

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

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The references are at the end of Part Twelve.

At the beginning of the 1970s Foucault chooses a Nietzschean option. He had long admired Nietzsche; he reports that he started reading him in 1952 or 1953, (Foucault 1984, p. 703). It appears that he admired Nietzsche and identified with him even before he read him. In retrospect, in an interview given in 1980, Foucault reflected that when he briefly became a member of the Communist Party in 1950-53, it was not because his sentiments were Marxist but because they were Nietzschean. Nietzsche and Georges Bataille were the means of access that led to Communism; Communism was understood as another form of rejection of the world we are living in. Of course it was ridiculous to be a Nietzschean Communist, but he nonetheless was one (Foucault 1980, p. 50). (His biographer Didier Eribon does not credit this interpretation by Foucault of his own past; Eribon finds that he was for a time a Marxist and became a Nietzschean later (Eribon 1989, p. 72)). Foucault reports that when he did read Nietzsche he read him with a life changing passion He had felt trapped. Nietzsche helped him feel he could escape and change his life. He did. He quit his job. He left France. (Foucault 1982, p. 780)

Foucault came to believe that there was no single philosophy to be found in the works of Nietzsche, but rather a series of somewhat disparate ideas which subsequent thinkers could draw on and develop. He came to rely on some of them to resolve his dilemmas regarding causality in history. (Foucault 1971A, Dreyfus and Rabinow 1983) From now on (roughly from his essay on Nietzsche and history published in 1971) Foucault would be free of the illusion of autonomous discourse. He had never completely fallen into it. Although he sometimes seemed to say that language creates the world and all that is in it, he never literally accepted the absurd consequences that would follow from such a proposition taken literally. Now he found a way to talk about the world outside language that allowed him to avoid the kinds of materialism and naturalism that he wanted to avoid. There would be something nameable outside discourse that determines what discourse will be. Namely: power.

Formerly, when Foucault wrote what he called “archaeologies” in Les Mots et les Choses and elsewhere, he was writing about the culturally determining forms of knowledge of European modernity, putting the objects (as distinct from the forms) of knowledge at a distance. Henceforth, as Foucault writes what he now calls (borrowing the term from Nietzsche), “genealogies,” the way he writes social history will be organized around the objects he studies: the ways in which social power is exercised. (Honneth 1994, p. 157) (1991) There will be *à dehors*, an outside, and it will be about force. (Deleuze 1986, p. 92)

Jurgen Habermas makes what I take to be the same point in slightly different terms: In Les Mots et les Choses Foucault had led himself and his readers to the strange result that regularities regulate themselves. Foucault escapes this difficulty by giving up the autonomy of knowledge and instead finding the foundation of knowledge in power. (Habermas 1994, p. 81)

Power (a polysemic term that over the years Foucault came to employ in unusual and controversial ways) becomes available to Foucault to provide plausible causal explanations concerning why over time some discourses burgeon while others wither away and disappear. (The word “causal,” however is more at home in my vocabulary than his, since in spite of his declaration in 1969 that he would look more closely into it, he continued to shy away from it. Indeed in 1980 he said he had been misunderstood or had failed to explain himself if power is taken to explain: Power is, he then says, not what explains but what needs to be explained. (Foucault 1980 p. 83)) It makes it possible to avoid reducing the social to the natural without seeing their relationship as a Kantian one. In other words: without seeing nature as a realm of laws whose social parallel is, again, named as law. Instead, one can see nature as a realm of power whose social parallel is, again, named as power. (Nietzsche 1886, part 1, paragraph 22; Foucault 1971, 1971A) But “power” is not, as Foucault employs it and develops it, a term that commits him to the implausible proposition that the principles of physics, chemistry, and other advanced natural sciences are generally determined by social struggles for power. (Foucault also thinks of linguistics as an advanced science). He is saved from being committed to this implausible proposition because he now specifies that his field of study is *savoir*. *Savoir* is no longer appropriately translated as “knowledge.” It refers rather to the particular sorts of knowledge claims found in the rather dubious human sciences, such as economics and psychiatry, which Foucault particularly studies. “...between opinion and scientific knowledge (*connaissance scientifique*) one can recognize the existence of a particular level, which one proposes to call that of *savoir*. This *savoir* is not embodied (*ne pas prend corps*) only in

theoretical texts and research instruments, but in a whole set of practices and institutions..." (Foucault 1969 p.844). With respect to *savoir* social struggles for power generally are constitutive in the historical evolution of concepts. Social struggles are however not completely without influence even in the shaping of the concepts of the most rigorous and advanced of the natural sciences.

