

## **“Against Foucault” Foucault on Power (Part Eleven): Power as the Generalized Enemy**

Howard Richards

Howard Richards presented this text on 23rd May 2013 in Pretoria, South Africa, on video.

The references are at the end of Part Twelve.

In the Spring of 1972 the staff of *Esprit* organized a round table with Michel Foucault about the role of social workers in France’s then new urban public housing. These were the multi-family apartment buildings the government was building for the dangerous classes. France was creating neighborhoods similar to the neighborhoods that in the USA are called “the projects.” (Foucault 1972A) An architect on the panel, identified as P. Virilio, remarked: “One could say that one passes through three stages: the self-regulation of primitive societies, the regulation of our societies, and now we are heading toward a species of *dérégulation*, through the urbanization you just talked about, which is itself a new phenomenon because one speaks today of global cities.” (Id. p. 331) Virilio and others observe that the time is coming, if not already here, when the marginals, *le plèbe non prolétarienne*, will be the majority. I will comment first on Virilio’s suggested three stages, and then on Foucault’s reaction to Virilio’s suggestion.

**Self-regulation:** In French the connection between self-regulation and rules is clear. The French word for “rule” is *règle*. *Régulation* is the fact of assuring a form that is *régulier* (regular), i.e. one in conformity with the *règles*. (Robert 2006) Without romanticizing primitive societies one can acknowledge that in their great variety they exhibit many customary ways of patterning social relationships with rules, also known as norms. Virilio can be read as echoing those of us who say that humans are a species biologically coded to be culturally coded. We are capable of self-monitoring and of mutual monitoring in groups.

**Regulation:** Skipping over civilizations that are neither primitive nor “our societies” Virilio refers (as is clear from passages I have not quoted) especially to those European social democratic welfare states that in 1972 were already beginning the process of decline under the impact of globalization. “Regulation” is identified particularly with regulating the economy to produce full employment, with plans and industrial policies that make it possible to transfer large parts of the surplus generated by the economy to the social sector, and with administering social safety nets that provide cradle to grave security for all citizens. “Regulation” is a key word because it is the social democratic regulating of the economy that makes comprehensive social security possible.

**Dérégulation:** It echoes what Hannah Arendt in her phenomenology of contemporary society reads as a “crisis of authority.” As social democracy declines, the breach between the numbers of people who can be integrated into society through satisfying steady well-paid employment; and the numbers of people who arrive in the city, either by birth or by migration; is a widening breach. The proletariat is becoming a smaller proportion of the total population. The marginals, formerly known as the *Lumpen*, are becoming a larger proportion. (Foucault contributes to the round table discussion the nuance that workers who are not unemployed often voluntarily

marginalize themselves, preferring a life of crime and drugs to their boring low-paid jobs.(Id. p. 338)) The result: chaos. Neither the customary norms of primitive societies nor the discipline provided by steady employment in regulated societies governs daily life in the *banlieues* of Paris where the dangerous classes live. The social workers are assigned the impossible task of stemming a tidal wave of social disintegration produced by urbanization and marginalization.

Foucault speaks next. The vocabulary he employs differs from Vilorio's vocabulary as rules differ from power, and in that respect he implicitly answers Vilorio, or at least expresses a different way of talking and displays a different way of seeing; but the question Foucault directly addresses is not whether Vilorio's three stages are valid, but instead a question raised earlier in the round table discussion by the historian J. Vuillard: whether the social worker is, in effect, a police officer. The implicit function of the social worker is, says Julliard, "*de maintien de l'ordre.*" (Id. p. 330)

Foucault mainly agrees with the point Julliard makes. He elaborates on it by proposing that the functions of the social worker and the functions of the police officer are subsets of a broader and more comprehensive social function that Foucault names as *surveiller et corriger* (surveillance and correction, anticipating the title of *Surveiller et Punir* which Foucault will publish three years later). Correction, in turn, has two parts: punishing and educating. Those who perform this broader social function named as *surveiller et corriger* include, besides social workers and police officers, priests, psychiatrists, and teachers. A recurring theme in Foucault's thought is that in the modern world psychology and medicine have replaced religion; psychiatrists have replaced priests. What used to be called sin is now called sickness. The medieval alliance of religion and nobility has become an alliance of medicine and law. A young person whose fate it is to be born in *banlieues* of Paris where the *plèbe non prolétarienne* resides will almost inevitably end up either before a judge or before a psychiatrist. It does not greatly matter which. The function of both is *surveiller et corriger*. The similarities between life in prison and life in a mental hospital are greater than the differences. Nor is being in school much different from being in a jail or in an asylum. The teacher too has inherited the function of the priest of yesteryear, *de maintien de l'ordre* in the words of Juillard, *surveiller et corriger* in the words of Foucault. The significance of the proliferation of social workers in the world's great cities, according to Foucault, is that political power has lost confidence in priests and teachers. It prefers to have agents more directly under its control.

