculated transformation.⁷⁰ But the most substantive discussion of the concept is in the course at the *Collège de France* in 1975-1976 which Foucault called ‘*Il faut défendre la société*’ [‘Society Must be Defended.’]⁷¹ Bio-power is distinct regime of power: its objects and its method are given shape within a particular type of rationality. Foucault contrasts that rationality (and its associated practices) to the one it superseded, that of sovereign power: “On top of the older right of the sovereign to *take* life or to *let* live, was substituted the power to *foster* life or to *disallow* it to the point of death.”⁷² In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault had presented memorably vivid exemplifications of the terrible corporal theater of the sovereign’s imperative to wage war on those that threaten his body politic. Foucault proposes a reversal of object and agency: in the rationality of biopolitics the new object is life and its regulation, to be achieved through the continuous regulation of its mechanisms. This imperative implies knowing those mechanisms and forging technologies and institutions to achieve that regulation. “What was demanded and what served as an objective was life, understood as the basic needs, man’s concrete essence, the realization of his potential, a plentitude of the possible.”⁷³ If fostering life is an active agenda, so, too, is disallowing it. In one of those striking amplifications for which he was infamous, Foucault writes: “If genocide is indeed the dream of modern powers, this is not because of a recent return of the ancient right to kill; it is because power is situated and exercised at the level of life, the species, the race, and the large-scale phenomena of population.”⁷⁴

It is evident that systematic exterminations of the population have continued into our present in the name of one or other authoritarian discourse. However few of the recent examples, ghastly as they have been, have called upon the truth discourse of modern bioscience or the technologies of modern knowledge-power to support them. These have been wars of sovereignty: however powerful and in some ways comforting is the rhetoric that sees them as the culmination and hence the hidden truth of modern power, we would argue that much qualification is demanded. If biopower sutures together the management of life and the management of death, today ‘the dream of power’ focuses on the pole of life. The place of death in these ways of thinking and acting is more modest, more enigmatic and more troublesome – decisions as to selective abortion, selective fetal implantation, euthanasia, brain death and the end of life. Even for the twentieth century, a period which saw the culmination of scientific thanatopolitics - the dream of modern powers can with equal plausibility be presented as the universalization of the well-run welfare state, the spread of liberal

democracy, the vast expansion of NGOs bearing witness to the abuse of human rights, and the maximization of well-being, or more elementally the progressive containment of many infectious diseases. One of the most compelling intellectual challenges for our present is certainly to develop an analytics that brings questions of the administration of life and death into a relationship. But this must be done, not by claiming there is some deep hidden secret of modernity to be revealed, but through that labor of grey, meticulous attention to the details of the practices of life and death which we, in our present have constructed, inhabit and contest.

Any initial survey of our contemporary problematization of life itself would begin by recognizing that, at the turn of the twenty-first century, the practices and dilemmas of life politics are not monopolized by States or even by doctors. There are a multitude of other actors in this new field of biosociality, not least amongst them being the patients, their families their communities themselves, not to mention the transnational pharmaceutical companies, biotech industry, massively funded science faculties, ethics commissions, regulatory agencies – and the vociferous social critics of bioscience and genomics themselves. Further, one would need to address these issues in a manner that was informed by Foucault's own reflections on the mentalities of liberal government. For over the twentieth century, in liberalism and, more especially, in neo-liberalism, one saw the emergence of formulae of power that not only postulated, but also sought to create, certain forms and spaces of self government, self-regulation and self-responsibility. These were not illusory, but were the *quid pro quo* for limiting the scope of the central administration, which, for such political rationalities, neither could, nor should know and control all those forces upon which it depended. In part through imitation and exemplarity, in part through the efforts of quite specific and identifiable agencies such as the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank, this formula for politics has proved extremely mobile. It has penetrated way beyond the confines of a particular political doctrine or body of political philosophical texts to become the premise for the operation of political power on a transnational – we are tempted even to say global – scale. And it has proved translatable into the reshaping of practices in a range of micro-locales including all those where health and life, illness and death, are governed. This is not to say there is anything automatic or inevitable about its functioning, still less to take it on its own terms, or to pronounce it 'a success.' Indeed, the role of critical thought is precisely to address the problem space in which life and health have become so central to our contemporary relations to ourselves and others and the relations of expectation and obligation we have with our authorities, to re-problematize the emergence of the living body as perhaps the key ethical substance upon which we must ourselves work in order to fashion ourselves and fulfill our potential as human beings.