Foucault's Nietzschean turn drew him closer to some strands of Marxism and distanced him from others. He drew closer to Marxism as a philosophy that exposes the falsity of bourgeois ideology and the power of the class interests that drive its production. Marx and Nietzsche can be interpreted as agreeing that social life consists of a series of conflicts, in which the rules that govern the conflicts are made by the winners to serve their own interests, against the interest of the losers. Foucault became closer to those who place Marx beside Nietzsche and Freud in the Hall of Fame of thinkers who unmask middle-class hypocrisy. (Some also include Karl Mannheim in the Hall of Fame as the founder of *Wissenschaftslehre*, that branch of sociology which studies the biases introduced into knowledge by the social conditions of its production.) Marxists are thus distinguished by what they do not believe. They are classed together with others also distinguished by their unbelief. Marx is drafted to be a combatant in the attack on common sense.

His Nietzschean turn drew Foucault even further away than he already was from the *deuxième naïveté* of Paul Ricoeur; from those who find in some religious and communitarian folk traditions cultural resources that function to improve the material conditions of life; away from willingness to draw in practice on any surviving elements that can be found of the traditional "moral economy" described by E.P. Thompson in his history of the working classes of England, whose principles were not greatly different from those declared in Unto This Last by the Victorian moralist John Ruskin; and away from a Gramsci-influenced (disregarding Gramsci's Leninism) concept of a gradual moral and intellectual reform, a long term war of position with shifting alliances and opportunistic educational strategies, in which elements of cultural advance toward solidarity, including but not limited to the legalizing and civilizing ideals of the bourgeoisie itself, and those of its organic intellectuals like Benedetto Croce, will eventually lead to the hegemony of socialist values in the realm of ideas, and to social democracy in practice. (Gramsci 1979)

Nietzsche also helped Foucault to further his anti-humanist agenda without relying on structuralism. I will try to explain why, and will add some remarks about what is at stake.

To the extent that it is persuasive, Foucault's dissolution of the human subject (however accomplished, whether by an alliance with structuralism that emphasizes system, or by an alliance with avant-garde literature that emphasizes dispersion (Megill 1985); or by an alliance with Nietzsche that emphasizes that the death of God entails the death of man) effectively undermines not only the existentialist Marxism of Jean-Paul Sartre, but also any democratic ideology that proposes to extend freedom and rights on grounds taking as a premise that humans have an essential dignity as rational beings. It effectively undermines socialism conceived as radicalized liberalism. (Laclau and Mouffe 2001) But Foucault's attack on liberal humanism does not dissolve social democracy conceived as the never-ending perfecting of institutions to make them more effective in meeting everybody's needs. On the contrary, Foucault was during part of his career an ally of social democracy so conceived. In the process of dissolving the Kantian ethical subject he also dissolves the Kantian juridical subject, the owner of property, the maker of contracts. (We will have to modify this assessment of Foucault's contribution when we get to his posthumously published lectures at the College de France of the late 1970s.) Foucault cleared the path for cultural creativity, for the invention of new selves better adapted to physical reality.

Some qualifications: My statement that Foucault's anti-humanism (to the extent that it is persuasive) effectively undermines revolutionary socialism of a Sartrean type and democratic socialism conceived as radicalized liberalism needs some expansion. In the first instance, whether the undermining of these positions is effective depends on whether their advocates care whether their premises have transcendental justifications. When Sartre takes as a starting point an existentialist neo-Husserlian conscious individual; who, like the natives in Frantz Fanon's Les Damnés de la Terre (for which Sartre wrote an introduction) becomes an individual with revolutionary consciousness; or, who, like the individuals in Sartre's Critique de la Raison Dialectique gradually acquires revolutionary commitments to a group, Sartre is indeed presupposing *l'homme* of Kant's Anthropology (of which Foucault was the translator for a French edition). Similarly Laclau and Mouffe might be read as taking the individual human being to be endowed by nature with inalienable rights that make democracy a transcendently valid ideal. Then their argument that political democracy should be extended to become also social and economic democracy would also depend on an Enlightenment doctrine of natural rights. But revolutionaries and democratic socialists (including Laclau and Mouffe) can reply to Foucault: We don't care. We can do without Kant's transcendental

argument for human dignity. We do not need the stand-in for God that Jean Jacques Rousseau called "nature." It is enough that conscious human individuals endowed by social convention with dignity and rights exist historically. They are elements of existing culture that we can appeal to and build on.

