On Foucault

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Describing Foucault

Reading Foucault is like reading Durkheim and Levi-Strauss. Foucault, of course, would have resented the comparison, for while he denied human agency as did Levi-Strauss and could therefore fall into the structuralist mold the early beginnings of which could be traced to Durkheim, he thought himself unique and untraceable to any origins, not even to the Marxist Althusser who was his teacher.

And Foucault, unlike Durkheim and Levi-Strauss, did pepper his works with plenty of concrete and palpable evidences of his theories. However, my view is that his mind worked in much the same way as theirs did: it was, even as it cited volumes of evidences, several times removed from such material, in an idealist sphere that sought to disconnect the threads between the reality of these materials. In Durkheim as in Levi-Strauss, the pretense was to sew them together; in Foucault, the pretense is done away with altogether, consciously and deliberately.

Foucault's concepts start with the episteme, a term he abandoned after **Archeology of Knowledge** and replaced with "discourse." However, I prefer to start with it, as it remains necessary to an understanding of his thought. Western knowledge, to Foucault, was cut up into four epistemes that started in the sixteenth century: Renaissance, Classical, Modern, and Post-Modern. Each was not related to the other, but contained its own discourse, or, in Christopher Tilley's terms, "sets of self-sufficient representations, i.e. they are not simply effects of underlying social or economic processes."

The "process of digging down to reveal [what] underlies discursive practices" Foucault called "archeology." The metaphor "archeology" suggested, aside from digging down, "uncovering concealed layers, letting archival fragments stand for the whole, reconstructing that which has been forgotten." What happens, therefore, is that instead of historiography, which is concerned with origins, continuities and teleology, we find "fundamental ruptures and discontinuities." "Instead of the coherences of processes, Foucault has the dispersions of events."[1]

In **Discipline and Punish**, however, Foucault shifts to the terms "genealogy." Here he is "now prepared to recognize longer-term continuities as well as transformations in Western culture." History has now become "a more complex web of continuities and discontinuities," for "the abandonment of the 'episteme' no longer requires him to regard historical differences in various phases as so profound there is no point of contact." He constructs genealogies, therefore, "seeking out the discontinuous in the continuous, what appears to be a directional 'flow' of meaning and social practice."[1]

Nevertheless there is no contraction between Foucault's "archeologies" and "genealogies." As Tilley states, an "archeological" study is necessary for a genealogical analysis. "While archeology is a descriptive analysis concerned with what statements are

actually made, genealogy is a critical analysis of the social conditions of existence of these statements, their relationship to power."[1]

Genealogy, according to Tilley, "questions the political status of meaning and discourse in relation to power."[1]

Discipline and Punish is a demonstration of a genealogical construction. It starts with an incident in Paris in 1757, on March 2 to be exact. The regicide Damiens' punishment is quoted by Foucault from historical records in all its gory detail: he is "conveyed in a cart, wearing nothing but a shirt, holding a torch of burning wax weighing two pounds;" "the flesh will be torn from his breasts, arms, thighs and calves with red-hot pincers, his right hand, holding the knife with which he committed the …parricide, burnt with sulphur, and, on those places where the flesh will be torn away, poured molten lead, boiling oil, burning resin, wax and sulphur melted together and then his body drawn and quartered by four horses and his limbs and body consumed by fire, reduced to ashes and his ashes thrown to the winds."[2]

However, Foucault adds, the four horses were not enough to quarter the body, and so two more had to be added, to no avail; therefore, finally, "they were forced, in order to cut off the wretch's thighs, to sever the sinews and hack at the joints…"[2]

Two more pages of detailed description of the ordeal worthy of the best in magic realism ensue. Eighty years later, Foucault writes, "Leon Faucher drew up his rules 'for the house of young prisoners in Paris,' these rules consisting of a minute-by-minute schedule of rising, prayer, work, meal, school, supper and recreation.[2]

Foucault concludes:

> We have, then, a public execution and a time-table. They do not punish the same crimes or the same type of delinquent. But they each define a certain penal style. Less than a century separates them. xxx
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> Among so many changes, I shall consider one: the disappearance of torture as a public spectacle. xxx
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> The disappearance of public executions marks therefore the decline of the spectacle; but it also marks a slackening of the hold on the body. xxx
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> Beneath the increasing leniency of punishment…one may map a displacement of its point of application; and through this displacement, a whole field of recent objects, a whole new systm of truth and a mass of roles hitherto unknown in the exercise of criminal justice. A corpus of knowledge, techniques, 'scientific' discourses is formed and becomes entangled with the practice of the power to punish.[2]

In short, Foucault's point, as summarized by Foucault for Beginners, is, "Careful control of every aspect of a life can represent a more complete exercise of power than the massive display of a death."[3]

Foucault's main metaphor for disciplinary power is the Panopticon, an architectural mechanism devised by Jeremy Bentham, whose life spanned the 18th and 19th centuries:

