

“Against Foucault” Foucault’s Nietzschean Turn (Part Nine)

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Howard Richards presented this text on 21st May 2013 in Pretoria, South Africa, on video.

The references are at the end of Part Ten.

In the course of replying to questions posed by a group of readers of Esprit, a French magazine expressing a Christian left perspective, Foucault formulated the hypothetical question, “...whether I am a reactionary, or ... whether my texts are (in themselves, intrinsically, through a certain number of coded signs).” (Foucault 1968, p. 683)

The question Foucault was replying to was:

“Does not a way of thinking that introduces the constraints of the system together with discontinuity in the history of the mind (*esprit*), take away all grounds for progressive political action? Does it not lead to the following dilemma:
---either accept the system,
---or call for a savage event (*événement sauvage*), an eruption of external violence, the only thing capable of crashing the system?” (p. 673)

Foucault acknowledges (in 1968) that this question accurately characterizes his writings. He recognizes himself in the question almost completely. “...you have arrived at a definition of my work that I cannot avoid signing,” but which leads to consequences no reasonable person would agree with. (*Id.*) “Suddenly I feel all my weirdness.” (*Soudain, je sens toute ma bizarrerie.*) (*Id.*)

Foucault writes a long reply to Esprit’s question. (pages 673-695). In it, and in a similar reply to a similar question posed by the Cercle d’Épistémologie of Paris (Foucault 1968A) at about the same time (the summer of 1968, which was also the time of tumultuous political events in France), he previews what he will publish as a book the following year (Archeologie du Savoir, 1969). Everything is dispersion. There is no system. There are only systems, better described as practices. There is no knowledge in general. There are only knowledges, better described as discursive formations. The same Michel Foucault who a year earlier (in April of 1967) in an interview in Tunisia had described himself as “the choir boy of structuralism,” (Foucault 1967 p. 581); the same Michel Foucault who had explained to the Tunisians the tenets of structuralism as if he were its ambassador; is now emphatically not a structuralist.

Foucault does not answer the hypothetical question whether he is a reactionary; he answers instead another question he conceives to be more legitimate and to be the question the readers of Esprit are really asking: the question of the relationship of his philosophy to political practice. (p. 683) The answer is that his philosophy leads to progressive political action to change particular practices. For example, his research on the history of medicine supports progressive action to curb the abusive power exercised by doctors in modern society. (pages 688-692), To be counted as a progressive one need not (and one ought not) believe any of the totalizing philosophies of history of the 19th

century, nor any of their untimely prolongations into the 20th; nor (in particular) need one follow Louis Althusser in trying to save Marx by separating him from Hegel. In 1967 in Tunis Foucault had praised Althusserian structuralist Marxism as "... an effort to analyze all the conditions of human existence, an effort to understand, in its complexity, the ensemble of relations that constitute our history, an effort to determine in what historical conditions (*conjoncture*) our actions are possible today." (Foucault 1967 p. 583) Now, in the summer of 1968, he endorses dispersion. If that made him a reactionary then yes he would be a reactionary, but distancing himself from structuralist Marxism does not make him a reactionary because there are better ways (more particular and detailed ways) to relate scientific research to social practice and political action.

I do not think Foucault's answer to the questions posed by the readers of *Esprit* is satisfactory. When in their question they posed as one horn of a dilemma "accept the system" I believe, reading between the lines, that they had in mind saying, "We find the system unsatisfactory; it has an inherent tendency to exclude and to generate violence; indeed as Christians we cannot help but notice that it generates each and every one of the seven deadly sins; we want to contribute to changing the system, but the results of your historical inquiries discourage us, for they seem to say that the course of the history of knowledge, which seems to have some bearing on the course of history in general, is determined by *epistemes*, impersonal structures nobody can control, which ordinary people do not know about; and which even scholars did not understand until you published your book (*Les Mots et les Choses*)."