Vilorio, as I read him, does not see the urban *Lumpen* through Foucault's Nietzschean lenses, but rather through Durkheimian lenses. For Vilorio the integration into society of those who are now marginal would be desirable if it could be achieved. If we could somehow revive the best of the self-regulation of primitive communities, replacing atomistic individualism with norms of reciprocity and mutual obligation, fueling cooperation and solidarity by appealing to the deepest sentiments of a species that has lived in small tribal groups of hunters and gatherers for the bulk of the time it has existed on the planet; if we could only revive the best of the regulation of social democracy, if we could revive faith in *l'homme* and in the universal declarations of human rights, including the now standardly accepted universal right to cultural and individual diversity, if this time around we could make economic and social democracy work, and deepen it, and thus achieve ever higher levels of inclusion and equity; then

such a devoutly to be desired synthesis of primitive self-regulation and modern regulation would save us from the *dérégulation* that is now turning the world's great urban conglomerations into hell on earth. I take some such proposal to bring the lost sheep back into the fold to be Vilorio's subtext. I agree with it. That is I agree with what I think I discern reading between the lines of Vilorio's remarks. At earlier stages of his career Foucault would have agreed with Vilorio too, or at least with parts of Vilorio's apparently Durkheimian line of thinking, or at least with parts of it suitably rephrased. In 1972 Foucault will have none of it.

In the short tumultuous years between 1969 and 1972 Foucault became a professor at the Collège de France, which meant that he would be highly paid for the rest of his life to study the history of systems of thought, while teaching twelve classes each year to report on his results. He also became a revolutionary. The same philosopher who had devoted himself to refuting the revolutionary philosophy of Jean-Paul Sartre now worked together with him. (Eribon 1989, e.g. pp. 295-7). I have to qualify something I said before, in case anybody remembers it: I said that when Sartre and Foucault marched together in demonstrations Sartre was being a general intellectual and Foucault was being a specific intellectual (to use Foucault's terms); I said they were doing the same things for different reasons. What I said before was true enough for later years. But In 1972 it appeared for a time that there was not only practical collaboration between the two of them but also theoretical convergence.

Some of Foucault's new ideas were published in Sartre's journal Les Temps Modernes in a collaborative exchange with two underground Maoists, writing under pseudonyms. The Maoists were living a clandestine life because warrants had been issued for their arrest. (Foucault 1972B) Foucault reinterpreted his own past. Histoire de la Folie now became a study of the exclusion of a particular kind of oppressed person, the person stigmatized as mentally ill. It was the beginning of a general project of studying all the rejected, all the exclusions. (Foucault 1971C p. 184) Foucault appeared to accept a working definition of oppression offered by another speaker at the round table organized by Esprit on the role of social workers in the projects. Oppression is either exploitation or surveillance or both. (Foucault 1972A, p. 338) Typically the workers suffered exploitation, while *le plèbe non prolétarienne* suffered surveillance. What potentially united them in the cause of the revolution was that they were all oppressed; as were also the homosexuals, the so-called mentally ill, the students, and just about everybody.

La Naissance de la Clinique which he had backed away from and apologized for in 1969, became by 1971 a good example of Marxist sociological analysis. (Foucault 1971) Regarding Les Mots et les Choses, Foucault came to agree with the main point Sartre had made in his critique of it: the book leaves the reader in suspense; it does not offer an account of the social practices that produced the shift from the classical to the modern episteme. (Foucault 1971A p. 162) (Foucault had already implied in the book itself, and had already stated explicitly in the preface to its English translation, that Les Mots et les Choses was not a book that tried to discern causal relationships; what was new was that now he considered this absence to be a gap that needed to be filled.) Foucault is still an anti-humanist, but whereas in 1966 toward the end of Les Mots et les Choses anti-humanism meant laughing at revolutionary projects because of the absurdity of the very idea of liberating humanity from its chains, in 1972 humanism is identified

with the reformists, than whom nobody is more contemptible. (Foucault 1971E) In contrast, for the Foucault of 1972 anti-humanism is the philosophy of the revolution.

