"Against Foucault"
Early Foucault Part One

Howard Richards

Howard Richards presented this text on 3rd May 2013 in Pretoria, South Africa, on video. Later on the same day, he engaged in a dialogue on his readings with Catherine Odora-Hoppers and Evelin Lindner.
The references are given at the end of Early Foucault Part Four.

Solving the complex economic puzzle posed by the need simultaneously to manage capitalism and to transform it, is not independent of building cultures of solidarity; on the contrary, building cultures of solidarity is the key to solving the complex economic puzzle. Achieving a broad social consensus that what solidarity and ecology require ought to be done – in other words achieving social cohesion based on non-authoritarian authority – is both a somewhat separate achievement and a key to disarming the systemic imperatives that tend to override even a broad social consensus. It requires a philosophy that facilitates cooperation among straights and queers, women and men, religious believers and irreligious unbelievers, conservatives and liberals, and in general people of all kinds. It requires a philosophy that combines the celebration of diversity with working together for the common good. It requires a philosophy that compensates for the conflicts inherent in the facts; most notably the conflicts inherent in our basic rules between those who work for a meager living, those who cannot even find work, those who are comfortable in their careers and businesses and do not understand why everyone else cannot do as they do and be comfortable as they are, and the *rentiers*. Revolutions do not work. (Debord 1994) A philosophy is needed that can cope with the conflicts there are and the illusions there are, and can help bring to fruition the possibilities for cooperation there are. I have been suggesting that Deweyan naturalistic pragmatism is such a philosophy (or, to put the same point a bit differently, I have been suggesting that Deweyan naturalistic pragmatism offers a flexible and scientifically valid framework within which people with different interests, different cultures, and different philosophies can understand each other while continuing to be different.) The welcoming cultural transformation I am advocating is more likely to precede than to follow economic transformation. It is even more likely, of course, that it will neither precede nor follow, but that instead what Norbert Lechner called "the conflictive and never completed construction of the desired social order" (Lechner 1983) will continue indefinitely on several fronts at once, and will be marked by innumerable interrelated advances and setbacks.

An examination of Michel Foucault's philosophy will test my Deweyan naturalistic approach. If there is something false in my philosophy, its falsity should come to light if it turns out that Foucault disagrees and has good reasons for disagreeing. If my neo-Kaleckian interpretation of contemporary philosophy as shifting in accordance with the perceived interests and the ideals of people who control society's discretionary expenditures is valid, then the case of Foucault should confirm it. If it is not valid, then the case of Foucault should refute it. My overall aim, of course, is not to evaluate Foucault´s work, but to propose a social democratic philosophy for improving humanity´s

capacity to solve its principal problems. Although I do not intend to be deliberately unfair to Foucault, I am not directly or principally interested in assessing the value of his work or in interpreting it correctly. What is important from a problem-solving point of view is not whether Foucault really meant what I take him to mean, or whether he perhaps left the door open for people to attribute to him implausible views which in fact he never held, but rather what is true. We need to work on solving our problems on the basis of what *is*, not under illusions which lead us to mistake what *is not* for what *is*. For example, when a reading of Foucault suggests that politics is the continuation of war by other means (Foucault 1997), I am less interested in perfecting my interpretation in order to grasp exactly what Foucault meant (as if "exactly what Foucault meant" were an entity capable of being grasped by a mind or by a text) than I am interested in assessing what consequences for practice such a claim might have if it is in some sense or senses true. Examining Foucault is a way of testing my own philosophy, and also a search for ideas in Foucault that promise to be useful.

Foucault was born into a family combining advanced education with property ownership; his father was a physician and medical school professor, his mother inherited land (Eribon 1989, p. 21); but even if he had not been born into a rich family, Kalecki would suggest that the funding of literary and academic life in France or anywhere else largely depends on decisions made by people like the Foucaults who have enough money to be able to decide what to fund. It is likely that broad trends in academic work will reflect the perceived interests and the ideals of the bulk of the funders and purchasers.

