

“Against Foucault”
Early Middle Foucault (1964-1969) (Part Six)

Howard Richards

Howard Richards presented this text on 9th May 2013 in Pretoria, South Africa, on video.

On 19th May, also in Pretoria, he engaged in a dialogue on his readings with Catherine

Odora-Hoppers and Evelin Lindner.

The references are at the end of Part Eight.

Foucault does not even try to analyze every field of knowledge that existed in Europe during the two centuries when Representation reigned as its *episteme*. He limits himself to three fields that he identifies as dealing with complex phenomena and as having in common arranging knowledge in tables, doing taxonomies. They are: general grammar, natural history, and the theory of wealth. They are the predecessors, respectively, of philology, biology, and political economy. The members of the latter trio could not exist yet because the logical/historical conditions for the possibility of their existence had not yet been satisfied; for example, there could be no biology because the concept of “life” discussed above was not ready. His articulation of the historical material he places under the rubric of a Representation *episteme* depends on finding similarities among naming things in grammar, classifying species of animals and plants in natural history, and exchanging goods for money in the theory of wealth; so that all three –naming, classifying, and exchanging—count as Representing. But all three do not fall into the pattern of the Representation *episteme* at the same time. Exchanging is late. There is a *décalage*. Naming and classifying become Representation early in the 17th century, while it took another half century to bring the theory of wealth under the sway of its *episteme* by establishing that money represents wealth as signs represent what they signify. Foucault explains, “But while in the last two cases, the mutation happened quickly (a certain mode of being in language appears suddenly in the Grammaire de Port-Royal, a certain mode of being of natural individuals manifests itself almost *d’un coup* with Jonston and Tournefort), on the other hand the mode of being of money and wealth, because it was connected with a whole *praxis*, with a whole set of institutions, had an index of historical stickiness (*viscosité historique*) that was much greater. Natural beings and language did not need the equivalent of the long operation of mercantilism in order to enter into the domain of representation, to submit themselves to its laws, and to receive from them their signs and principles of order.” (Foucault 1966 p. 192)

This is the opposite of what one would have expected from the Foucault of Histoire de la Folie (1961). There *praxis* and sets of institutions led to the new ways of thinking; they were not the historical stickiness that slowed them down. Internment in asylums was the historical *a priori*, the condition of possibility, for the concept of insanity. Now, in Les Mots et les Choses (1966) it is the other way around. Institutions resist the rise of the rule of Representation, but in the end their resistance collapses and they submit to the requirements of the ruling *episteme*. This *volte-face* was one reason why Louis Althusser, Foucault’s teacher and friend, approved of Histoire de la Folie but did not approve of Les Mots et les Choses. The earlier book was close to structuralist historical materialism. The later was close to idealism (“expressive causality” in Althusser’s terminology). My opinion is that Foucault was partly right both earlier and

later, not right in the sense of being perfectly accurate or encyclopedically complete, but philosophically right in suggesting different sorts of causal explanations for the various phenomena he describes in his various works. Institutions and practices have causal powers. Speech acts have causal powers. Rules have causal powers; as do stories and ways of thinking growing out of stories. A way of thinking (a loose category intended to include the tight notion of *episteme*), once it gets rolling, can indeed spread just because of its own momentum and in spite of institutional resistance; a whole society can be blinded or illuminated by its ideology just because it is its ideology. To reply to the objection that Foucault would not accept the compliment I am paying him because the phrase “causal powers” was not part of his vocabulary and suggesting causal explanations was not part of his intention, an objection to which one might add that in addition to not making causal claims himself Foucault did not approve of people who did (Foucault 1966 p. 275); I would employ the lacanian phrase, *il ne sait pas qu'il sait*. (“He does not know he knows.”)