> …At the periphery, an annular building; at the center, a tower; this tower is pierced with wide windows that open onto the inner side of the ring; the peripheric building is divided into cells, each of which extends the whole width of the building; they have two windows, one on the inside, corresponding to the windows of the tower; the other, on the outside, allows the light to cross the cell from one end to the other. All that is needed, then, is to place a supervisor in a central tower and to shut up in each cell a madman, patient, a condemned man, a worker or a schoolboy. By the effect of backlighting, one can observe from the tower, standing out precisely against the light, the small captive shadows in the cells of the periphery. They are like so many cages, so many small theatres, in which each actor is alone, perfectly individualized and constantly visible. The panoptic mechanism arranges spatial unities that make it possible to see constantly and to recognize immediately. In short, it reverses the principle of the dungeon; or rather of its three functions – to enclose, to deprive of light and to hide – it preserves only the first and eliminates the other two. Full lighting and the eye of a supervisor capture better than darkness, which ultimately protected. Visibility is a trap.[2]

As the Panopticon and Foucault's description of it illustrates, power is the central concept studied by Foucault in his genealogies. Tilley aptly portrays this concern thus:

> In the emerging industrial societies of the capitalist West disciplinary procedures and surveillance of the population provide the primary modes of social subjection. The prison is merely the most visual and obvious manifestation of this new focus of power, a microcosm of all institutional forms. Discipline creates subjects of everyone. Power does not just operate on a few tortured bodies to serve as an example but radiates throughout the entire social fabric, creating subjects and simultaneously subjecting. As power spreads throughout the social field it simultaneously becomes more anonymous and less visible. Discipline is located and exercised in a wide variety of institutions: factories, schools, hospitals, university departments of archeology, military organizations, to name but a few. This discipline creates subjects by providing procedures for the training or coercing of people through hierarchical observation, the normalizing judgment (of, for example, the teacher or the social worker), and the examination involving the compilation of documents and the constitution of case histories. Surveillance takes place in the workplace, increasingly separated from the home, and through the systematic collection and organization of information that can be stored and used to monitor populations. The factor-based labour process renders bodily behaviour-routine, repetitive, subject to codifiable rules and accessible to surveillance and calculation. The factory's logic is thus political rather than purely economic. It is simply more efficient in terms of an economy of power, as is incarceration as opposed to the public spectacle of torture.[1]

As with prison, so with sexuality. "Power-knowledge strategies," Tilley writes, "create a discourse on sexuality, permitting an object to emerge which may then be utilized as an instrument of subjectification and domination." It is not sexuality that creates power. "Instead, **The History of Sexuality** argues," according to Tilley, "power creates

sexuality. The power relation has been productive of an ever-increasing discourse and knowledge of sexuality extending, intensifying and elaborating its forms and practices."[1]

Foucault goes further in **The Use of Pleasure** by analyzing "the manner in which individuals turn themselves into subjects." Going back to fourth-century BC Greek texts, Foucault calls "the process of self-imposed subjectification 'techniques of the self.'" Tilley defines such techniques as "means by which agents affect their bodies, souls, thoughts and conduct[,] hence transforming themselves." In the Greek texts, Tilley recounts:

> Sexuality was problematized as a moral matter associated with a need for moderation and austere conduct, and sexuality was intimately linked with three main arts or techniques of living: dietetics (the subject's relation to his or her body involving diet, exercise and the risks and pleasures associated with sexual activity); economics (the conduct of the head of the household); and erotics (the relationship between men and boys). All these formed areas through which the conduct of the self could be conceptualized. For example, in the realm of dietetics, the food one ate depended on (i) the activities engaged in during the day and their serial arrangement, and (ii) the relation of the self to an external world over which one had no control: the climate, seasons, the hour of day, degree of humidity and dryness, heat and cold, directions of the winds, regional geography and the layout of a city. In winter conduct of the self should have a drying and warming effect, hence one should eat roasted rather than boiled meats, whole-wheat bread, dry vegetables accompanied by numerous vigorous exercises and more frequent sex. All these aspects of conduct of the self would have warming effects, whereas in the summer sex should be reduced to a minimum, diet consist of barley cakes and boiled or raw vegetables and exercise should be limited – all to produce cooling and moistening effects.

With this description of Foucault, drawn due to lack of time and resources mainly from second-hand sources, I would like to venture into a critique of his thought.

Problematizing Foucault

As one arrives at Foucault's discourse with the Greek texts, one begins to wonder what kind of a society would be suitable to Foucault: if all manner of discipline is control and ensues from power and the prerogative to knowledge, what is to bind individuals together in society?

In this regard, Foucault's other description of the Panopticon is instructive:

> It is an important mechanism, for it automizes and disindividualizes power. Power has its principle not so much in a person as in a certain concerted distribution of bodies, surfaces, lights, gazes; in an arrangement whose internal mechanisms produce the relation in which individuals are caught up. The ceremonies, the rituals, the marks by which the sovereign's power was manifested are useless. There is a machinery that assures dissymmetry, disequilibrium, difference. Consequently, it does not matter who exercises power. Any individual, taken at random, can operate the machine: in the absence of the

director, his family, his friends, his visitors, even his servants. Similarly, it does not matter what motive animates him; the curiosity of the indiscreet, the malice of a child, the thirst for knowledge of a philosopher who wishes to visit this museum of human nature, or the perversity of those who take pleasure in spying and punishing. The more numerous those anonymous and temporary observers are, the greater the risk for the inmate of being surprised and the greater his anxious awareness of being observed. The Panopticon is a marvelous machine which, whatever use one may wish to put it to, produces homogeneous effects of power.