On a first and superficial glance, my philosophy and Foucault's are incompatible. If one is right, the other must be wrong. Foucault is against authority. I am for authority. Foucault unabashedly favors devoting life to pleasure-seeking, although perhaps he changed his mind in his last years to the limited extent of favoring discipline of the self by the self. I am in favor of social norms (although on the whole not of laws) that limit and channel pleasure-seeking. Foucault sides with the sophists; I with Plato. He with Nietzsche; I with religion and the morality of the herd. I believe there is an objective basis for ethics in physical reality; he believes discourse defines its objects. I believe in truth. Foucault (it is sometimes said) does not. I explain social reality in terms of rules. He explains it in terms of power. I have any number of proposals for solving humanity's main problems. Foucault has none. (Even his activism on prison issues was not framed as a proposal for solving the prison problem; it was framed as giving voice to the prisoners to tell their own stories in their own words. He says he offers no solutions at Foucault 1980B pp. 86-87.)

On a closer examination, these differences which appear on a first and superficial glance, tend to vanish. I agree with Foucault more than would appear from my self portrayal in the preceding paragraph. His claims are on the whole rather modest and limited, although not uninteresting or unimportant. He did believe in truth. His writings are often not so much extremist as ambiguous, lending themselves to multiple and sometimes mutually inconsistent interpretations. Jana Sawicki wrote about him, "That he has been labeled structuralist determinist and voluntarist, activist and fatalist, leftist and neoconservative suggests either that his own discourse was incoherent and confused or that his interpreters have been unwilling to suspend assumptions and categories when judging it." (Sawicki 1994, p. 354)

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Let us begin a closer examination by looking at one of the introductory summaries of his work provided by Foucault himself. In 1983 on a visit to Berkeley during the year before he rather suddenly and unexpectedly died leaving a great deal of work in progress uncompleted, he wrote a brief introduction to his philosophy in English, which included the following words:

 "As a starting point, let us take a series of oppositions which have developed over the last few years: opposition to the power of men over women, of parents over children, of psychiatry over the mentally ill, of medicine over the population, of administration over the ways people live.

 "It is not enough to say that these are antiauthority struggles. We must try to define more precisely what they have in common.

"1) They are 'transversal' struggles; that is, they are not limited to one country. Of course, they develop more easily and to a greater extent in certain countries, but they are not confined to a particular political or economic form of government.

"2) The aim of these struggles is power effects as such. For example, the medical profession is not criticized primarily because it is a profit-making concern, but because it exercises an uncontrolled power over people's bodies, their health and their life and death.

"3) These are 'immediate' struggles for two reasons. In such struggles people criticize instances of power which are closest to them, those which exercise their action on individuals. They do not look for the 'chief enemy,' but for the immediate enemy. Nor do they expect to find a solution to their problems at a future date (that is, liberations, revolutions, end of class struggle). In comparison with a theoretical scale of explanations or a revolutionary order which polarizes the historian, they are anarchistic struggles." (Foucault 1983, p. 211)

Each of these three commonalities of the new struggles defined in Foucault's proposed "starting point" is consistent with what Foucault told Catherine von Bülow at Sartre's funeral when he said that his youthful passion had been to separate himself from the "terrorism" of Sartre and
Sartre's journal Les Temps Modernes. (Eribon 1989, p. 297) He is building an alternative to phenomenological Marxism. In each of the three cases the "anarchistic struggle" Foucault endorses is contrasted with notions typical of Marxism, namely: concern with a particular political or economic form of government; criticism of profit-making; solutions to problems at a future date through liberations, revolutions, end of class struggle.

Having identified the above three commonalities of the new struggles, Foucault goes on to say three more things about them which he calls "more specific," namely:

"4) They are struggles which question the status of the individual: on the one hand, they assert the right to be different and they underline everything which makes individuals truly individual. On the other hand, they attack everything which separates the individual, breaks his links with others, splits up community life, forces the individual back on himself and ties him to his own identity in a constraining way.

"These struggles are not exactly for or against the 'individual,' but rather they are struggles against the 'government of individualization.'

"5) They are an opposition to the effects of power which are linked with knowledge, competence, and qualification: struggles against the privileges of knowledge.

But they are also an opposition against secrecy, deformation, and mystifying representations imposed on people.

"There is nothing 'scientistic' in this (that is, a dogmatic belief in the value of scientific knowledge), but neither is it a skeptical or relativistic refusal of all verified truth. What is questioned is the way in which knowledge circulates and functions: In short, the *regime de savoir.*

"6) Finally, all these present struggles revolve around the question, Who are we? They are a refusal of these abstractions, of economic and ideological state violence which ignore who we are individually, and also a refusal of scientific or administrative inquisition which determines who one is." (Foucault 1983, pp. 211-12)

Earlier in the same text Foucault states what his own goal has been "during the last twenty years," i.e. during the period 1963-1983. He writes, "I would like to say, first of all, what has been the goal of my work during the last twenty years. It has not been to analyze the phenomena of power, nor to elaborate the foundations of such an analysis.