But Althusser had other and better reasons for objecting. Even if one agrees with me that at this point in time the issue of material causes vs. ideal causes should be cheerfully disregarded as a non-issue, because both of these two supposedly opposed categories have now been superseded by better ways of talking about science, one should still acknowledge that leftists in Paris in 1966 were not wrong to recognize in Les Mots et les Choses a sophisticated salvo fired against them. (See the summary of their critical reactions in Eribon 1989 part two chapter 5) Archaeological analysis in terms of the *episteme* of the age had the consequence that questions leftists are accustomed to thinking of as important, such as the question whose interests are served by an ideology, were dismissed as irrelevant. They were surface effects above the archaeological level. For example, in a long discussion of the various economic theories of the classical age (Chapter 6); full of quotes airing bourgeois commonplaces that Marx satirized, such as the commonplace that everybody gains by trade since if each party did not consider what he was buying to be worth more to him than what he was selling there would be no contract and no transaction; which Foucault repeats with a straight face, not because he is saying he takes common liberal economic ideas at their face value and agrees with them, but because he is saying something at a wholly different level; namely, that all parties to those 17th and 18th century controversies were disagreeing with each other within the common framework of the same *episteme*; when he finally gets to a question about whether an ideology serves class interests, he writes, “It is necessary to distinguish carefully between two forms and two levels of study. One would be an opinion inquiry to find out who in the 18th century was a Physiocrat and who was an anti-Physiocrat; what were the interests at stake; what were the points and the arguments in the polemics; how the struggle for power played out. The other consists in without considering the personalities and their histories defining the conditions in which it was possible to think coherently and simultaneously both the knowledge (*savoir*) of the Physiocrat and the knowledge (*savoir*) of the Utilitarian. The first analysis would lead to a doxology. Archaeology can only recognize and practice the second.” (Foucault 1966 p. 214)

David Carroll argues that the key concepts Foucault invented in his 1966 book, “archaeology” and “*episteme*,” already positioned him to be what he became in the 1970s, along with Gilles Deleuze, Jean-Francois Lyotard, Jean Baudrillard, and the “*nouveaux philosophes*” a leader of the wave of anti-Marxism that was then sweeping

Paris. Carroll writes, “In Foucault’s archaeology events in their traditional historical sense -- events produced by human subjects (individual or collective)—are considered to be of only superficial interest, surface rather than fundamental, non-events in the archaeological sense. The only ‘true’ events are epistemological events, those produced by changes in the *episteme*. Time and time again Foucault-archaeologist will judge changes in historical, philosophical, political, scientific, and literary positions to be inconsequential, not by denying their existence, but rather their pertinence and their status. The differences between Marx and Ricardo, for example, are inconsequential because they do not affect the *episteme*, because they occupy the same space and are determined to be in the same context; Foucault argues that they are ultimately (epistemologically) the same. In other words, Marxism is a non-event.” (Carroll 1978 p. 712 referring in his example to Foucault 1966 pp. 213-4)

For Jean-Paul Sartre it was clear that the purpose of Les Mots et les Choses was to undermine Marxism and that its way of achieving its purpose was to remove from history any reference to the dynamic forces that shaped it. In an interview shortly after its publication he said, “What Foucault has presented us with, as Kanters has rightly seen, is a geology: a series of successive layers that form our ‘soil.’ Each of these layers defines the conditions of possibility of a certain type of thought that has triumphed during a certain period. But Foucault does not say what would be most interesting: namely how each thought system (*pensée*) is constructed starting with certain conditions, nor how people pass from one thought system to another. For that it would be necessary to make reference to the role of praxis, therefore of history, and that is precisely what he refuses to do. Certainly his perspective remains historical. He distinguishes epochs, a before and an after. But he replaces the cinema with the magic lantern, movement with a series of immobilities.” (Sartre 1966)

But. The waves of anti-Marxism, in which Foucault was a participant, can also be viewed –and I view them that way—together with the rise of neoliberalism, more as effects than as causes of the breakdown of social democracy, which in turn can be viewed as due to its inability to escape from the systemic imperatives of capitalism. I am looking for ways to build a culture of solidarity, and to build strong and efficient public sectors, so that between them they can weaken the power of capital to dictate the terms of the social contract; that is to say, so that between them they will decrease the dependence of all of society –of ordinary people for jobs, of governments for tax revenues—on compliance with the requirements of a regime of accumulation. The crisis of authority can be viewed –even at the pre-political levels of families and classrooms—as the crisis of a society that does not know how to organize social and economic democracy. In order to relate the text written by Foucault published in 1966 to the discussion of these larger issues; and in the process to pen some nuances to the rather harsh judgments about it made by David Carroll and Jean-Paul Sartre; and in the process to acknowledge that Foucault and others have some valid points to make against obnoxious forms of Marxism; I need to first to say something about how Foucault handles the transition from the *episteme* of Representation to the *episteme* of modernity which is supposed to have happened between 1775 and 1825. “The last years of the 18th century are broken by a discontinuity symmetric to that which broke, at the beginning of the 17th, the thought system (*pensée*) of the Renaissance:...” (Foucault 1966 p. 229)