And, in these processes, the ways in which we understand and relate to ourselves as human beings is under transformation. In the twentieth century, we came to ground our ethical practices in an understanding of ourselves as creatures inhabited by a deep interior, the font of all our desires and the place where we might discover the secret source of all our troubles. But these relations to ourselves are being transformed in the new games of truth that we are caught up in. New sciences of brain and behavior forge direct links between what we do – how we conduct ourselves – and what we are. These games of truth work at a molecular level - the level of neurons, receptor sites, neurotransmitters, and the precise sequences of base pairs at particular locations in what we now think of as the human genome. At the same time, these molecular phenomena, rendered visible and transformed into the determinants of our moods, desires, personalities and pathologies, become the target of new pharmaceutical techniques which promise not merely coping, nor even cure, but correction and enhancement of the kinds of persons we are or want to be. Such developments are not primarily mobilized by the kinds of actors we have come to think of as political – biopolitics today is a matter of the meticulous work of the laboratory in its attempts to create new phenomena, the massive computing power of the apparatus that seeks to link medical histories and family genealogies with genomic sequences, the marketing powers of the pharmaceutical companies, the regulatory strategies of research ethics, drug licensing bodies committees and bioethics commissions, and, of course, the search for the profits and shareholder value which truth here promises. It is here, in the practices of contemporary biopower, that the figure of *'l'homme'* is mutating: the human, here, is not erased but transformed from ontological to artificial -- in the sense of open to artifice. This is not a matter, as some prophesy, of us becoming 'post-human.' More mundanely, and yet more profoundly, it is merely another move in the games of truth, power and ethics within which we have, historically, come to understand and act upon ourselves into humans of particular kinds.

Forward

And what, in the end, is the gain for critical thought achieved by such a work of thought? For Foucault, this work is a mode of critique he terms historical ontology. Thus, towards the end of his essay on What is Enlightenment?, following his attempt to distinguish the theme of humanism from that of Enlightenment, he writes:

... we must obviously give a more positive content to what may be a philosophical ethos [of Enlightenment] consisting in a critique of what we are saying, thinking, and doing through a historical ontology of ourselves ... criticism is no longer going to be practiced in the search from formal structures with universal value but, rather, as a historical investigation into

the events that have led us to constitute ourselves, and to recognise ourselves as subjects of what we are doing, thinking, saying. ⁷⁵

And, as significantly, it is not a method of critique that seeks to reinvent ourselves anew “the historical ontology of ourselves must turn away from all projects that claim to be global or radical” for we know from our history the fate of such attempts to escape from the constraints of the present:

I prefer the very specific transformations that have proved to be possible in the last twenty years in a certain number of areas which concern our ways of being and thinking, relations to authority, relations between the sexes, the way in which we perceive insanity or illness; I prefer even these partial transformations, which have been made in the correlation of historical analysis and the practical attitude, to the programs for a new man that the worst political systems have repeated throughout the twentieth century. ⁷⁶

What faces us, then, if we are to take historical ontology seriously, is not a grand gesture of transgression or liberation, but a certain modest philosophical and pragmatic work on ourselves: “a historical-practical test of the limits we may go beyond, and thus as work carried out by ourselves on ourselves as free beings.” A work, that is to say, which is both banal and profound, which we carry out upon ourselves in the very real practices within which we are constituted as beings of a certain type, as beings simultaneously constrained and obligated to be free, in our own present.

