

“Against Foucault” Early Foucault Part Four

Howard Richards

Howard Richards presented this text on 8th 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 at the end apply also to Parts One, Two, and Three.

Remark 15: The terrifying truth is that many human beings are rejected by the labor market, and that most of those who are accepted are accepted only provisionally. Having evolved as gatherers and hunters over several hundred thousand years to live in small tribal groups organized by kinship ties, we find ourselves in successor states of the Roman Empire, where the principle of *dominus* implies that every physical thing is under the control of one juridical subject or another, leaving those who do not control any place with no place to sleep; and where the principles of commerce imply that unless there is a contract nobody owes anybody anything. These facts are consequences of the constitutive rules of modernity – the rules of our kind of society, the kind the legal historian Sir Henry Maine describes as having achieved the transition from being a traditional society based on status to being a modern society based on contract. Employment is a contract. Those who do not own enough property to live without working need employment, but like any contract employment requires another party. That other party may and may not be found. As John Maynard Keynes showed, normally there will be more work-needers than work-providers. Keynes wrote his theory in 1936, but in Europe ever since the dawn of modernity (and even previously in some civilizations with similar institutions, such as the imperial Rome from whose laws modern laws mainly derive) there has existed the phenomenon of surplus population. The phenomenon is not a function of the ratio of number of people to quantity of land; it is a function of supply of people to demand for people. It can be and has been modified by charitable and socialistic measures; hopefully in some sweet future day it will not occur. Now it does occur; it has for several centuries, and it has ramifications throughout the social order in many forms, including sending surplus people to colonies, sending them to jail, keeping them in various kinds of asylums, enlisting them in the army, having them go to school year after year; and it has ramifications of many other forms concerning which details are given by many writers among whom Michel Foucault is one; Michel Foucault stumbled onto the phenomenon of surplus population (Foucault 1961, chapter two) when he encountered *le grand renfermement* of the 17th century, the great locking up in hospitals of fools along with surplus people of all kinds, as he was in the process of using history to save psychology from positivism; and it has not only ramifications but also analogues; it goes together with parallel forms of alienation growing from the same roots; because, remember, the rejection of people by the labor market is only an example, not the root source of all the market-generated hypermodern *Unsicherheit* that spreads everywhere uncertainty, insecurity, and isolation. (Bauman 2001) We live in a world so disconnected that almost everyone, at one point in time or another, suspects himself or herself of being crazy; where almost everyone can relate to the feelings of Roquentin, the protagonist of Jean-

Paul Sartre's novel *La Nausée*, for whom everything, the trees, the buildings, the streets was *de trop*, too much, unnecessary. Nature contradicts culture. By natural processes people are born; they emerge into the light from the wombs of women. But it is culture, largely through its principal institution, the market, which threshes out the difference between those who are wanted and those who are unwelcome. Foucault stumbled across the phenomenon of surplus population in his history of madness in early modern times. He was not looking for it. He was writing a polemic against positivism designed to redeem social outcasts, to promote respect for deviant individuals, and to deflate the pseudo-scientific pretensions of knowledge-based power trips. He discovered that the history of lunacy was part of the history of surplus population. In the *grand renfermement* of the mid seventeenth century hospitals were created to put out of the way and to care for all the people whom society did not know what to do with: people who refused to go to mass, blasphemers, invalids, indigents, mentally retarded people, people who walked the streets talking to themselves, troublemakers, old people with no family to support them, dangerous people given to rages, people who denied Christ or thought they were Christ The result was similar whether they were deranged and impoverished because they were socially rejected, or whether they were socially rejected because they were deranged and impoverished. In either case France had a surplus population. A royal decree of 27 April 1656 founded a General Hospital charged with preventing "... begging and laziness as the sources of all disorders." (Foucault 1961, p. 90) In England and Germany and elsewhere in Europe there were workhouses and poorhouses with a similarly catholic clientele. We do not read in *Histoire de la Folie* anything about what was happening in Asia, Africa, Latin America or the Middle East in the mid-17th century. Those places were, as we learn from Braudel, Wallerstein, and others who fill in parts of the picture Foucault does not paint, at that time still places where modern economic relations had not yet arrived. Having written a history of stigmatism and separation in the particular case of madness, and having shown how the histories of psychiatry and of medicine as sciences are interwoven with the history of institutions, Foucault might have written, as his next book, a history of class-divided societies in general. Instead he began a book about someone in many ways similar to himself – someone who never had to do manual labor; somebody who suffered from bouts of madness and suicide attempts (Eribon 1989 p. 43-44), who had indeed been treated by the famous psychiatrist Pierre Janet, who was however in that respect unlike Foucault because Foucault on Louis Althusser's advice declined to seek psychiatric treatment (Eribon 1989, p. 50); a homosexual; a writer; a sensualist; someone who meditated at length on the relation of death to language; someone who prolonged his life beyond his life by his writing. Janet in his book *Angoisse et Exstase* had described his patient Raymond Roussel as "a poor little sick man." In his book on Roussel Foucault shows (once again deflating the pretensions of psychiatry) that *folie*, madness, is admittedly and declaredly *absence d'oeuvre*, absence of work; it appears to be useless, but it is akin to great art. He shows that the same discourse can be madness or literature, in Roussel's case madness during the period of his life and literature in a later period. (Foucault 1969A p. 605) I want Foucault to be right in honoring Roussel, because I want it to be true that through writing works of fiction, sometimes closely allied to madness – always closely allied to dreaming and to playing – humans can create alternative worlds, which can then influence and hopefully improve the existing *status quo*. I agree with Herbert

