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10 Michel Foucault

The work of Michel Foucault (1926–1984) is a philosophical contribution to the theory of truth. However, his work stands at an oblique angle to the mainstream philosophical universe in its attempt to effect a series of radical *decentrings*. Instead of a theory of constitutive subjectivity, Foucault explores firstly the discursive practices and then the forms of power which constitute the subject. Instead of a logical theory of truth, Foucault develops a theory of the regimes of truth and then a theory of the relationship between truth and power. Instead of a rationalist theory of history, Foucault gives us a history marked either by discursive discontinuities or forms of power–knowledge. These decentrings constitute nothing less than a philosophical anti-humanism. The intellectual origins of his thought are primarily locatable, therefore, in the rereadings of Western philosophy and the criticisms of its anthropocentrism which were carried out in the thought of Nietzsche and Heidegger.

ITINERARIES

Foucault's work can also be seen as a contribution to the theory of culture in social theory. Firstly, the objects of his study—asylums, clinics, prisons—shift the focus of the study of domination far away from the analysis of class and the economic base. Secondly, culture is not thematised as belonging to the merely representational realm as it is in a simple-minded Marxism. Thirdly, culture is not looked upon as a spiritual totality as it is in historicism. Fourthly, although Foucault is by no means a functionalist, he does operate with a concept of society and culture which implicitly recognises the differentiated character of both society and culture in modernity. In many respects, therefore, Foucault's work is a contribution to a *culturalist reading of modernity*. More specifically, the early work on discursive practices is an attempt at a theory

of the internal coherence not so much of culture as a totality, but of domains or formation-specific cultures of a discursive kind. However, such a perspective must be tempered by the recognition of the importance of power in the middle period of Foucault's work.

The notion of power enters Foucault's work as an answer to the riddle of how and why discursive formations change. The autonomy accorded to culture due to the internal coherence of discursive formations is vitiated with the shift of accent to the 'power relation' as the most important axis. This makes knowledge the site of strategies, struggles and conflicts for control. Foucault's notion of 'disciplinary power' must, therefore, be read as an attempt at a *power-theoretical reading of modernity*. Once again Foucault is very far away from the concentration on the 'production relation' typical of Marxism. It is in this period that Foucault's work seems to draw near Weber's or, at least, certain readings of Weber's work.

In the final period of Foucault's work there is a recognition of the limitations of a power-theoretical framework and he makes an attempt to supplement it with another kind of archaeology. This time it is a question of an archaeology of problematisations and not of knowledge; an archaeology that he wishes to pursue simultaneously with a genealogy of the practices of the self. This leads to a more *hermeneutical reading of modernity*.

THE ARCHAEOLOGY OF DISCURSIVE PRACTICES

Foucault's early work is centrally concerned with the culture of modernity. If we take modernity as beginning in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, then Foucault's work can be seen as a critical reflection on the difference between pre-modern and modern cultural forms. In *Madness and Civilization* (1961) Foucault begins his 'archaeology of the silence of the madman' in a world in which the madman had become a presence with the retreat of the leper; and madness was replacing leprosy as the 'already there' of death.

According to Foucault, the madman's 'liminal position' in the middle ages was made visible by his social expulsion onto 'ships of fools'. The madman's embarkation both excludes him from the city, pushes him to its limits, and also opens up a passage from the city to the limits or, more precisely, from reason to madness. In this context the Renaissance performs the crucial role of preparing the ground for the classical experience of madness by gradually incorporating madness within reason in order to control it. Renaissance humanism both liberates the voice of the madman and controls it by bringing madness within the 'universe of discourse'; however, it is only in the classical period that the madman is reduced to silence through his confinement in hospitals.

In the *Birth of the Clinic* (1963) Foucault undertakes an 'archaeology

of the medical gaze'. What concerns him here is the shift from a conception of medicine focused on health which left room for the patient to be his own physician in the eighteenth century, to a conception of medicine focused on normality where the body of the patient is subject to the sovereign gaze of the doctor in the clinical setting of the modern hospital. In both books Foucault is working on the constitution of new domains of rationality—the science of psychology and the science of modern medicine—and the domains of finitude to which they correspond: madness and death.

In *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (1966), three new domains of finitude concern Foucault: life, labour, and language. Foucault works with the notion of *episteme* or 'epistemological field' which governs the conditions of possible knowledge. There are, according to Foucault, three differing *epistemes* which succeed one another: that of the Renaissance, the Classical period, and the nineteenth century. What separates the Classical period from the nineteenth century is that the former still maintains a relationship to the infinite whereas the latter constitutes an analytic of finitude. In this context man becomes 'a strange empirico-transcendental double' because he is both what knowledge is about and the condition of all possible knowledge. The book ends, therefore, with the discussion of trends in modern thought, notably psychoanalysis and ethnology, which are leading to a decentring of man from his privileged position. The erasure of man, as Foucault envisages it, is not something to bewail as it will make possible new spaces for thought. Here again, the philosophical anti-humanism of Nietzsche and Heidegger makes itself present.