But this "we don't need no transcendentals" defense of humanism does not escape Foucault's critique. Foucault has another line of argument. Since Nietzsche the role of the philosopher can be thought of as opening up new paths for thought (like Heidegger) or (like Nietzsche) as diagnosing what is happening in culture. (e.g. Foucault 1966 p. 536; 1967 pp. 581-2). What happened in culture (according to Nietzsche and Foucault) was that humanity died. What is happening now is that the powers-that-be in the bureaucracies East and West, and charlatans like Albert Camus, Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, and Antoine de Saint Exupery are feeding on its corpse. (Foucault 1966A p. 541). The 19th century figures most responsible for 20th century humanist frauds are, evidently, Hegel and Marx. (Ibid..) The social conventions endowing conscious human individuals with dignity and rights are dissolving before our eyes. On this view *L'homme* is not an element of existing culture. He does *not* historically exist.

My statement that Foucault's critique of humanism makes him an ally of realist social reconstruction also requires qualification. Foucault finds in the literary works of Maurice Blanchot "*l'érosion invincible de la personne qui parle*" (the invincible erosion of the person who speaks) and irreparable dispersion. (Foucault 1966B p. 536) But when he transposes his literary experience into asserting that progress in the human sciences is eroding day by day the philosophical myth of the unitary subject, he can legitimately be answered with the reply, "yes and no." Yes, some people have very little of what Jane Loevinger and other psychologists call "ego development," but on the other hand no, some people score high on that variable according to elaborate mental measurement instruments that she and others have developed. (Loevinger 1976) The integrated and integrating ego exists in varying degrees and in diverse ways in our culture and in others. Jacques Lacan, whom Foucault originally cited as one of the leading scientists who confirmed for him that the literary discovery of subjectlessness was being validated scientifically by hard research reported in books to be found on the non-fiction shelves of libraries, helpfully observed in a dialogue with Foucault: "...I would like to remark that with or without structuralism it seems to me that there is nowhere any question, in the field vaguely marked by that label, of the negation of the subject. It is a matter of the dependence of the subject, which is extremely different; and particularly, at the level of

the return to Freud, of the dependence of the subject with respect to something truly elementary, which we have tried to isolate under the name 'signifier.'" (Lacan 1969 p. 820) Foucault is an ally of the realist insofar as he shows that nothing social is fixed or eternal. He is not an ally of those of us who believe in choice and construction insofar as he holds that willy-nilly we must accept a Nietzschean diagnosis of contemporary culture whether we want to or not. He is not accurate to the extent that he underestimates the continuing vitality of humanistic ideals. (See Lipovetsky 1992) Foucault recognizes where some key issues are: in questions about how subjects are in fact constituted in modern society. His further research (from about 1970 on) will focus on these key issues by creating "...a history of different modes by which, in our culture, human beings are made subjects." (Foucault 1983 p. 208) Nietzsche provides Foucault with a guiding concept without which, in Kant's terms, the percepts gathered in Foucault's thousands of hours spent reading books in the libraries of Paris would have been blind. Namely: in different modes human beings are made subjects by power.

To say that Foucault took a Nietzschean turn is not to say that thereafter he consistently described himself as a Nietzschean nor that he thereafter found a single message in Nietzsche's writings. (See Foucault 1985, pp. 53-54) It is to say that thinking in terms of will-to-power enabled him thereafter to reframe epistemology in a different perspective. It was, moreover, a perspective he desired. Concerning Marxism (taking it not only as an example, but also as a central example, since for Foucault, as for many others, it was a central albeit often hidden theme). His Nietzschean turn enabled him to say that seeking to demonstrate that Marxism is a rational science is seeking to invest Marxism with power. (Foucault 1980, p. 85) It is something altogether different from demonstrating that Marxism's propositions are the outcome of verifiable procedures. (Id.)

