



THE GENEALOGICAL WRITING OF HISTORY: ON SOME APORIAS IN FOUCAULT'S THEORY OF POWER

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Foucault saw himself as a 'happy positivist' because he made three reductions which have major methodological consequences. The understanding of meaning by an interpreter participating in discourses is reduced in the opinion of the ethnological observer, to the explanation of discourses. Validity claims are functionally reduced to effects of power. 'Ought' is naturalistically reduced to 'is'. I speak of reductions because the internal aspects of meaning, truthfulness and value can in no way be completely dissolved into the externally grasped aspects of power practices. The concealed and repressed return and assert their own right — first of all on the metaphysical level. Foucault falls into aporias as soon as he wants to explain how one should understand what the genealogical historian does. The so-called objectivity of knowledge is then precisely put into question by the *presentism* of a writing of history which remains hermeneutically restricted to its starting situation; by the *relativism* of a present-connected analysis which can understand itself only as a context-dependent practical enterprise; and by the *partiality* of a critique whose normative basis cannot be demonstrated. Although Foucault is of course honest enough to confess these inconsequences, he certainly draws no consequences from them.

Foucault wants to eliminate the hermeneutical problematic and with it all self-relatedness, which comes into play with a meaning-understanding approach to the object domain. The genealogical historian should not proceed as the hermeneuticist. He should not try to understand what actors respectively do and think within a context of traditionalism which is intimately linked to their self-understanding. He ought rather to explain the

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horizon within which such expressions can appear as especially meaningful, on the basis of grounding practices. So, for example, he will not relate the prohibition of gladiatorial contests in late Rome to the humanizing influx of Christianity, but rather to the supersession of one power formation by another.¹ In the horizon of the new power complex of post-Constantinian Rome it is, for example, very natural that the ruler no longer treats the people as a flock of protected sheep, but rather like a troop of children requiring education — and one ought never to cruelly abandon children. The discourses by which the establishment or abolition of the gladiatorial contests were grounded, thus count only as objectifications of an unconsciously grounded praxis of domination. As the source of all meaning such practices are themselves meaningless. The historian must approach them from outside in order to grasp them in their structure. For this one does not need any hermeneutical understanding but rather only the concept of history as a meaningless kaleidoscopic transformation of the form of the discursive totalities. These totalities have nothing in common with one another except this determination — that they are above all protruberances of power.

Contrary to this objectivistic self-understanding, the first look in any of Foucault's books shows that the radical historicist, too, can only explain technologies of power and practices of domination in comparison with one another and in no way as totalities in themselves. Nevertheless, the viewpoints under which he makes comparisons are inevitably combined with his own hermeneutical starting-point. This is shown, *inter alia*, in the fact that Foucault himself cannot evade the compulsion towards the implicit 'present-relatedness' of the classification of epochs. Now whether it is the history of madness, of sexuality, or of punishment, the power formations of the Renaissance, of the middle ages, and of the classical age refer always to the disciplinary power, to the bio-politics that Foucault takes to be the fate of our present time. In the conclusion of *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, he himself makes this objection, only indeed to avoid it. "This is because, for the moment, and as far ahead as I can see, my discourse, far from determining the locus within which it speaks, is avoiding the ground on which it could find support."² Foucault himself is conscious of the aporia of a process which wants to be objectivistic and must remain diagnostical of its time, but he does not give any answer to it.

Foucault only yields to the melody of an avowed irrationalism in the context of his interpretation of Nietzsche. Here, namely, the self-extinguishing or the "sacrifice of the subject of knowledge", which the radical historicist must insist upon only because of the objectivity of the pure structural analysis, to the contrary experiences an ironically different interpretation: "In appearance, or rather, according to the mark it bears, histori-

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cal consciousness is neutral, devoid of passions, and committed solely to the truth. But if it examines itself and if, more generally, it interrogates the various forms of scientific consciousness in history, it finds that all these forms and transformations are aspects of the will to knowledge: instinct, passion, the inquisitor's devotion, cruel subtlety, and malice. It discovers the violence of a position that sides against those who are happy in their ignorance ... The historical analysis of this rancorous will to knowledge reveals that all knowledge rests upon injustice (that there is no right, not even in the act of knowing, to truth or a foundation for the truth)."³ This effort to explain the discursive and power formations under the remorseless, objectivizing look of a distant analyst with no native understanding, but only out of itself, turns into its opposite. The exposure of the objectivistic illusion of *every* will to knowledge leads to the agreement with a writing of history narcissistically aligned with the viewpoint of the historian, which instrumentalizes the view of the past for the needs of the present: "effective history composes a genealogy of history as the vertical projection of its position."⁴