After some Maoist activists, including Foucault's intimate personal friend Daniel Defert, had suffered the realities of imprisonment, Foucault became the principal leader of an activist group, the G.I.P., Prison Information Group. It was dedicated to making the French public aware of those realities. But the volunteers who formed the Prison Information Group were not prisoners and they did not pretend to speak for the prisoners. Their project was to facilitate bringing to the ears of the public the voices of the prisoners themselves, and the voices of others affected by the imprisonment such as those who came to visit them in jail. Foucault had come to accept Gilles Deleuze's principle that nobody should speak for anybody else. Every Saturday Foucault stood at the gates of a prison gathering testimony from those who went in and out. Referring to the work of the G.I.P. Foucault wrote: "We want to attack the institution just at the point where it become incarnate in an ideology so simple and fundamental as the notions of good and bad, innocence and guilt. We want to change the lived ideology through the dense institutional layers in which it is invested, crystallized, reproduced. To simplify, humanism consists of wanting to change the ideology without changing the institution; reformism of changing the institution without touching the ideological system. Revolutionary action defines itself on the contrary as simultaneously shaking the consciousness and the institution." (Foucault 1971E, p. 231) In lines like those I have just quoted Foucault made it clear that now he wanted to be identified as a revolutionary.

In May of 1971 the first brochure issued by the Prison Information Group appeared. Its title: Intolérable. On its back cover it declared: "Intolerable are:

- the courts
- the police
- the hospitals, the asylums
- the school, military service
- the press, television
- the State." (Eribon 1989, p. 237)

Notice that although Foucault now calls himself a revolutionary, capitalism does not make this particular short list of institutions that are intolerable.

In a 1971 interview with four French secondary school students in which Foucault played the part of the interviewer, Foucault began the interview by asking his young interviewees which form of oppression they found most intolerable: that of their parents, that of their teachers, that of the police, or that of the media. (Foucault 1971E, p. 223)

If I had been present at that interview in 1971, I could not have resisted the temptation to follow up Foucault's question to the students with some questions for Foucault: Are you putting us on? Are you the Foucault whose nickname is "le Fuchs" ("the fox"), of whom Georges Dumèzil, who knew you better than anybody, said you were always wearing a mask and were always changing masks? (Eribon 1989, p. 13) Are you the same Michel Foucault who a decade ago in Uppsala used to dress up as a chauffer to drive your own Jaguar with a lady friend in the back seat as if she were rich and you were poor (Id. p. 100), now playing the game of the ultra-radical more radical than all the radicals in the radical atmosphere of Paris in 1971? I would ask the same questions regarding the previously mentioned dialogues with French Maoists published in Jean-Paul Sartre's journal Les Temps Modernes in which Foucault suggests that a court,

any court, is a deformation of justice standing between the people and its enemies. (Foucault 1972B p.356) Michael Walzer has pointed out that many of the views expressed by Foucault in interviews in the early 1970s were absurd: “To abolish power systems is to abolish both moral and scientific categories: away with them all!” (Walzer 1986, p. 61) I am suggesting that Foucault was smart enough to have known at the time that they were absurd.

The round table convened by the editors of *Esprit* in 1972 posed an important question: how could the marginalized poor and the traditional proletariat become political allies? To this question Foucault had an answer. Teach them that “power” is their common enemy. (Foucault 1972A, pp. 335-36) From Foucault’s works one might derive a similar question: How can the majority consisting of the sum total of all the different kinds of people who are marginalized in one way or another become aware that it is a majority? To this similar question Foucault suggests the same answer: Teach them that “power” is their common enemy. Power is the general enemy. It is the logical basis of the alliance of all the oppressed. Foucault would be to Marx as Einstein is to Newton because resisting oppression by economic power is a subset of resisting oppression by power, as Newton’s mechanics is a subset of Einstein’s general theory.

Foucault as activist put into practice the teachings suggested by Foucault as theorist. When he wrote the Manifesto for the Prison Information Group he put as the first two sentences: “Not one of us is sure of escaping imprisonment. Today less than ever.” (Foucault 1971B, p. 174) These words embody a revolutionary strategy. Convince the masses that the cause of the marginals is their own cause. Anybody can be sent to jail. Anybody can be diagnosed as insane and confined to a mental hospital. Although one might not share the orientation of any given sexual minority, in the majority of cases one’s own sexual practices would be considered immoral by somebody, and therefore the cause of sexual freedom is the cause of the majority.

Even before Foucault cast power in the role of general enemy, power had been groomed for the role because it had played a somewhat similar role in the past. Whatever else “power” (*le pouvoir*) denoted, power was the entity that had re-established itself by putting down the revolts in France in 1848, in 1870, in 1940, and now again in 1968. (Foucault and Deleuze 1972, p. 308) It tended to be the word that named whatever put down popular revolts anywhere; so that if the revolt was successful one said the people won; if the revolt failed one said power won. There are two other words that appear in the discourse of Foucault and his friends in the early 1970s that are sometimes taken to be synonyms of *le pouvoir* and used interchangeably with it. They are *le bourgeoisie* and *le capitalisme*. (e.g. Foucault 1970A, p 120; 1971C pp. 191-2; Foucault 1972A p. 336) Choosing “power” instead of one of the other two carried with it the choice of a conceptual framework.