I use the generic term “handles” because Foucault does not explain why there was a sea-change in the fundamental cultural codes around 1800. He does not explain anything in the sense of providing an account of the causes that produced it. What then does he do? “*Archéologie, elle, doit parcourir l'événement selon sa disposition manifeste; elle dira comment les configurations propres à chaque positivité se sont modifiées.*” (p. 230) I quote these lines in French so that the reader will not have to rely exclusively on someone’s attempt to translate them. My feeble attempt is this: “Archaeology, for its part, should follow the pattern of appearance of the train of events; it should say how the configurations proper to each *positivité* are modified.” The word *positivité*, positivity, seems to refer both to a pattern of phenomena and to an *episteme*, a way of talking about, of seeing, and of thinking about a pattern of phenomena. It is what is given at any given period of time, but Foucault has taught us that what is given is never simply given by nature; it is always also given by history. Briefly, in some sense still problematic, which Foucault himself will struggle to clarify in later years, Foucault will tell us what happened to knowledge between 1775 and 1825 without “saying why.” In an important sense Foucault cannot possibly “say why” because what counts as “saying why” changed as a result of the very epistemic mutation between 1775 and 1825 whose history he traced. It was a prime example of what Foucault calls the, “.perpetual oscillation which makes the human sciences always contested, from the outside by their own history.” (Foucault 1966 p. 388)

Foucault justifies his claim that there *was* a general epistemic mutation around 1800 by referring to three specific fields. First, as already mentioned, biology became possible because the classification of living species switched to being based on the functions performed by their vital systems. (e.g. Foucault 1966 pp. 238-245) Second, philology and linguistics became possible because the study of language shifted from studying the meanings of words to studying the transformations of grammatical systems. (e.g. Foucault 1966 pp. 245-49). Third, political economy became possible because “. . . since Ricardo the possibility of exchange is founded on labor [i.e. on a labor theory of exchange value HR], and the theory of production from his time forward had always to precede that of circulation.” (Foucault 1966 p. 267) (Writing in Paris in the early 1960s, Foucault did not then anticipate that Chicago economics would in the late 20th century lead a comeback of theories giving circulation priority over production, but he did begin to study the comeback of liberal economics in his lectures and seminars at the Collège de France shortly before his death.)

What these three disciplinary mutations have in common, and what makes them elements of a general culture shift is that origins, causality, and history came from, “. . . great hidden forces starting from primitive and inaccessible cores” “From now on, things would no longer come to representation any way but on the basis of that thickness retired into itself, troubled perhaps and rendered more somber by its obscurity; but knotted strongly to themselves; assembled or divided, grouped without appeal by the vigor that hid them there down below, in that depth.” (Foucault 1966 pp. 263-64)

The *episteme* of modernity cannot be neatly named with a single word like Resemblance of Representation. Its consequence is dispersion, not unity. Descartes’ famous deduction, “I think therefore I am” no longer works. “Can I say indeed that I am this language that I speak? Can I say that I am this labor that I do with my hands, but which escapes me not just when I finish it, but even before I start? Can I say that I am

that life that I sense in the depth of my being, but which at the same time envelopes me ...? (Foucault 1966 p. 335) What does work for a time, at least to the extent of creating an illusory concept of humanity that has enjoyed considerable prominence for nearly two centuries, is Kant's transcendental account of human nature, his "... discovery that the subject, to the extent that he is reasonable, gives himself his own law which is the universal law," (Foucault 1966 p. 339) both with respect to morals and with respect to general truths. The human is thus defined as a double being: an empirical being studied by biology, linguistics, political economy and other sciences; and also a transcendental being—what Kant called a rational being—whose transcendental rationality established the conditions of possibility of experience, for example the condition, without which experiences would not be possible, that there is a three dimensional space to have experiences in. "...the threshold of our modernity is not located at the moment when one decided to apply objective methods to the study of man, but rather on the day when there was constituted a dual empirical-transcendental being and it was decided to call it *humanity*." (*homme*, more literally translated as *man*) (Foucault 1966 p. 330)