But why the anxiety, if the voyeurism in this case is only temporary? Who could this consenting inmate be, that his paranoia is so great? For in the larger context, and as intimated by his study of the Greek texts, the Inmate would be a consenting adult, voluntarily submitting him/herself to social control.

And then again, *any* individual? But what would the significance of such an act be, especially if it is temporary, and at random? What does it matter that any individual can operate the machine? We already see that everyday, in our skewed democratic process, so by this time Foucault is already out of time, writing like the *Gazette d'Amsterdam* in 1757 about the regicide Damiens.

Here, to my mind, lies the weakness of Foucault. Denying the distinction and dialectics between economics and culture, the individual and society, and the forces of production and relations of production, he invariably succumbs to the paranoia of the individual alone in his prison cell. Insisting on an ahistorical and perpetual struggle between a well-defined repression and an unfocused, even unnamed resistance, he eventually yields to what many have seen as nihilism.

In fact, Michel Foucault's personal history should be instructive as to the underpinnings of his theories. This included "a suicide attempt, a nervous breakdown, a short period of institutionalization, a police file, accusations of theft as a student and so on. …His gayness remained a source of potential scandal within conservative educational institutions." And he died of complications following his infection with HIV.[4]

I submit that while Foucault's methods of studying the past, as well as the present, may have some merit, it could be useful – but only if informed by a responsible Marxism, which earlier in his career Foucault eschewed, though in 1976 (fifteen years, as he kept on saying, after his first work, **Madness and Civilization**, came out) acknowledged at least some elements of, while still denying its main points, and I quote:

> …As long as a feudal type of society survived, the problems to which the theory of sovereignty was addressed were in effect confined to the general mechanisms of power, to the way in which its forms of existence at the higher level of society influenced its exercise at the lowest levels. xxx …The mode in which power was exercised could be defined in its essentials in terms of the relationship sovereign-subject. But in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, we have the production of an important phenomenon, the emergence, or rather the invention, of a new mechanism of power possessed of highly specific procedural techniques, completely novel instruments, quite different apparatuses, and which is also, I believe, absolutely incompatible with the relations of sovereignty.

This new mechanism of power is more dependent upon bodies and what they do upon the Earth and its products. It is a mechanism of power which permits time and labor, rather than wealth and commodities, to be extracted from bodies. It is a type of power which is constantly exercised by means of a system of levies or obligations distributed over time. It presupposes a tightly knit grid of material coercions rather than the physical existence of a sovereign. It is ultimately dependent upon the principle, which introduces a genuinely new economy of power, that one must be able simultaneously both to increase the subjected forces and to improve the force and efficacy of that which subjects them.

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This new type of power, which can no longer be formulated in terms of sovereignty, is, I believe, one of the great inventions of bourgeois society.[5]

Having read Foucault admitting the existence of feudalism and capitalism (or bourgeois society), I would expect that he could have gone further. But he does not. He merely reiterates the need to struggle against discipline:

If one wants to look for a non-disciplinary form of power, or rather, to struggle against disciplines and disciplinary power, it is not toward the ancient right of sovereignty that one should turn, but toward the possibility of a new form of right, one which must indeed be anti-disciplinarian, but at the same time liberated from the principle of sovereignty.[5]

Yet discipline, self-discipline, is the very mechanism by which society will grow out of the capitalist relations of production into a higher stage. The indicators Foucault has taken pains to document, to dig down into, are in fact the very indicators that show capitalist societies growing out of their constraints to a new and higher stage of production. It is this very discipline that will most likely lead to that where to each will be given according to his need.

I am aware, of course, of the current popular criticisms against the Marxist theory of social stages, as well as its concept of the economic base and superstructure. But in my cursory review of other theories, as well as this preliminary study of Foucault, I have not yet seen an adequate replacement for it, or any argument that has upset its main tenets. Polemics, yes, and contrasting, even antagonistic frameworks, yes; but bombs enough to blast the method of analysis, no. I would therefore still hold on to Marxism as the best methodology with which to analyze society, and, rather, blast Foucault for coming up with a lame alternative, an alternative that is bound to foster anarchy rather than break down the current structures of discipline and power.

References:

1 Christopher Tilley, "Michel Foucault: Towards an Archeology of Archeology."
2 Foucault, Michel. **Discipline and Punish**. NY: Vintage Books, 1995.
3 **Foucault for Beginners**.
4 Simon During, **Foucault and Literature**.
5 Michel Foucault, "Two Lectures (7 Jan 1976 and 14 Jan 1976)." **Culture/Power/History: A Reader in Contemporary Social History**. Ed.

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