Foucault's history must lead to an acute presentism as well as to relativism. His research gets caught in exactly this self-relatedness which he wants to eliminate by a naturalistic treatment of the problematic of validity. The genealogical writing of history is supposed to make accessible to an empirical analysis practices of power precisely in their discourse-constituting capacity. From this perspective the truth claims are not only limited to the discourses in which they respectively show up. They exhaust their meaning in the functional contribution they make to the self-assertion of a specific discourse-totality. The meaning of validity claims, therefore, lies within the effects of power which they have. On the other hand, this basic assumption of power is self-referring; it must, if it is valid, destroy the foundation of validity of the research which it inspires. But if now the truth claim which Foucault himself links with his genealogy of knowledge really were illusory and reduced to the effects which this theory has among its adherents, then the whole enterprise of a critical exposure of the human sciences would be pointless.

Yet Foucault still pursues the genealogical writing of history with the serious intention of creating a science which is superior to the obsolete human sciences. If its superiority could not express itself in such a way that something more convincing replaces the convicted pseudo-sciences; if its superiority would only express itself with the effect of the actual replacement of the hitherto dominant discourses — then Foucault's theory would exhaust itself in a politics of theory, and indeed in a theory-political goal which would overwhelm the strength of a one-man enterprise no matter how heroic. Foucault is aware of this. Therefore he wishes to distinguish the

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genealogy from all other human sciences in a way which is compatible with the assumptions of his own theory. To this end he applies the genealogical writing of history to itself; in its own history of emergence, the difference, which would prove its merit vis-a-vis all of the other human sciences, should be revealed.

The genealogy of knowledge has to make use of the disqualified kinds of knowledge from which the established sciences demarcate themselves. It offers the medium for the revolt of the subjugated sciences. Therein Foucault does not see the sediment of scholarly knowledge which is simultaneously veiled and present, but rather the never sufficiently articulated experiences and the unofficial knowledges of the subordinated groups. It is the implicit knowledge of the 'people' which forms the sediment in a system of power. It is they who experience in their own bodies a technology of power, be it as sufferers or as officials of the machinery of suffering. For example, the knowledge of those in mental hospitals and their nurses, delinquents and wardens, concentration camp inmates and guards, blacks and homosexuals, women and witches, vagabonds, children and the mad. The genealogy does its digging in the dark ground of this local, marginal and alternative knowledge which "obtains its strength only out of the hardness with which it resists everything which surrounds it." This repertory of knowledge is normally disqualified as "not appropriate or sufficiently articulated: naive kinds of knowledge at the bottom of the hierarchy ranging below the necessary level of knowledge and scientificity."⁵ In the repertory sleeps the "historical knowledge of the struggles". The genealogy which lifts these local memories to the level of "erudite knowledge" takes the side of those who resist the specific practices of power. From this position of counter-power it gains a perspective which is supposed to over-reach the perspective of the rulers. From this perspective it is supposed to transcend all validity claims which are constituted within the magic circle of power. The connection with the disqualified knowledge of the people is supposed to give superiority to the reconstruction work of the genealogist, "which gave the essential strength to the critique which has been practiced by the discourses over the last 15 years."

This reminds one of an argument of the early Lukács: according to him, Marxist theory owes its ideological impartiality to the privileged possibility of knowledge of an experiential perspective which was formed on the basis of the position of the wage-laborers in the production process. However, the argument was only valid in the framework of an historical philosophy which wanted to find the common interest in the proletarian interest and the self-consciousness of the species in the class consciousness of the proletariat. Foucault's concept of power does not allow for such a historical-philosophical, knowledge-privileged concept of counter-power. Each count-

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er-power moves within the horizon of the power which it attacks, and transforms itself as soon as it is victorious into a complex of power which provokes a new counter-power. The genealogy of knowledge cannot break this cycle while it supports the revolt of the disqualified knowledges and mobilizes the subjugated knowledge against "the constraint of a theoretical, unified, formal and scientific discourse." Whoever defeats the theoretical avant-garde of today and overcomes the existing hierarchy of knowledge will be the theoretical avant-garde of tomorrow and will erect a new hierarchy of knowledge. In any case he cannot maintain any superiority for his knowledge on the basis of truth claims which would transcend local agreements.

