Canadian Journal of Political and Social Theory / Revue canadienne de théorie politique et sociale, Volume XI, No. 3 (1987).

THE LIMIT OF HISTORIES: MICHEL FOUCAULT'S NOTION OF PARTAGE

Deborah Cook

The work of Michel Foucault is marked by much the same ruptures and discontinuities which Foucault claimed constituted history. Reading through his work from one end to the other leaves one with the distinct impression that Foucault simply failed to find a single method for the analysis of history. On the other hand, one might be led to believe that Foucault progressively modified his method and, "in the end," managed to unify his working hypotheses. Whatever one's conclusions, however, it might be of value to analyse what each of Foucault's works offers on its own in terms of such concerns as the problem of method. That Foucault *could* constantly reinterpret his working hypotheses, especially those in his earlier work, indicates perhaps that this work contains more insights than have been formulated in any of his explicit statements on the subject. In this paper, I wish to address one of the more important and methodologically interesting notions found in the *Histoire de la Folie à l'âge classique*: that of the *partage*. I shall also comment on the broader outlines of that history — more particularily, on the nature of the division between reason and unreason which results from the *partage*. Only when the specific contexts in which the *partage* makes its appearance are analysed and clarified is it possible to consider the broader methodological significance of the *partage* in the corpus of Foucault's work. At the end of the paper, I shall address some of the methodological issues raised by this notion.

Before I discuss the notion of *partage*, a few brief comments ought to be made about the differences between *Folie et Déraison: Histoire de la Folie à l'âge classique* — the first edition of the *Histoire* published by Plon[1] — and Gallimard's second edition: *Histoire de la Folie à l'âge classique*.[2] The corpus of these works remains unchanged with the exception of some very minor revisions. The first edition, however, contains a preface in which Foucault

describes the aim or intent of his history. This preface, which Derrida has criticised in "Cogito et Histoire de la Folie,"[3] does not appear at all in the second edition. One can only speculate on the reasons that led Foucault to suppress it. It is, for example, entirely possible that Derrida's criticism of *Folie et Déraison*, which focusses, though not exclusively, on some remarks Foucault made in his preface, so offended Foucault that he did not wish to see it published in the second edition. It is also possible that Foucault's own later criticism of this work in terms of its intent indicates that he believed his first statement of purpose to be inadequate. Because the preface is important for its description of the notion of *partage*, I shall make reference to it here.

A second difference between the two editions can be found in the addition of an appendix to the second edition. This appendix is entitled "La Folie, l'absence d'oeuvre" and was originally published in *La Table ronde* in May of 1964. In it, Foucault extends his analysis of madness in terms of the form of exclusion peculiar to the classical age. Subsequent reprintings of *Histoire de la Folie* do not contain this appendix. Once again, one may only speculate as to why this is the case. Since, however, the appendix is not crucial for an understanding of the *partage* nor for the characterisation of the particular form of exclusion exercised in the classical age, it will not be quoted in this paper.

The notion of *partage* which Foucault introduces to his historical account of madness in the classical age is qualified by a number of different terms in both the preface and the corpus of *Folie et Déraison*. It is the degree zero of history (*FD*, p. i), constitutive of history (*FD*, p. i), a caesura (*FD*, p. ii) and it lies on the confines of history (*FD*, p. iv). Throughout the text proper, it is used interchangeably with the term "*geste*" (gesture). Further, the word "*partage*" has, in French, two distinct meanings or usages. Both of these are found in Foucault's history. It has both the active sense of division or dividing and the passive sense of share or allotment. Used interchangeably with the notion of gesture, it is the active sense that prevails. The history of the classical age can be said to have begun with an anonymous act which separated the institutions, concepts and laws of the Renaissance from those of the classical age. The passive sense of *partage* can be found in the form of exclusion which results from the active gesture and is encapsulated in the classical age in the distinction between reason (*raison*) and unreason (*déraison*).

This view of history which ascribes it to the effect of a *partage* lying on the confines of history already assumes a number of traits which may be discovered in Foucault's later views of history. I shall briefly comment on them here, although I would also point out that there are differences in the later formulations that must be respected. First, the idea that history is constituted by a *partage*, or by an abrupt event or experience, already

anticipates Foucault's later thesis that history is discontinuous. "The classical experience of madness is born" (*HF*, p. 53). It emerges suddenly on the scene preceded by the *partage* which itself is preceded by nothing. An anonymous act lies at the origin of any historical period, and that period is not, therefore, explicable with reference to other events in previous histories. The anonymity of this gesture of division in the *Histoire de la Folie* is that gesture's more perplexing attribute. One may be able to describe the effects of the *partage* and have some, though not unequivocable, sense of its historical significance. Nevertheless, the *partage* itself, apart from its instantiation in the classical age, is not defined. What it does, however, is to force a radical break with the past.