"My objective, instead, has been to create a history of different modes by which, in our culture, human beings are made subjects." (Foucault 1983 p. 208)

He identifies three such modes. The first is science, or, rather, modes of inquiry which pretend to be scientific. The second is dividing practices: e.g. dividing the sick and the healthy, the criminals and the "good boys."

The third: "Finally, I have sought to study –it is my current work—the way a human being turns him- or herself into a subject. For example, I have chosen the domain of sexuality – how men have learned to recognize themselves as subjects of 'sexuality.'" (Foucault 1983, p. 208)

Let me follow up these quotations in which Foucault introduces himself with some general remarks discussing three worries, or three sets of worries, people might have about Foucault.

Since Foucault supported several worthy and important causes, one might worry that his influence would divert energy away from other equally or more worthy and important causes that are less identified with his name. He is sometimes assigned part of the blame for the rise of a divisive identity politics that put movements to transform capitalism on the back burner. His friend Gilles Deleuze credited him with having undermined all "leftism" by making "normalization" rather than some typically Marxist theme like oppression or exploitation the center of historical analysis. (Deleuze 1977, pp. 183-84) One might worry that Foucault's influence has undermined and continues to undermine social movements that think of themselves as resisting oppression or exploitation. My view is that it is unlikely that transforming capitalism, ecology, and other important issue areas will be neglected because some people emphasize queer rights, prison justice, and other topics that were Foucault's special concerns. I see no logical reason why this should be so. However, this does not mean I am not worried about Foucault. It is one thing for one person to work on poverty issues and another person to work on prison reform issues while both persons have a comprehensive understanding of how the system works and how to change it. It is quite another thing for Foucault to go out of his way to construct a non-economic interpretation of history that filters out the economic structures that need to be changed. (See for example the Introduction to Foucault 1969).

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Barry Smart has written that the political effect of Foucault's philosophy is, in summary, to render problematic the classic discourse of socialism and its associated forms of political strategy (Smart 1986, pp. 166-69). Although Smart does not explicitly consider the possibility that this political effect was one Foucault intended, consciously or unconsciously, I believe that the following chapters will convince an open-minded reader that this possibility is a probability

Having chosen, like John Dewey, to identify with the positive, liberal, and undogmatic senses of the historically-battered term "socialism;" with full awareness of the crimes that have been committed in its name, with an intention to eliminate those ideas historically associated with the term that have lent themselves to committing them, and with no intention of eliminating either markets or privately owned businesses; I tend to identify achieving desirable forms of socialism with making progress toward solving humanity's principal problems. To get from here (a world exchange value made) to there (a world where people evaluate and revise institutions continually so that little by little the institutions do a better job of meeting human and environmental needs) I believe that theories are needed. (By a "theory" I mean an account of causes and their effects.) Without embracing what are pejoratively called totalizing theories, one can see the need for theory linking actions to be taken (causes) to expected consequences that will tend to solve problems (effects). I think I have good reasons for worrying about Foucault insofar as his work tends to discredit social democracy and to discredit theory.

One might also worry that Foucault's chronic aversion to authority (Sawicki 1994, p. 394) would make him anti-social. However, he also came to speak toward the end of his career of a crisis of governability similar to Arendt's crisis of authority. (Foucault 1980B p. 94) I believe Foucault would agree that in the real world the breakdown of reasonable, functional, legitimate non-authoritarian authority does not lead to the full freedom of the individual to pursue unusual pleasures; it leads instead to chaos quickly followed by brutal authoritarian domination. (My thinking here is influenced by my experiences living in Chile during the Pinochet coup and its aftermath (C. Richards 1985).) Foucault was sympathetic not only to the anti-authoritarian movements of the 1960s but also to that periods' experiments in communal life and worker ownership; he opposed "…everything which separates the individual, breaks his links with others, splits up community life, forces the individual back on himself and ties him to his own identity in a constraining way." (Foucault 1983, p.211) In general, I am not worried about anti-authoritarian passsions overwhelming an ethic of solidarity . One of my reasons for optimism is empirical. Findings of studies in the psychology of moral development show that the people committed to cooperating under the guidance and direction of norms of solidarity and the people who respect other people's right to be different tend to be the same people. (Hoffman 2000) Being anti-authoritarian appears to make people less anti-social, not more anti-social.