NOTES

- 1 Paul Klee, 1961, *Notebooks Volume 1: The Thinking Eye*, tr. Ralph Mannheim, London: Lund Humphries, 1961, from The concept of analysis, p. 99.
- 2 Foucault, "Practicing Criticism," or "Is it really important to think?" May 30-31, 1981. Didier Eribon interview. In Lawrence Kritzman, *Foucault, Politics, Philosophy, Culture*. New York and London: Routledge, 1988. p. 155.
- 3 We would like to thank James Faubion, Thomas Osborne, Tobias Rees and Mariana Valverde for helpful comments on earlier drafts of this Introduction.
- 4 See 'Truth and Power', Selection A1 and 'The Subject and Power', Selection A9.
- 5 See 'The Birth of Social Medicine', Selection A2, and 'The Politics of Health in the Eighteenth Century', Selection A3.
- 6 See 'Lives of Infamous Men', Selection A4, and 'Dangerous Individual', Selection A5.
- 7 See 'So is it Important to Think', Selection A11.
- 8 See "Governmentality", Selection A6 and 'Omnes et Singulatim', Selection A8.
- 9 See "The Birth of Biopolitics", Selection C6.
- 10 See 'Society Must be Defended', Selection C4, 'Security, Territory, Population', Selection C5, 'The Birth of Biopolitics', Selection C6.
- 11 See 'Questions of Method', Selection A7,
- 12 See 'On the Archaeology of the Sciences', Selection B5, 'Life, Experience, and Science', Selection B9.
- 13 See 'Madness and Society', Selection B6.
- 14 See 'Nietzsche, Genealogy, History', Selection B7.
- 15 See 'Questions of Method', Selection A7, and 'On the Genealogy of Ethics', Selection C7.
- 16 Louis Althusser et. al., *Lire le Capital, Lire Marx* .
- 17 *Dits et écrits, Vol. II*, p. 720.
- 18 *Dits et écrits, Vol. III*, p.18.
- 19 See 'The Politics of Health in the Eighteenth Century', Selection A3.
- 20 There are selections in Volume 3 of *The Essential Works of Michel Foucault: Power*.
- 21 "Quel est pour toi le sens et la fonction méthodologique de ce terme: 'dispositif'?" *Dits et écrits, Vol III*, p.298.
- 22 Michel Foucault, "Le Jeu de Michel Foucault," *Dits et écrits, Vol III*, p.298.
- 24 See 'The Birth of Social Medicine', Selections A2 and 'The Politics of Health in the Eighteenth Century', Selection A3.
- 25 "The Confession of the Flesh" in Colin Gordon, ed., *Power/knowledge*, p.195.
- 27 'The Ethics of the Concern for the Self as a Practice of Freedom', Selection C1.
- 28 Polemics, Politics, and Problematization, in Volume 1 of *The Essential Works of Michel Foucault: Ethics*, p.117.
- 29 Foucault, *Dits et écrits, Vol. IV*, p.670.
- 30 Polemics, Politics, and Problematization, in Volume 1 of *The Essential Works of Michel Foucault: Ethics*, p.117.
- 31 Polemics, Politics, and Problematization, in Volume 1 of *The Essential Works of Michel Foucault: Ethics*, p.118.
- 32 Polemics, Politics, and Problematization, in Volume 1 of *The Essential Works of Michel Foucault: Ethics*, p.118.
- 33 Polemics, Politics, and Problematization, in Volume 1 of *The Essential Works of Michel Foucault: Ethics*, p.117.
- 34 Polemics, Politics, and Problematization, in Volume 1 of *The Essential Works of Michel Foucault: Ethics*, p.118.