I would paraphrase Foucault's reply to the charge that his philosophy of history discourages those who want to make a difference for good in the world as follows: "*Tu me prends pour un autre*. (You take me to be somebody else). You identify me with those old-fashioned philosophers of history who wrote big theories claiming to explain what has happened and to predict what will happen based on what they took to be history's great determining causes. But I am a modest scholar, devoted to noticing in the sources I study their great variety of discourse and practice; I am averse to great embracing theories, and incredulous in the face of those who imagine there is some great system determining events. Far from discouraging your good intentions, I encourage you to undertake modest political projects to deal with particular discerned evils."

The readers of *Esprit*, it seems to me, are left approximately where they were before they received Foucault's answer. They had feared that he was telling them they could not change the system because it was beyond the power of human mind and will to change it. Now they learn that they cannot change the system for a different reason: because "the system" is not a legitimate concept. The term does not refer to any entity that a person who has accepted the method and the conclusions of Foucault's studies, as they are about to be published in *Archéologie du Savoir*, would set out to change.

In response to the questions of the readers of *Esprit* Foucault develops a vocabulary that acquits him of the charge of regarding history as a single monolithic all-powerful and all-pervasive system. But in the course of doing so he confesses several times that he feels that his questioners will not be satisfied by his answers. Indeed. They had something in mind when they asked about "the system" as Immanuel Wallerstein has something in mind when he writes about "the modern world-system." Neither they nor Wallerstein will be satisfied if Foucault answers them in terms that invoke what J-F Lyotard calls "incredulity toward meta-narratives" if that means that what they wanted to

say when they asked a question about “the system” cannot be said. I suggest that my concept of rules leads to a useful way to interpret the phrase “the system.” -- a way which grants meaning to the concerns I think the readers of Esprit had in mind. It offers guidance for social activists.

“The system” can be identified with the basic constitutive rules concerning contracts and property rights, and especially because the logic of accumulation and the corresponding need for a regime of accumulation (see below) follow from them as corollaries. I do not agree with Foucault, with Marx, nor with Foucault's interpretation of Ricardo insofar as they claim that it is at the level of production that the keys to understanding political economy are to be found. I agree with Keynes, Karl Polanyi and others who attribute to markets (to what Marx called the sphere of circulation) a leading role. “The system” is about who owns the means of production, yes, but it is also about owning in general and about commodity exchange in general. To say with the readers of Esprit that we do not want to accept the system, that we want to change it, is to be like John Dewey a thoroughgoing pragmatist, a consistent pragmatist who is willing to consider moving whatever parameters need to be moved to solve concrete problems. The readers of Esprit wisely regarded an *événement sauvage* as one horn of a dilemma of which both horns are unacceptable.

The readers of Esprit wanted to know, I believe, at least two things more about the system: (1) why it is so hard to change, and (2) how to change it. With respect to these two questions also I think rules-talk helps.

The basic constitutive rules of modern society (employing ideas of “constitutive rules” developed by Charles Taylor and John Searle, with roots in Wittgenstein and Kant; and adding the idea of “basic,” i.e. concerned with satisfying the basic needs of life) set up the systemic imperatives of capitalism. (Ellen Wood 2004) The concept of “systemic imperatives” helps to explain why the system is so hard to change. In addition to social inertia, apathy, ignorance, reluctance of people with vested interests to give up privileges, superstition, dualism, military institutions organized to defend the status quo, traditional ethnic hostility, inexperience with new practices, fear of the unknown, and other factors, the system is hard to change because of its systemic imperatives. In the language of the French regulationist school of economics, the imperatives of the system require that there be some regime of accumulation, some set of economic, political, social, and cultural institutions that make it possible for the accumulation of capital to proceed. (Aglietta 2002) To the extent that such a set of institutions is lacking, for example when a progressive government imposes taxes that discourage investment, the system does not function; its failure to function sets in motion forces that tend to restore the conditions it requires to function. (Richards and Swanger 2006.)