Marcuse and with Johan Galtung that to change the world empirical social science devoted to the study of what happens, needs to be complemented by other methodologies that focus on what might happen, what is possible, what could be imagined. Otherwise humanity has no hope of transcending the tragic social reality in which it has, for now, trapped itself. When I read Claude Levi-Strauss's account of totemism, in which he depicts Australian aborigines as snobs who construct elaborate genealogies *non motivés* that achieve no objective and serve no discernible function; I attribute to the aborigines' prolific exercise of their symbolic capacities enormous long run survival value. *Homo ludens* lives in stories. From taking pleasure in making up stories for no reason at all have come all the sciences and all the civilizations. Pierre Machery, in his Presentation to a reprinting of Foucault's Raymond Roussel encourages me to believe what I want to believe about the causal powers of imagination and about Foucault: "At first glance," writes Machery, "one might be tempted to consider that Foucault then applied his notion of experience, elaborated at the junction of philosophic discourse and history, to the study of literary texts. But, if one reflects attentively, one will perceive that in fact it is the contrary that must have been the case. Literature was without doubt for him the privileged place where he elaborated on the status of experience, considered as such, and starting from which he was able to think – based in a way on a literary model – other 'experiences' such as those of exclusion, of knowledge, of punishment, or of sexuality." (Machery in Foucault 1963A, p. ix) Roussel, an admirer of Jules Verne and a precursor of Alain Robbe-Grillet, structured bizarre experiences that do not happen. For example, concerning Roussel's La Vue, Foucault writes, "The View, as an immediate contradiction to its title, opens onto a universe without perspective. Or perhaps it combines the vertical point of view (which makes it possible to embrace everything as in a circle) and the horizontal point of view (which places the eye at ground level and only allows the foreground to be seen)." (Foucault 1963A, p. 138) Foucault's account of Roussel begins in the first chapter and ends in the last chapter with Roussel's suicide, representing his suicide as the end toward which his literary activity was tending; in language reminiscent of Heidegger's notion that human being is being-towards-death (Heidegger 1927 pp. 235-267); and also reminiscent of young Foucault's own attempts at suicide. Roussel staged his own death, elaborately contrived and passionately desired, in a hotel room in Palermo, where he had gone to live alone in a state of constant drug-induced euphoria. Foucault seems to me to give away the secret of Roussel's suicide in words which confirm Emile Durkheim's empirical study of the subject, and which illustrate the terrible truth that in modern society many people are bonded to others by nothing more solid than contracts, and in the absence of contracts by nothing at all. I think my Durkheimian reading of the following words of Foucault about Roussel will be understood by those who acknowledge that in modern society the alienation of the rich is of a piece with the alienation of the poor; and by those who agree with me that Roquentin in Sartre's La Nausée was projecting onto the world around him his own sense that he was unwanted and unnecessary; and that his presumably leftwing (because his creator Sartre was leftwing) boredom with middle-class life in Mudville reflected its Weberian disenchantment, its Polanyian disembeddedness; and that the same terrifying truths are perceived from a different perspective when the rightwinger Heidegger writes of *das Man* and the rightwinger T.S. Eliot writes "The crowds crossing over London Bridge so many/ I had not thought that death had destroyed so many." Foucault on Roussel: "Roussel at