The discontinuity which characterises Foucault's idea of history throughout his work is thus found from the beginning in his notion of *partage*. While a particular epoch may exhibit its own form of continuity, it is not part of some larger and universal History which would precede it and explain it. Foucault's histories begin with a discussion of the limits or *partages* that divide one age from another.

> One might write a history of *limits* — of those obscure gestures, necessarily forgotten as soon as they are accomplished, by means of which a culture rejects something that would be external to it; and all throughout its history, this hollowed void, this white space which isolates it, designates it as much as its values. For it receives and maintains its values in the continuity of history; but in that region of which we wish to speak, it exercises its essential choices, it creates the *partage* which gives it the face of its positivity; there one can find the originary thickness where it is formed. To interrogate a culture about its limit experiences, is to question it on the confines of history, on a rupture which is like the birth itself of its history (*FD*, pp. iii-iv).

Ruptures, confines, and limits lie at the outer edges of any age. History is, in Foucault's *Histoire de la Folie* and elsewhere, constituted in these limit experiences or events. In his later work, these limits become the limits of language and, later still, those of power and desire. Thus, the earlier anonymity of the *partage* gives way to a more positive qualification.

Another idea entailed by this notion of *partage* is that of *aléa*, chance or accident. The *Petit Robert* defines "*aléa*" as an unforseeable event, an unforeseeable turn that events might take — hasard. The *partage* is not something that can be predicted on the basis of prior events which might, otherwise, be assumed to have led up to it. It is neither determined nor the result of the choice of subjects with free will. Its emergence on the scene is as unpredictable as the roll of a dice. The *partage* is an event which can never be anticipated. Thus neither reason nor unreason could appear such as they

were without the entirely inexplicable gesture that constituted the classical age. In question, then, is the rationality of history and a rational origin for historical periods. It is this refusal to see the real as rational which plants Foucault squarely in the tradition of Nietzsche. Although the word "chance" is not used in *Histoire de la Folie*, it is clear that Foucault's later description of it in "Nietzsche, Geneology, History" is applicable to that earlier work. In this article on Nietzsche, Foucault approvingly quotes Nietzsche's view in *Die Morgenröte* that sees history as ". . . the iron hand of necessity shaking the dicebox of chance."[4]

The final point to be made about the notion of *partage*, which links it to Foucault's later work, concerns the problem of origin. It is here that Foucault's view of the *partage* stands in need of correctives if one wishes to correlate it with Foucault's later ideas. In the preface of Foucault's history, one reads:

> What is constitutive is the gesture that divides madness, and not the science which is established: this division [*partage*] which, once it is made, returns to the calm. What is originary is the caesura which establishes the distance between reason and unreason . . . It will therefore be necessary to speak of this primitive debate without supposing a victory nor a right to victory, to speak of those gestures regurgitated in history . . . , of these cutting gestures, of this distance taken (*FD*, pp. i-ii).

The problem with this notion of *partage* as origin has been well formulated by Jacques Derrida, who otherwise misreads Foucault. In "Cogito et Histoire de la Folie," Derrida writes: " . . . if this great division is the possibility itself of history, the historicity of history, what does 'writing the history of this *partage*' mean here?"[5] What is the nature of the origin Foucault posits with his notion of *partage*? In *L'Ordre du Discours*, where he links it with the will to truth and power and desire,[6] it is clear that Foucault means something historical by it. In *Histoire de la Folie*, however, the *partage* appears at once to lie outside of history as that which makes it possible and to be the result or effect of a *partage*. The ambiguity of that word with respect to its two senses is perhaps no more evident than here.

The ambiguity in Foucault's notion of *partage* as origin is a problem that is not resolved in the *Histoire de la Folie*. Can something that is constitutive of history itself be historical? If not, then one is confronted with a gesture that shares much in common with the creative and uncaused act of a divine being. In the beginning was the *partage*. On one interpretation, then, it would be the unmoved mover or uncaused cause of history. Apart from a few vague remarks on the relationship between the *partage* and history, Foucault does not define the status of that gesture that initiates

history. Only later, when he links the *partage* to power and desire, will one find a characterisation of its status as an historical one. Commenting on his history in *L'Archéologie du Savoir*, Foucault states that he came " . . . close to admitting an anonymous and general subject of history."[7] This attempt at self-criticism seems particularly apt in light of the difficulties with Foucault's idea of history sketched here.