Among the reasons why the system is hard to change, another that rules-talk plays a useful role in illuminating is the crisis of authority. It is associated with the lack of adequate cultures of solidarity and social responsibility. People do not pay their taxes. They ignore environmental regulations. They prefer stealing to working. They do not do volunteer for community service or show up for meetings of civic organizations. These common failures can be expressed in terms of rules-talk by saying: it does not matter what the stated rules (or norms, or expectations) of a culture are if people do not follow them. One of the advantages of using rules-talk here is that it suggests neatly dividing the difficulties into two parts: one sort of difficulty occurs when the norms are dysfunctional

even if followed; another sort of difficulty is a crisis of authority, a tendency not to follow norms at all.

An answer to the question how to change the system is: change the rules. In particular, change those rules that set up the systemic imperatives that make the system hard to change. This is a practical and pertinent answer: it suggests that rather too much time and energy is spent in protest demonstrations of the kind that were raging in Paris during the summer of 1968. The cause of the evils protested could more effectively be addressed by nurturing alternative practices organized according to different rules. Protests generally require an existing rule, whose violation is protested, Protests serve a purpose because good existing rules are often violated. But social change also requires organizing institutions that do not exist yet, which will function according to new rules; or according to old rules like those of solidarity which half-exist in the sense that people have heard of them, but which do not exist as rules according to Professor Hart's definition of "rule" because they do not yet describe and guide practice.

I have been suggesting that rules-talk is rooted in common sense, and that there are systemic reasons why in the 20th century, and beginning with Nietzsche and others in the 19th century, there have been heavy trends toward attacks on common sense. Common sense can only lead to Marx, not to Marx in the sense of endless bla bla and specious pretexts for violence, but to Marx in the sense of modifying the rules that govern property ownership and markets.

Having replied to the readers of Esprit in terms that he himself doubted they would be happy with, and having explained "archaeology," Foucault also became uneasy with the relationship of his approach to history to the traditional (Aristotelian and Kantian) category of cause and effect. In a research proposal submitted to the Collège de France, he announces that he will take up again a group of problems concerning "*la causalité dans l'ordre du savoir*." (causality in the order of knowledge) (Foucault 1969 p. 845)

High time. Foucault had come perilously close to falling into what Hubert Dreyfus and Paul Rabinow call "the illusion of autonomous discourse." (Dreyfus and Rabinow 1983) Unless the world is very different from what Kant thought it was; unless it is not a world where patterns of phenomena follow regular laws so that like causes produce like effects; then the stories Foucault has been telling us about discursive formations changing their patterns over time for no discernible reasons are not about history *wie es eigentlich gewesen war*. (as it really happened). In La Naissance de la Clinique Foucault came close to saying that political and economic events that were not just discourse caused changes in medical discourse. Non-talk caused talk. But he backed away from his drift into materialism when he wrote Raymond Roussel, Les Mots et les Choses and Archeologie du Savoir. Nonetheless he always denied that he simply wanted to erase and deny the category of causality. He usually said that what he was doing was not determining which causes produced which effects; he was doing something else; but the something else he was doing, the archaeology, was not entirely unrelated to causes and effects. In late 1969 he decided to take another look at how it was related.

For Kant the relationship of concepts to causes had been reasonably clear. There were two realms: the *a priori*, which did not depend on experience; and the *a posteriori*, which did depend on experience. The concept of cause was given a priori. It did not

depend on experience. The mind brought it to experience. It was a condition of any possible experience.

The realm of experience, of phenomena (which Kant sometimes called "intuitions" or "percepts") was necessarily a world governed by causal laws. Concepts without percepts were empty, because the *a priori* form only said what an experience would have to be. Percepts without concepts were blind because no sense could be made of experience without ordering it in categories.