the time when he was writing his first book experienced a feeling of universal glory. Not an exasperated desire to be a celebrity, but a physical confirmation: '[quoting Roussel] What I was writing was surrounded by rays of sunlight. Every line was repeated with thousands of copies, and I wrote with thousands of flaming penpoints.' When the book was published [and turned out to be a failure] all the doubled suns were extinguished; the flaming words drowned in black ink; and all around Roussel the language which scintillated in the depths of his least syllable like marvelous waters dissolved into a faceless world. '[quoting Roussel again] When the young man with great emotion walked out onto the street and realized that nobody noticed as he walked by, the feelings of glory and luminosity were quickly extinguished.' It was the night of melancholy; and nevertheless that light continued to burn near and distant (as at the heart of a darkness that abolished distances and made them unattainable), troubling and imperceptible in a mistake in which all his work was lodged; it was there also that there was born his decision to die, in order to rejoin in one bond that marvelous point, that heart of the night and threshold of light.'" (Foucault 1963A, p. 199) In short, a simple story: a man who wanted love and did not get it. A classic Durkheimian suicide. Because I want a world in which the terrifying truth is not true, I want to retain from Foucault on Roussel the suggestion (which I will not say is Foucault's suggestion because he hedges it with qualifications that do not appear when I quote him partially) that language has the power to create new realities. I find that suggestion in passages like this: "There is no system common to existence and language; for a simple reason; it is because language, and it alone, forms the system of existence." (Foucault 1963A, p. 203, cf. pp. 69, 74, 85, 137, 142, 171, 209-10) Foucault developed similar notions of self-referential languages creating their own worlds in two articles also published in 1963, one in Critique (Foucault 1963B) and one in Tel Quel (Foucault 1963C). I take Machery in his Presentation to be saying that Foucault discovered the capacity of language to create experience in fiction, and then found that capacity to be operative in history. (If we now relax the rule that we are not allowed to consider what Foucault later said about his book on Roussel, we will find that although Machery's thesis is a plausible one, and one perhaps not incompatible with accounts that emphasize the importance of Nietzsche or of music for the genesis of Foucault's early methodology (e.g. Eribon 1989, p. 89) it is not one endorsed by the late Foucault. Foucault later said that his youthful passion for Roussel was a summer love that did not lead anywhere, while characterizing the methodology he adopted in L'Histoire de la Folie as defined by a "rupture" with phenomenology and Marxism that was sparked by a series of influences, more influences than he mentioned to the reporter from Le Monde at the time and only some of them literary. (Foucault 1983A)

Remark 16: In saying that humanity has trapped itself in a tragic social reality, because its dominant constitutive rules do so much harm at the same time as they do so much good, and because they so fiercely resist change, I do not want to get sidetracked onto the question whether modernity is good or bad; or onto questions about whether our time and our place are better or worse than other times and other places. I do not want to make wholesale value judgments, nor do I want to tell people what ought to be their mood. I want to help people solve problems. I call attention to modernity's basic cultural

structures because I think solving humanity's main problems requires consciously revising them.

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* The book Foucault preferred to forget was a manual for the study of psychology featuring praise of Soviet psychology, written under the direction of his then supervising professor Louis Althusser. His preference for forgetting it was shown, for example, in an interview with Gerard Raulet in the 1970s when he called Histoire de la Folie "my first book." (Foucault 1994 p. 114)

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