- ³⁵ *The Use of Pleasure*, tr. R. Hurley, Penguin: Viking, 1986, p.11.
- ³⁶ Preface to *The History of Sexuality, Vo. II*, Selection C9.
- ³⁷ *The Use of Pleasure*, tr. R. Hurley, Penguin: Viking, 1986, p.6, p.11.
- ³⁸ Gilles Deleuze, *Foucault*, translated by Sean Hand. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988,, pp. 94-123..
- ³⁹ Preface to *The History of Sexuality, Volume Two*, in Volume 1 of *The Essential Works of Michel Foucault: Ethics*, p.201, included in the present volume.
- ⁴⁰ ‘On the Genealogy of Ethics’, Selection C7.
- ⁴¹ *The Use of Pleasure*, tr. R. Hurley, Penguin: Viking, 1986. p. 6-7.
- ⁴² See ‘Technologies of the Self’, Selection C8.
- ⁴³ See ‘On the Genealogy of Ethics’, Selection C7.
- ⁴⁴ See ‘The Ethics of the Concern for the Self as a Practice of Freedom’, Selection C1.
- ⁴⁵ ‘Introduction’, Volume I of *The Essential Works of Michel Foucault: Ethics*.
- ⁴⁶ See ‘The Masked Philosopher’, Selection C10.
- ⁴⁷ ‘Friendship as a Way of Life, in Volume 1 of *The Essential Works of Michel Foucault: Ethics*, p.135.
- ⁴⁸ ‘How much does it cost to tell the truth,’ in Sylvère Lotringer, ed., 1996, *Foucault Live*, New York: Semiotexte, pp. 348-362, at p.359.
- ⁴⁹ *Discipline and Punish*, tr. Alan Sheridan. London: Allen Lane, 1977, p.31.
- ⁵⁰ The argument in this section rehearses that in the Introduction to A. Barry, T. Osborne and N. Rose, 1996, *Foucault and Political Reason*, London: UCL Press, pp. 1-18,
- ⁵¹ Foucault discusses these issues in ‘Structuralism and Post-Structuralism’, Selection B8.
- ⁵² Introduction to *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, tr. Alan Sheridan Smith. London: Tavistock, 1972, pp. 16-17. Foucault refers here in particular to his reply to questions posed by the *Cercle de Epistémologie* of the E.N.S, published in *Cahiers pour l’analyse*, 1968, 9 which was published in English translation in *Theoretical Practice* 1971, 3/ 4, and to his ‘Réponse à un question’ put to him about *The Order of Things* by the editors of *Esprit* and published in *Esprit* in 1968, translated as ‘Politics and the study of discourse’, *Ideology and Consciousness*, 1978, 3: 7-26.
- ⁵³ ‘What is Enlightenment’, Selection C2.
- ⁵⁴ “What is Enlightenment” in Volume 1 of *The Essential Works of Michel Foucault: Ethics*, p.313, included in the present volume.
- ⁵⁵ F. W., Nietzsche, [1874] 1893, ‘On the uses and disadvantages of history for life”, in *Untimely Meditations*, tr. R. J. Hollingdale, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p.60.
- ⁵⁶ “For an ethic of discomfort” in Volume 3 of *The Essential Works of Michel Foucault: Power*, p.448
- ⁵⁷ Quoted in Andrew Barry, Thomas Osborne and Nikolas Rose, *Foucault and Political Reason*, London: UCL Press, 1996, p.5.
- ⁵⁸ Paul Klee, *Notebooks. Volume 1: The Thinking Eye*, tr. Ralph Mannheim. London: Lund Humphries, 1961, p.92.
- ⁵⁹ ‘What is Enlightenment’, Selection C2.
- ⁶⁰ “What is Enlightenment” in Volume 1 of *The Essential Works of Michel Foucault: Ethics*, p.310, included in the present volume.
- ⁶¹ Find the source for this interview – NR can’t remember.
- ⁶² “Useless to Revolt?” Volume 3 of *The Essential Works of Michel Foucault: Power*, p.459-50.
- ⁶³ ‘Questions of Method’, Selection A8.
- ⁶⁴ Questions of Method, Volume 3 of *The Essential Works of Michel Foucault: Power*, p.236, included in the present volume.

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- ⁶⁵ Michel Foucault, *Les Mots et les choses*, Paris: Editions Gallimard, 1966, p. 398.
- ⁶⁶ Gilles Deleuze, *Foucault*, translated by Sean Hand. "Appendix: On the Death of Man and Superman," Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988, (original, *Foucault*, Editions de Minuit, 1986).
- ⁶⁸ "l'homme moderne est un animal dans la politique duquel sa vie d'être vivant est en question." *La Volonté de savoir*, Paris: Editions Gallimard, 1976., P.188.
- ⁷⁰ *History of Sexuality, Volume 1: An Introduction*, London: Allen Lane, 1979. pp. 139-143.
- ⁷¹ The summary of the course is included in Volume 1 of *The Essential Works of Michel Foucault: Ethics*. **[This is not yet published in English.]**
- ⁷² *History of Sexuality, Volume 1: An Introduction* New York: Vintage Books, 1980. p. 137.
- ⁷³ *History of Sexuality, Volume 1: An Introduction* New York: Vintage Books, 1980, p.145.
- ⁷⁴ *History of Sexuality, Volume 1: An Introduction* New York: Vintage Books, 1980 , p. 137.
- ⁷⁵ "What is Enlightenment" in Volume 1 of *The Essential Works of Michel Foucault: Ethics*, p.317, included in the present volume.
- ⁷⁶ "What is Enlightenment" in Volume 1 of *The Essential Works of Michel Foucault: Ethics*, p.318, included in the present volume.