His Nietzschean turn enables Foucault to transform himself several times: from the anti-Marxist of Les Mots et les Choses, to the radical fellow traveller of the Marxists of the early 1970s, to the radical non-Marxist of a few years later, and then back to being a radical anti-Marxist, this time with an even more sophisticated discursive practice, outdoing even the sophisticated anti-Marxism of Les Mots et les Choses. By 1976 Foucault can refer to Marxism and psychoanalysis together as "the enemy" because they are "unitary theories." (Foucault 1976 pp. 25-26) A Nietzschean Foucauldian can pass for a while among Marxist-Leninists as just one more comrade: "Yes, comrades it is all about struggle, all about power. Yes, comrades, the reason why the prison system arose when and as it did was that capitalism required it at a certain moment of its history. Yes, comrades, there is nothing

more despicable than a reformist, a humanist, a social pacifist, a class collaborationist.” But it turns out that the Nietzschean Foucauldian discourse is not in the end Marxist-Leninist at all; it locates itself to the left of the Marxist-Leninists. The Soviet Union is just one more bourgeois state. Foucault in his radical period works with the Maoists (although it is a question what relationship there was between the Maoists of Paris and those of China). The labor unions are conservative organizations. The Communist Party is a conservative party. The conceptual move that makes it possible simultaneously to chime in with the most radical of the radicals and nevertheless to locate oneself to the left of them is the replacement of humanist ideals by power. As Foucault makes abundantly clear in a debate with Noam Chomsky, the proletariat (according to Foucault) is not fighting for justice. It is simply fighting to win. (Foucault and Chomsky 1974) But it follows from this Nietzschean premise that the bourgeoisie, or the rentier class, or a military cabal, or anybody who fights, is also fighting to win. Nobody has any more right to win than anyone else. The Nietzschean turn served to dissolve the traditional arguments reformers had made in favor of social justice, and to reinforce the sophist's proposition that might makes right. “I am radically on the side of the sophists.” (Foucault 1974, p. 632) “Capitalism” is renamed and generalized as “power;” it is reduced to being just one form of “power” among others; and then, in a further development, it turns out that “power” is not bad after all: exercising power gives people pleasure; power is creative. (e.g. Foucault 1974 p. 642)

Following this line of thought, as he sometimes did—and I do not think he always did; I do not think he was consistent—Foucault sometimes comes to the conclusion that it does not matter what side one is on. Let me do a brief and evanescent flash-forward here to quote an incident Paul Veyne reports: “In 1982 or 1983, in Foucault's apartment, we were watching a televised report on the Palestinian-Israeli conflict; at one point one of the combatants (which side he was on is utterly unimportant) was invited to speak. Now this man spoke in terms quite different from the ones ordinarily encountered in political discussions. ‘I know only one thing,’ this partisan said, ‘I want to win back the lands of my forefathers. This is what I have wanted since my teens. I don't know where this passion comes from, but there it is.’ ‘There we have it at last,’ Foucault said to me, ‘everything has been said, and there's nothing more to say.’ Each valorization of the will to power, or each discursive practice (more scholarly types will spell out the relation between Nietzsche and Foucault on this point) is a prisoner of itself, and universal history is woven of nothing but such threads.” (Veyne 1997 pp. 225-6)

I do not know what Nietzsche would have thought, had he lived on into the 21st century, about proposals like mine to reduce dependence on the logic of capital accumulation by organizing nations and local communities with different rules; such as, for example, the three principles of permaculture (1. Love the earth, 2. Love its people, 3. Share the surplus) (Mollison 2005) Nietzsche might be read as saying that I am completely wrong: One cannot solve problems by establishing better rules and institutions because rules and institutions are made by power. They do not make power. Since power causes not just rules but also all other phenomena I am irrelevant. Most likely besides being irrelevant I am driven by will-to-power like everyone else . Most likely I am not really interested in solving humanity's problems at all. My will-to-power just happens to adopt the subtle form of a will to contribute to solving the problems of life.

I consider this perhaps Nietzschean objection to building non-authoritarian cultures of solidarity by cooperating to solve physical and emotional problems in several ways. Not just in these lectures but also in other writings. In the next of these lectures I will comment on some functions of power-talk in Foucault and in Nietzsche.

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