Gilles Deleuze elaborated an anti-power conceptual framework at the level of a critique of metaphysics and epistemology. (Deleuze 1969A, 1969B) Foucault enthusiastically endorsed it. (Foucault 1970C) Let me now try to evoke the image of traditional metaphysics that Deleuze and Foucault attacked: Traditional metaphysics, revived in a new form in the twentieth century by Martin Heidegger, had organized knowledge in categories. At the root of all the categories was the concept of being. Being was substance. Being was logos. Being was God. Traditional metaphysics extracted from logic the idea that before anything could be said, there had to be a concept of what it was

to be. Once a concept of to be was established, order, and therefore oppression was also established. Deleuze, following Nietzsche and followed by Foucault, denied that knowledge required any concept of order. Non-being, not being; diversity, not unity; difference, not sameness; was the root of the scientific concept. Thus philosophy the way Deleuze and Foucault do it contributes to social equality. For example, a philosophy that puts all linguistic events on the same level, without hierarchy, implies that black English is no better and no worse than standard American English. (Deleuze 1986, p. 15) The general enemy was power. The general philosophical strategy of the revolution was to dismantle the conceptual tools for imposing oppression that power over the centuries had fashioned. Foucault wrote in the course of praising Deleuze: "...to liberate difference, it is necessary to invent a thinking without categories." (Foucault 1970C, p.34). Deleuze wrote in the course of praising Foucault: "Foucault's book [he refers to L'Archéologie du Savoir] represents the most decisive step toward a theory and practice of multiplicity." (Deleuze 1986, p. 23.)

Following consistently this line of thought, Foucault suggests that some people found his inaugural lecture at the Collège de France troubling, "...perhaps because I am hostile to any institution whatever." (Foucault 1971A p. 173) It was not a matter of building continually better institutions to replace the defective and in principle improvable institutions humanity now has. It was a matter of resisting power. Since power takes the form of institutions, it was a matter of resisting institutions in general. Similarly, it was not a matter of changing the rules of a given culture in order to live life according to a better set of rules; it was a matter of breaking down the exclusions that distinguish the good people, the ones who follow the rules, from the bad people, the ones who do not. Foucault now endorses whatever is *transgressif* (transgressive). (Foucault 1970A p. 120; Foucault 1971D p. 206) Foucault said in an interview: "Intellectuals often make an image of the working class as having the same humanist values as the bourgeoisie. But that is not true. If you look closely at the working class, you will see in the end that it is anti-law (*illégaliste*). It is against law, because law has always been made against it." (Foucault 1973, p 422) Rules in general and not just any particular set of rules are to be resisted. "It is good —and here is true theater—..." to transcend the bourgeois way of life, "...in the mode of play, playfully and ironically; it is good to be dirty and bearded, to wear long hair, to look like a girl when you are a boy (and vice-versa)." (Foucault 1971C p. 193)

When asked what values he would propose to replace humanism and the existing system, Foucault once replied that humanism had to be fought with a "...cultural attack: the suppression of taboos, the suppression of limitations on sexual sharing, the practice of communitarian existence, the removal of inhibitions with respect to drugs; the break with all the interdictions and closures by which normative individuality is constituted and guided." (Foucault 1971E, p. 227)

Although part of the rationale for Foucault's concept of power as the general enemy was that it was a conceptual umbrella broad enough to be the ideology of an alliance among the workers, the homosexuals, other kinds of sexual minorities, the prison inmates, the students, the children, those society judges as insane, and all oppressed people, it followed from his analysis that the existing organizations of the French working class were conservative and anti-revolutionary. The labor unions were conservative. The Communist Party was conservative. (Foucault 1971C, pp. 187-88)

Indeed it follows from Foucault's choices about how to talk and how to see (I am talking now, not Foucault) that not only is the Communist Party conservative, but any political party is necessarily conservative. Any political party must seek votes among normal adults. We know from psychological research, from sociological research, and from common everyday experience that the majority adheres to conventional morality. It tends to defend law and order as it is constituted, however it may be constituted at any given time and place.

So much for a brief introduction to what is usually called Foucault's brief radical period in the early 1970s. Next time we will look at Foucault's rather rapid transmutation into becoming one of the most important intellectual leaders of the wave of anti-Marxism that swept through French universities in the middle and late 1970s.