Nearly two hundred years later for the Foucault of late 1969 who told the Collège de France that he was going to reexamine causality, Kant's clarity was muddled. Kant's eternal and universal *a priori* had been replaced by an historical *a priori*. "Conditions of the possibility of experience" continued to play a role, but they played a different role. They changed from one century to another. They had left the eternal realm of Kant's *a priori* that does not depend on experience and had joined the hurly burly of time; but they had not made it all the way across the divide that separates *a priori* from *a posteriori*. They were still not full citizens of Kant's *a posteriori* realm where they, like everything else, would be explained and predicted by determining what causes had produced them. Two different but interrelated sets of questions emerged:

1. What causes the changes in the concepts that determine what experiences are possible? This is a question difficult to separate from questions about what moves history in general, and the related question whether nothing moves history in general, but rather a series of diverse causes; or whether however history might be moved it is necessarily impossible to scholars to determine the cause or causes of its movement.

2. How do cultures of different times understand cause and effect?

Foucault could simply have answered these questions by adopting the viewpoint of the realist (mainly economic) historians he discusses at the beginning of Archeologie du Savoir. But instead he then devotes the book to offering an alternative to the economic historians, and of course an alternative to Sartre. He could have simply changed his mind and decided that *homo natura* is not a bad idea after all. Now we know about demographic processes. We know about climate change and other ecological causes. We know how markets work and how capital accumulates once certain institutional conditions are given. We know, going a bit beyond the expertise of the economic historians, how myths organize cultures; and so on. So Foucault might have said that we can now read our own scientific culture's understandings of cause and effect backwards into time to explain what happened in the past. In other words Foucault might have decided to become a realist.

But Foucault did not want to go there. He remained reluctant to continue in the direction he had been going in La Naissance de la Clinique, toward realist historical explanations. (I collapse the distinction Anthony Giddens makes much of in A Contemporary Critique of Historical Materialism between political explanations and economic explanations, counting them both as realist explanations.)

But we are not free to simply disregard causality, pretending to know nothing about it on the pretext that we know nothing certain about it. (Here, again, I am speaking, not Foucault) Causality requires attention if one is to have any ethical life at all. To behave in even a minimally responsible manner; even to have an intention (and *a fortiori* to have good intentions); one must have some expectation of what the results of one's actions will be. We are causes. Our actions have effects. There is no responsible way to

avoid explaining and predicting. Explaining why events happen and predicting what will happen presuppose identifying the causes at work; they presuppose ideas about what produces what. Following Rom Harré and critical realism, I have been developing the view that rules have causal powers. Norms are at the heart of causal explanation. They often explain why people did what they did; and they often predict what people will do. For example, the social psychologist Michael Argyle predicted that the passengers who got on Oxford city busses would pay the fare. He sent out his students to collect data. The data verified his prediction. The explanation of the observed phenomenon was that the conventional norms in Oxford, England, prescribe that when one gets on the bus one pays the fare. Interpreted in the light of the principle thus illustrated, that rules are causes, Adam Smith's Wealth of Nations, Karl Marx's Capital, and John Maynard Keynes General Theory can be read as books about what happens when certain rules are followed. (Keynes reference to "the psychology of the community" should be read as a reference to "the norms of the community") (Keynes 1936 p. 27) Since most human action is conventional, social change consists mostly of changing conventions. A culture of solidarity is equivalent to a culture with norms of solidarity. Choosing an option with regard to how to understand cause and effect is part and parcel of choosing an option with regard to how to be a social change activist.

So there you have it. In 1968 speaking to a group convened by Esprit Magazine Foucault was embarrassed to find that he had no concept of cause and effect. Therefore he seemed to be conservative or even reactionary. He had to accept things as they are because his philosophy allowed no concept of social activism oriented by causes that can be rationally expected produce effects. On the other hand, the club of the scientific realists who *did* have concepts of cause and effect was not a club Foucault wanted to join. In 1969 Foucault submitted a research proposal to the College de France saying he would devote himself to studying concepts of cause and effect. What would Foucault do next? Where would his study of cause and effect lead him? How could he come up with a convincing concept of cause and effect that would not lead him back into the economic history he had worked so hard to avoid? How could he think about causes without falling into the camp of the scientific realists where he did not want to be? In the next lecture I will suggest that he found in the philosophy of Friedrich Nietzsche the answers he was looking for.