The attempt to spare genealogical history a relativistic self-denial with its own means fails. When the genealogy becomes aware of its own descent out of the alliance of erudite knowledge with disqualified knowledge, it only finds confirmed that the validity of counter-discourses counts neither more nor less than the ones of the ruling discourses — they too are nothing but the effects of power which they cause. Foucault sees this dilemma but he again avoids an answer. He again confesses to a militant perspectivism only in the context of his Nietzsche reception: "Historians take unusual pains to erase the elements in their work which reveal this grounding in a particular time and place, their preferences in a controversy — the unavoidable obstacles of their passion. Nietzsche's version of historical sense is explicit in its perspective and acknowledges its system of injustice. Its perception is slanted, being a deliberate appraisal, affirmation, or negation; it reaches the lingering and poisonous traces in order to prescribe the best antidote." ("Nietzsche, Genealogy, History").

Finally we have to examine if Foucault succeeds in avoiding the cryptonormativism of which, according to him, the human sciences which insist on being value-free are guilty. The genealogical writing of history should, in a strictly descriptive attitude, reach back behind the totalities of discourse within which alone there is a dispute over norms and values. It leaves out normative validity claims as well as claims of propositional truth and it abstains from the question of whether some discourses and power formations could be more justified than others. Foucault opposes the invitation to take sides; in the interview "Power and Sex" he derides the "leftist dogma" of understanding power as evil, ugly, sterile and dead — and "what power is exercised upon as right, good and rich." For there is no "right side." Behind this is the conviction that politics, which since 1789 has been under the sign of revolution, has reached the end, that theories which have worked through the relation of theory and praxis are outdated. Now even this *proof* of value freedom of a second degree is by no means value-free. Foucault sees himself as a dissident who resists modern thinking and the humanistically-

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disguised disciplinary powers. Commitment marks his learned essays also in style and diction; the critical gesture governs the theory no less than the self-definition of the whole work.

Thereby Foucault distinguishes himself from the committed positivism of Max Weber who wishes to separate a decisionistically chosen and openly declared value-basis from a value-free analysis. Foucault's critique is based (according to an observation of Nancy Fraser) more on a postmodern rhetoric of representation than on the postmodern assumptions of his theory. On the other hand, Foucault distinguishes himself also from the critique of ideology of Marx who exposes the humanistic self-understanding of modernity by asking for the normative content of bourgeois ideals. Foucault does not intend to continue this counter-discourse which modernity has led with itself since its beginnings; he does not want to refine and turn against the pathology of modernity, the language game of modern political theory (with its basic concepts of autonomy and heteronomy, morality and legality, emancipation and repression) — he wants to transcend modernity along with its language game. His resistance is not supposed to be justified as the mirror of the existing power. For Foucault, "resistance must be like power: just as inventive, as mobile and as productive. It must be organized and stabilized like power is. It must, like power, come from below and be strategically distributed."

The dissidence draws its only justification from the fact that it sets out traps to the humanistic discourse, without engaging it; Foucault derives this strategic self-understanding from the properties of the modern power formations themselves. This disciplinary power, whose local, steady, productive and all-penetrating, capillary-like character he describes, settles down more into bodies than heads. It has the shape of a bio-power which takes possession more of bodies than of spirits and which subjugates the body to a remorseless, normalizing constraint — without needing a normative basis. The disciplinary power functions without a detour through a necessarily false consciousness that would have been formed in humanistic discourses and would, therefore, be exposed to the criticism of counter-discourses. The discourses of the human sciences fuse with the practices of their application to form an opaque complex of power which makes any critique of ideology rebound. The humanistic critique as in Marx or Freud, which bases itself on the obsolete contrast between legitimate and illegitimate power, conscious and unconscious motives, and fights against instances of exploitation, suppression, repression, etc., rather is in danger of reinforcing the humanism that has been brought from heaven down to earth and has congealed into a normalizing force.

Now this argument might suffice to conceptualize genealogical history no longer as a critique, but as a tactic, a means of conducting a war against

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a normatively invulnerable formation of power. If the only concern is the mobilization of counter-power, tricky struggles and confrontations, the question arises why we should resist this ever-present power which circulates through the body of modern society instead of submitting to it. Then the means of struggle of the genealogy would also be superfluous. It is evident that the value-free analysis of strong and weak points of the enemy is useful for he who wishes to fight, but why fight?: "Why is struggle preferable to submission? Why ought domination to be resisted? Only with the introduction of normative notions could he begin to tell us what is wrong with the modern power/knowledge regime and why we ought to oppose it."