What the *partage* divides is, as has already been noted, itself a *partage*. In the classical age, what is divided is the realm of reason from unreason. Foucault further claims that the active *partage* which creates this division is an ethical one. This philosophical account of the nature of the *partage* and of its effects is the next topic I shall treat in this paper.

Foucault opens his discussion of the classical age with an interpretation of Descartes. In the stage of natural doubt — before he advances the possibility of total deception with the evil genius hypothesis — Descartes excludes madness as a stage in the process of rational doubt.[8] Doubting the senses is rational because the senses sometimes deceive me. Doubting that I am awake is rational because I sometimes dream that I am awake when I am in fact asleep. but doubting my sanity is an extravagance which the process of rational doubt makes impossible. Along the road to the truth of the *cogito*, madness must be excluded. If one were to entertain the hypothesis that one was mad, there would be no ground for asserting any truth whatsoever. Madness is thus excluded *de ovo* from the rationality of the doubting process that leads to truth. It is simply presumed to be too extravagant to warrant serious consideration.

This summary exclusion of madness from rational doubt in the stage of natural doubt is not the only exclusion madness suffers in Descartes' work. At a later stage in his analysis, Foucault comments on the exclusion found in Descartes' rejection of the evil genius hypothesis. Foucault interprets the holding of this hypothesis as a final attempt to include madness in the process of rationality that leads to truth. While I object to this interpretation of the hyperbolic hypothesis as a form of madness on the grounds that Descartes advanced reasons for entertaining it, Foucault does manage to show that even the possibility of total deception is excluded from the truth of the *cogito*. His interpretation, however, does not underestimate the force of the evil genius hypothesis.

> It is true that the *cogito* is an absolute beginning; but one must not forget that the evil genius comes before it. And the evil genius is not the symbol in which are resumed and systematized all the dangers of those psychological events which are dream images and sensible error. Between God and man, the evil genius has an absolute meaning: in all his rigor he is the possibility of unreason and the totality of its powers . . . And it is not because the truth which the *cogito* illuminates

> ends up masking the shadow of the evil genius that one must forget his continually dangerous power; this danger will underlie Descartes' procedure up until the existence and the truth of the external world (*HF*, p. 175).

With the *cogito*, the possibility of complete deception is eliminated. The evil genius may deceive me as much as he wants, he will never arrange it so that I am nothing when I think that I exist. The certitude of my own existence protects me from that danger that lurks in the shadow of the *lumen naturale*: the possibility that I may be utterly deceived. The power of the evil genius does not extend to that absolute beginning that assures me of my own existence. It is in the truth of the *cogito* alone that his power is dispelled.

What Foucault hopes to illustrate with this philosophical account of exclusion is, firstly, the nature of the *partage* itself and, secondly, the new relationship which results from it between reason and unreason in the classical age. What Descartes' spontaneous act of excluding madness from the process of rational doubt exemplifies is a will to rationality that may not be breached by an appeal to extravagant or hyperbolic hypotheses. Foucault writes that " . . . the *will* to doubt has already excluded the involuntary enchantment of unreason and the Nietzschean possibility of becoming mad" (*HF*, p. 157). The gesture that divides reason from unreason is therefore an ethical one. Doubt is assumed to be the act of a free subject which, by virtue of being rational — *i.e.* free — may lead to truth. In the act of will which impels doubt and sustains it, one has already voluntarily excluded the possibility of madness. The will to doubt already implies a decision to excommunicate madness.

If I doubt, I cannot be mad. If I am mad, I do not exist. The form of exclusion practiced in the classical age on the basis of its ethical *partage* is a radical one. Facing the Cartesian subject — the philosophical counterpart of our classical forebears — is a world of unreason and madness which this subject rejects out of hand as lacking rationality, and thus existence altogether.

> Confronting those insensate beings who imagined themselves as pitchers or as having bodies of glass, Descartes knew immediately he was not at all like them . . . The inevitable recognition of their madness arose spontaneously in a relation established between them and oneself: the subject who perceived the difference measured it against himself (*HF*, p. 199).

The insane, and those grouped with them under the rubric of unreason, were immediately perceived as ethically nul and void and were thus interned in houses of correction where they were punished for their moral turpitude.