A third set of worries one might have concerns Foucault's relationship with Marxism. Sometimes he associated himself with Marx. (e.g. Foucault 1980A, p. 53). Sometimes he distanced himself from Marx. (e.g. Foucault 1980A, p. 58). One might fear that he gives aid and comfort to to whomever one takes the enemy to be. He once described himself as neither an adversary nor a partisan of Marxism. (Foucault 1984 p. 595) That self-description can be contested, but it is not wrong if it mainly means that he was willing to learn from Marx and Marxists. He was clearly an intellectual adversary,

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although not a personal enemy, of Jean-Paul Sartre. I will be regarding Foucault as a life-long Marx-avoider with respect to the ethical issues discussed in the previous chapters. I confess that my terminology is odd in the respect that Marx himself can be regarded as a Marx-avoider in my sense if he is read through lenses, for example althusserian lenses, that sharply separate science from ethics and see him as a partisan of the former at the expense of the latter.

Foucault on the whole avoided the political commitments of Sartre *engagé;* although for a time he became *engagé* in his own way with the prison rights and the anti-psychiatry movements. In the last years of Sartre's life, the aging Sartre leaning on the arm of Simone de Beauvoir sometimes marched down a street in Paris together with Michel Foucault demonstrating for the same worthy cause. But Sartre and Foucault were not *engagé* in the same way. Even when they were at the same place at the same time doing the same thing, their philosophies were different. Sartre was participating in a long term global movement to change the system. Foucault was participating in a short term specific action to resist an effect of power.

Now I will make some specific remarks concerning Foucault's earliest books, of which the first will be biographical and a bit repetitive.

Remark 1: Paul-Michel Foucault, later known as Michel Foucault, was born 15 October 1926 en the provincial city of Poitiers, being the second child of his parents, following his older sister Francine and preceding his younger brother Denys. The family is rich. A governess takes care of the children, while a cook does the cooking. There is even a chauffer. (Eribon 1989, p. 21) His father, Paul Foucault senior, with whom he never had an affectionate relationship, is a surgeon and a teacher at a school of medicine. His mother, with whom he will spend the month of August and other vacation days throughout his life (Id. p. 31) inherited extensive real estate holdings in the region. Madame Foucault devotes herself to the education of young Paul-Michel, even sometimess hiring private professors to supplement what the local *lycée* is able to offer (Id. pp. 23-24) When he fails in his first attempt to gain admission to the *École Normale Supérieur* she sends him to Paris to prepare for the entrance examinations again, this time at the prestigious *lycée* Henri IV. He does not get along with his classmates. He is different because he lives alone. The students at Henri IV, except for Paul-Michel Foucault, are either external or internal. Those from Paris live with their families and are externals. The provincials like Foucault live in the dormitory. But Paul-Michel cannot stand to live with a group, and since his family has means his mother tries to buy an apartment for him. She finds none for sale and Paul-Michel ends up taking a room in a house on *Boulevard Raspail.* (Id. pp. 32-33). Both in the *lycée* and later at the *École Normale Supérieur*, to which he is admitted after a second attempt, Foucault is seen by his classmates as wild, enigmatic, a loner, sarcastic, argumentative, aggressive, and half crazy. He was almost unanimously detested. (Id. p. 33, p. 43) In the 1940s homosexuality was not as widely accepted as it is today, and young Paul-Michel suffered greatly because of being gay and because of what appeared to be some form of insanity. More than once he attempted suicide. (Id. p. 43, p. 44) He read widely and passionately. He read Plato, Kant, Hegel, and all the philosophical classics; he read the Marquis de Sade, Kafka, Genet, Faulkner and vanguard literature generally; he read Freud and other

psychologists; and like everyone else of course he read Marx. But more than anyone else he read Martín Heidegger. (Id. p. 47) At a slightly later period he read more Nietzsche than Heidegger; in an interview in 1984 Foucault said that reading Heidegger and reading Nietzsche were for him two fundamental experiences. (Id. p. 48) First he read the translation of <u>Sein und Zeit</u> into French by Alphonse de Waehlen which appeared in 1942, and then he devoted himself to learning German so that he could read Heidegger in the original. (Id. p. 47) In 1948 he graduated with a degree in philosophy, writing a senior thesis on transcendental history in Hegel. In 1949 he graduated again, this time in psychology. In 1952 he finished earning a graduate level diploma in pathological psychology. (Id. p. 62) He joined the Communist Party in 1950 and left it in 1953.