One needs to add some nuances to Foucault's rejection of Marxism, which at this point becomes explicit (e.g. p. 274). He accepts many of the characteristic doctrines of Marxism, if not as truth then at least as central characteristics of a modern *episteme* that has rejected the bourgeois commonplaces so prominent in 17th and 18th century theories of wealth. Those characteristic doctrines include the priority of production over circulation, capital accumulation, the labor theory of value, the theory of surplus value, and the concept of alienated labor. The conceptual mutation that led to these modern ideas is attributed to Ricardo, and in the last analysis not to any individual but to a general shift of cultural codes which made Ricardo possible. (See Foucault 1966 pp. 265-275) With respect to them Foucault regards Marx as an optimist and Ricardo as a pessimist. Foucault also connects phenomenology with Marxism, disparaging both at once, and disparaging their essential connection with each other. (Foucault 1966 p. 332) It is as if Foucault had been reading my book, or reading Charles Taylor, and had agreed with us that the interpretation of the lived-world can only lead to a critique of it reminiscent of Marx. If I can say so without getting too far into the question what Foucault personally thought of Marx personally, which should not be the issue, and concerning which numerous diverse quotes could be collected, I should say that although within the script of Les Mots et les Choses Marx plays the modest role of author of optimistic variations on themes from Ricardo, elsewhere Foucault pairs Marx with Freud as one of the two most important modern path breaking founders of new forms of discourse. (Foucault 1969D p. 805). Foucault once explained that Marx's work was not an epistemic break in economics, but was an epistemic break in politics and history. (Foucault 1967 p. 587)

I do not for one minute agree with Foucault that humanity is a dual being, at once empirical and transcendental, whose birth was indistinguishable from the birth of modernity at the time of Kant and the French Revolution, and whose short life ended when Nietzsche made it clear that the death of God entailed the death of man, whose posthumous ghosts still walk the earth in the form of bogus doctrines "*gauches et gauchies*" that the honest philosopher can only oppose with a silent philosophical laugh. (Foucault 1966 p. 353-4) On the contrary humanity was born some 200,000 years ago, more or less, the exact date depending on how one reads the fossil evidence. Humanity

has invented many cultures and if the systemic imperatives of capitalism and the other ideologies and institutions that drive irresponsible industrialization do not lead it to destroy itself by destroying its habitat, it will invent many more. Most of human culture has either been at a different time or at a different place, or at both a different time and a different place, from the capitalist Europe between 1650 and 1966 whose ways of knowing are charted by Foucault in Les Mots et les Choses.

Nevertheless, Foucault does make some valid points, and when he steals the concept *l'homme* to make them with he is only copying the imperialism his analysis dissolves. When Kant wrote that it is a categorical imperative to treat humanity, whether in yourself or in some other person, never only as a means, but always as an end-in-itself, he really did mean by "humanity" precisely the dual being, at once empirical and transcendental, that Foucault identifies as *l'homme*. (I think when Foucault names the concept of humanity as masculine he deliberately evokes its links with patriarchy; e.g. in the French Revolution, in Kant, and in Auguste Comte; if he had been interested in refurbishing it and in rescuing its positive aspects he would have found a gender-neutral way to refer to it; if not in 1966 then later.) The network of meanings Foucault calls *l'homme* really was invented when Foucault says it was, with the precursors Foucault notes; it really was the object of worship in Auguste Comte's religion of humanity; and it really has become the official moral framework for the period Foucault calls modernity, which, following Wallerstein, I prefer to call the liberal period of a modern world-system that began earlier. Kant crystallizes ideas of *l'homme* typical of his time and characteristic of the French Revolution; he has many followers, most of whom have not read him, and (a point Foucault does not make but could have) the other characteristic ethical theories of liberal culture, such as utilitarianism, differ from Kant very little in their practical conclusions and in what Foucault would call their archaeological basis. Even people in modern times who have no philosophy usually have modern common sense; and it is precisely modern common sense, the moral and legal framework of a commercial society, that Kant brilliantly rationalized, with a logical elegance superior to that of the other early modern philosophers who were offering similar rationales for the same institutions. (Richards 1995) Kant's concepts of human dignity and respect for persons are explicitly included in the United Nations Charter, and in many international declarations of human rights; they are in several national constitutions. Foucault is right also in a sense he himself does not make explicit: *l'homme* is the juridical subject of a world physically organized by commodity exchange and capital accumulation. *L'homme* fits its ethical and legal paradigm.