The ethical division leads, by the force of the rationality it spawns, to the positing of a realm of unreason.

The mid-seventeenth century saw the sudden birth of internment throughout Europe and Great Britain. The places in which the insane were housed were designed for the moral castigation of misery and unreason. "If, in the seventeenth century, madness was virtually desanctified, it is because misery has undergone this sort of fall which means that it is now perceived on a moral horizon alone" (*HF*, p. 74). The insane are not socially useful, moral subjects. Insanity has been created as a form of unreason by virtue of that ethical division which creates both reason and unreason. Given the will to doubt, a whole category of people including the indigent, the libertines, those with venereal diseases, sodomites, the debauched and others, are abruptly shut out of the ethical order. Thus it is not madness itself, or a madness that would preexist the classical age and persist in our own which is excluded.[9] Foucault makes this point quite explicitly. Madness, and the forms of unreason associated with it, are designated as ethically void in the classical age alone.

> . . . one did not intern, in about 1657, one one hundredth of the population of Paris to save oneself from the "asocial element." The gesture undoubtedly had another dimension: it did not isolate misunderstood strangers who had been hidden for too long under the mask of custom; it created them, changing familiar faces in the social landscape to make of them bizarre faces no one could recognise any more . . . In a word, one might say that this gesture was creative of alienation (*HF*, p. 94).

The creation of madness as a moral fault can thus be attributed to the *partage* which, inasmuch as it is ethical, divides madness from the *cogito*, reason from unreason and being from not-being. "[R]eason is born in an ethical space" (*HF*, p. 157). And unreason is born in the same space. Reason resides in the free will and the sense of responsibility it entails. Unreason resides in the involuntary behaviour of an animal which lacks even the most nominal sense of guilt. Foucault goes on to claim that reason and unreason confront each other in the classical age as being confronts non-being. It is this final description of the passive form of the *partage* which I shall consider in my concluding remarks.

What distinguishes the classical age from any other is the new relationship established in it by virtue of its ethical *partage* to what it deemed unreason or insanity. Foucault asserts that no other age has experienced the sort of division found in the classical age between reason and unreason. Never has an age so stringently distinguished what it designates as insanity. With the birth of houses of internment, those considered insane were

opposed to the ethical and rational subject of the classical age as non-being (*non-être*) to being (*être*).

Descartes " . . . banishes madness in the name of the person who doubts and who can no more be irrational than not think or not be" (*HF*, p. 58). The madman was thus designated " . . . abruptly and without further ado by his presence alone in the visible — luminous and nocturnal — *partage* of being and non-being" (*HF*, p. 547). An ethical, and therefore, rational subject, who exercises his or her free will, has already, and by virtue of those acts, joined the ethical community. An insane being has failed to exercise the right to choose which is given with free will. As unfree and irresponsible, the insane must be excluded. They form " . . . the other side of a choice which opens to humankind the free exercise of its rational nature" (*HF*, p. 159).

That unreason in the classical age does not partake in the existence of the ethical community is not, however, to say that it does not exist at all. It means that no truth is guaranteed to the existence of unreason. The insane do not have any assurance of their own existence. And the ethical order which implicitly recognizes their existence in the practice of internment does not validate it. The existence of the ethical order is guaranteed in the truth of the *cogito*. The existence of unreason is assured by the ethical community that recognizes it but refuses to accord it any status in the realm of rationality and therefore of ethics. Thinking, or the rationality given in the exercise of free will, may well be the hall-mark of existence, but existence itself may take other forms which are not rational. It may, and in fact does, take the form of unreason in the classical age.

In the *Histoire de la Folie*, Foucault attempts his first description of an age in terms of a notion that he will progressively revise as he continues his studies of history. The *partage* is central not only to Foucault's early work, but is cited in the later work as well, as a form of "exclusion, limitation, appropriation"[10] which must be studied in what he terms a critical analysis of history. It is an integral part of what Foucault means by archeology. Nevertheless, after we have examined its role in the *Histoire de la Folie*, the nature of the *partage*, apart from its specific (ethical) instantiation in the classical age, remains uncertain. That the classical age should have been constituted by a *partage* which distinguishes it from other ages brings one no closer to understanding what the *partage* itself might be. Indeed, even when it receives a more positive qualification in the later work, it is just its protean capacity to take different forms in different ages which is emphasized by Foucault.