Once, in an interview, Foucault could not evade the question; on this one occasion he gave a vague reference to post-modern criteria of justice; "In order to advance against the disciplines, in the fight with the disciplinary powers, one should not take the direction of the old right of sovereignty, but rather ought to move towards a new right which would be liberated not only from disciplines but at the same time from the principle of sovereignty."

Despite the fact that moral and right conceptions have been developed in connection with Kant, which no longer serve to justify the sovereignty of a power-monopolizing state, Foucault himself does not address this theme. Yet if one tries to obtain the implicitly used standards out of the indictments against the disciplinary powers, one encounters known determinations from the explicitly rejected normativistic language game. The asymmetrical relation between rulers and ruled as well as the reifying power technologies which damage the moral and bodily integrity of subjects unable to speak and act are also objectionable to Foucault. Nancy Fraser has proposed an interpretation which does not show a way out of this dilemma but explains where the crypto-normativism of this history, which declares itself value-free, comes from.⁶

Nietzsche's concept of will to power and Bataille's concept of sovereignty take in more or less openly the normative content of the experience of aesthetic modernity. In contrast, Foucault takes his concept of power from the empiricist tradition; he has stripped it of its quality of being a simultaneously frightening and charming object from which the aesthetic avant-garde from Baudelaire to the surrealists have drawn. Nevertheless, power, in the hands of Foucault maintains a literally aesthetic relation to bodily perception, to the painful experience of the tortured body. This moment becomes determining for power formations, which owe the name of bio-power to the fact that it penetrates deep into the reified body and occupies the whole organism in the subtle ways of scientific objectification thus creating a subjectivity through truth technologies. This form of socialization, which eliminates all naturalness and transforms creaturely life as a

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whole into a substrate of the power process, is called bio-power. The normatively relevant asymmetry that Foucault finds expressed in power complexes, is not between the ruling will and forced submission, but between the power processes and those bodies which are ground up in them. It is always the body which is tortured and which is the scene of the revenge of the sovereign; which is seized by drill, broken up into a field of mechanical forces and manipulated; which is objectified and controlled by the human sciences and at the same time stimulated in its covetousness and exposed. If Foucault's concept of power maintains a remnant of aesthetic content then it owes it to the vitalistic life-philosophical version of the self-experience of the body. At the end of the first volume of *The History of Sexuality* one finds the unusual phrase: "We need to consider the possibility that one day, perhaps, in a different economy of bodies and of pleasures, people will no longer quite understand how the ruses of sexuality, and the power that sustains its organization, were able to subject us to that austere monarchy of sex."

This other economy of bodies and pleasures of which we can in the meantime only dream — with Bataille — would not again be an economy of power but a post-modern theory which could render account of the standards of critique which implicitly have always already been used. Until then the resistance can take its motive but not its justification from the signals of body language, from the non-verbalized language of the tortured body that refuses to be sublimated into discourse.⁷

Foucault, however, may not make this interpretation, which surely finds support in some of his obvious feelings, his own. Otherwise he would have to give, like Bataille, a status to the other of reason which, since *Madness and Civilization*, he has refused to do — and with good reason. He defends himself against a naturalistic metaphysics which idealizes counter-power into a pre-discursive referent. In response to Bernard-Henri Levy in 1977 he states: "What you call naturalism refers, I believe, to two things. A certain theory, the idea that under power with its acts of violence and its artifice, we should be able to rediscover the things themselves in their primitive vivacity: behind the asylum walls, the spontaneity of madness; through the penal system, the generous fever of delinquency; under the sexual interdict, the freshness of desire." Because Foucault cannot accept this life-philosophical conception, he likewise cannot answer the question about the normative basis of his critique.

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Notes

1. Paul Veyne deals with this example in his *Der Eisberg der Geschichte: Foucault revolutioniert die Geschichte* (Berlin: Merve, 1981).
2. M. Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, p. 205.
3. M. Foucault, *Language. Counter-Memory. Practice*, pp. 162-163.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 157.
5. Nancy Fraser, "Foucault on Modern Power," *Praxis International* 1:3 (1981). Vol. 1, N. 3, 1981.
6. In a manuscript entitled, "Foucault's Body-Language: A Post-humanist Political Rhetoric."
7. Peter Sloterdijk develops this alternative with regard to the silent, bodily expressive forms of protest of the cynics, in *Kritik der zynischen Vernunft*, 2 vols. (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1982).