In all three studies the term *archaeology* is prominent. In *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (1969) Foucault tries to make clear the methodological presuppositions behind his early works. His approach is to stress the autonomy of discourse or discursive formations and the rules or regularities which constitute them. This approach excludes from view the question of the genesis of discourses and concentrates on the problem of their rules of formation.

THE GENEALOGY OF THE WILL TO KNOWLEDGE

The notion of a genealogy dates from the time of Foucault's inaugural address published in English as the *Discourse on Language* (1971; 1972). Here the notion appears to complement the analysis of the system-like aspect of discourses with an analysis of how they are formed. However, genealogy soon begins to replace archaeology. The radical decentring nature of his thought is not forsaken. As Foucault makes clear in his key essay, 'Nietzsche, Genealogy, History', an analysis of the effective formation of discourses is not a search for an origin (1971; 1977). Rather, the task of a genealogy of power is to analyse the descent of knowledge.

According to Foucault, Nietzsche's distinction between origin and descent is a distinction between the presentation of history as the unfolding of an idea and as a purely contingent phenomenon. Furthermore, Foucault uses the Nietzschean notion of emergence to show that modes of knowledge are inextricably tied to the eruption of forces. Hence, Foucault arrives at the couplet power–knowledge: a couplet which dramatically expresses both the tying down of discourse into relations of force and power, and the productive capacity of power to give rise to discourses.

The most famous study of this period is *Discipline and Punish* (1975). Once again modernity is in question as the decisive break is between the Classical period and the nineteenth century. Foucault charts the emergence of a 'disciplinary society' out of a society dominated by the 'spectacle of the scaffold'. The two different forms of societies are dominated by two very differing forms of power. The juridico-political concept of sovereignty in pre-modern society makes public execution into the restoration of damaged sovereignty. In modernity the new forms of 'generalised punishment' stem from a new form of capillary power which reaches into every part of the social body, but which is most strikingly illustrated in the Panopticon of Bentham. At the methodological level, the problem is that we still think of power in politico-juridical terms and, as a consequence, we are unable to understand the productivity of power, but instead conceptualise it as something negative or interdictory. Hence, the motto of the new microphysics of power, which charts the dispersal of power, is the affirmation of the need to cut off the Kings's head. We cannot think the new type of normalising society with old concepts of power.

It was during this period that Foucault began to rethink the role of the intellectual. In a sense the old notion of the universal intellectual was like the notion of the sovereign, as they both made claims to totality. As the adversary of the sovereign, the universal intellectual in effect operated within the same juridico-political field. The notion of the specific intellectual is the counterpart to the notion of capillary power. The specific intellectual intervenes at a specific site in order to wage a struggle against the local uses of power. This idea is another registration of the validity of the idea of functional differentiation in modern society.

The first volume of the *History of Sexuality* (1976; 1978) and its proposed sequels also belong to this period. Foucault's attack on the repressive hypothesis is a consequence of his new idea of power. Instead of conceiving of modernity as involving the prohibition of sex, Foucault conceives of modernity as involving its deployment, its putting into discourse. Hence, our task is to say no to this 'sex-king'. The proposed sequels were to examine the various aspects of this investment in the

sexual aspect of human life. Here he introduces the notion of bio-power. However, the sequels were not to be, as Foucault once more exercised his right not to remain the same.

THE ARCHAEOLOGY OF PROBLEMATISATIONS AND THE GENEALOGY OF PRACTICES

In the *Use of Pleasures* (1984a) and the *Care of the Self* (1984b) there is a return to archaeology, but this time Foucault is after an archaeology of problematisations and not of discourses. Instead of concentrating on the internal rules or regularities of discursive formations, Foucault is now concerned with the relationship between man and world. Foucault is interested in the way that 'human beings "problematise" what they are, what they do and the world in which they live'. This opening up of archaeology to 'problematisations' represents a more *hermeneutical turn* in his thinking about culture. Hence, the concern of these two books is with ethical problematisations in the worlds of antiquity and late antiquity. However, Foucault has not abandoned the genealogical dimension as he is still concerned to provide us with a genealogy of the practices of the self. In these books Foucault returns, albeit in a modified form, to the kind of complementary style of analysis he promised in his inaugural address. Both archaeology and genealogy are put into the service of the analysis of the doctrinal and practical aspects of the 'aesthetic of existence' in antiquity and its transformation in late antiquity.

The new series was to be completed with a study of Christianity, which, although already written, was not revised by Foucault and has not been published. All three books are understood by Foucault as contributions to the investigation of the 'mode of subjectivation' which inhabits a particular social formation in order to elucidate the 'man of desire' which Foucault understands as the key component of the contemporary 'mode of subjectivation'. Hence, despite the change of program, Foucault remains interested in the central question as to how Western man came to invest so much of himself in the question of his sexuality.

AN ONTOLOGY OF THE PRESENT

Foucault's work on archives can deceive. His central concern was with the present and the processes of rationalisation which have led to our present. Hence, his concern with our relationship to madness; the construction of the body in the new setting of the medical clinic; the birth of the human sciences in the nineteenth century; our false pride in our new humanistic penology; and the modern 'man of desire's' obsession with the 'sex-king'. His thought, as Habermas rightly put it, was an arrow aimed at the heart of the present.

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