One thing is clear, however. In Foucault's view, it is necessary that historians relate the practices of an age back to their "origin" in a *partage*. The *partage* represents a kind of historiographic imperative. If histories are constituted by such ruptures, and it is certain that Foucault believes this,

then, in order to write history, one must refer the practices, institutions, laws, and discourse of an age back to the *partage* which limits it and determines it. Yet, and once again, while the necessity of referring the practices of an age back to the *partage* is amply *illustrated* by Foucault's entire corpus, neither Foucault nor his commentators have clarified its status. If "[o]ne must accept the introduction of the aleatory as a category in the production of events,"[11] how this should be understand remains a mystery.

Perhaps the *partage* is nothing apart from its instantiations in particular ages. If this were the case, one would be obliged to view the *partage* as historical. However, such an historical interpretation does not agree with Foucault's characterization of the *partage* as the degree zero of history. On the other hand, it might be easier to caricature the notion, by comparing it to the Adamite theory of naming. The creation of an entirely new world of objects which is attributed to a *partage* resembles nothing more than the theory according to which the world was created in the word. Indeed, in such works as *The Archeology of Knowledge*, the *partage* has a peculiarly linguistic character which lends itself easily to such a caricature. In either case, it is clear that what Foucault demands of his readers is simply to accept (or reject) the notion that history is constituted in a series of ruptures or *partages*. No arguments are advanced to defend it; we are simply told (in *The Archeology of Knowledge*, for example) that a new analysis of history which borrows much from Georges Canguilhem, has begun to transform traditional historiography. The validity of this new form of historiography is never demonstrated. Its usefulness to historians is only illustrated by the actual histories produced under the aegis of the methodological principle of referring the "essential choices" of an age back to the *partage* which constituted them. That this methodology and the notion implied by it remain unexamined and undefended is one of the central weaknesses of Foucault's historiography.

In one of his later programmatic statements, found in *L'Ordre du Discours*, Foucault further articulates the notion of *partage*. Systems of exclusion are given a more detailed treatment, and Foucault isolates three which were found in a confused form in the *Histoire de la Folie*. Procedures of exclusion include the interdict (*l'interdit*), rejection, and the will to truth, which excludes falsity. These are historically conditioned forms of exclusion which ultimately refer to power and desire, and to the institutions, laws, etc., which are maintained by power and desire. In order to analyse a society, it is necessary to refer its discourse back to these forms. As in the *Histoire*, then, the analysis of history requires that the exclusionary events which constitute it be identified and characterized. Nevertheless, only if one accepts the view that history is discontinuous, and that this discontinuity is conditioned by *partages*, will Foucault's historiography be practicable. Mere

acceptance will not validate it however. To defend Foucault, it is necessary to find not only illustrations, but arguments, to support this methodological principle.

Department of Philosophy
Queens University

Notes

1. Michel Foucault, *Folie et Déraison: Histoire de la Folie à l'âge classique* (Paris: Plon, 1961). Henceforth quoted in the text as *FD*.
2. Michel Foucault, *Histoire de la Folie à l'âge classique* (Paris: Gallimard, 1972). Henceforth quoted in the text as *HF*.
3. Jacques Derrida, "Cogito et Histoire de la Folie," in *L'Écriture et la Différence* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1967), pp. 51-97.
4. Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Dawn of the Day* (n. p.) p. 130, quoted in Michel Foucault, "Nietzsche, Geneology, History," in *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice*, ed. Donald Bouchard, trans., Donald Bouchard and Sherry Simon (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1967) p. 155.
5. "Cogito et Histoire de la Folie," p. 68.
6. Michel Foucault, *L'Ordre du Discours* (Paris: Gallimard, 1971), pp. 10-23.
7. Michel Foucault, *L'Archéologie du Savoir* (Paris: Gallimard, 1969), p. 27.
8. Although Jacques Derrida has advanced a powerful argument against Foucault's interpretation of Descartes in "Cogito et Histoire de la Folie," I shall treat Foucault's interpretation as unproblematic in this paper. In fact, it can be shown that Derrida completely neglects to take into account the rational character of Descartes' doubt. This oversight, along with a questionable interpretation of the evil genius hypothesis, flaws his criticism, and thus Foucault's account remains the more acceptable one.
9. Another standard interpretation of Foucault that appears in Derrida's work and others suggests that Foucault is attempting an ontology of madness. As I hope to show in this paper, however, madness in the *Histoire de la Folie* is an historical phenomenon constituted by a *partage* whose nature is ethical but whose status in terms of history is uncertain.
10. *L'Ordre du Discours*, p. 62.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 61.