

VOICES FROM THE MARGIN

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In his essay "Prison Talk" Foucault wrote:

With the prisons there would be no sense in limiting oneself to discourses *about* prisons; just as important are the discourses which arise within the prison, the decisions and regulations which are among its constitutive elements, its means of functioning, along with its strategies, its covert discourses and ruses, ruses which are not ultimately played *by* any particular person, but which are none the less lived, and assure the permanence and functioning of the institution. All of this has to be brought together and made visible by the historian. And in my view this task consists rather in making all these discourses visible in their strategic connections than in constituting them as unities, to the exclusion of all other forms of discourse.¹

The text which follows is from a larger work entitled *Voices from the Margin*, based primarily on the writings of prisoners in a maximum-security penitentiary in Quebec, and secondarily on my teaching work with them. The following selection from these writings is therefore neither a discourse about prison from the Outside, nor those discourses sanctioned from within the institution that relate to its functioning and permanence. It is rather a counter-discourse from Inside. This work is unusual in its length and elaboration, first because it was written by a person who was not encouraged by either prison or society to speak for himself, much less to write, and secondly because the counter-discourses which arise in prison even in fragmented form are usually silenced by the functioning of the dominant normalizing discourses of the in-

SUZANNE BELLRICHARD

stitution. Counter-discursive writings rarely surface Outside because prisoners are not supposed to have the last word about anything. When they do, it does not usually occur in a speech-act, but in an act of violence, which is turned back on them and on others in a rationalization of power. Basically prisoners are told who they are; they are spoken for. When they do speak, it is necessarily in discredited discourse. The fundamental positivity of their discourse is that it is unauthorized; it may as well have been stolen.

When a person, arrested and convicted for deviancy, is removed from society to prison, all the non-criminal aspects of his character cease to be pertinent for his custodians, and in addition, become potential liabilities for him in the inmate population. The person's identity is reconstituted and retotalized in dossiers as criminal. Medical and therapeutic discourses are invoked to see all aspects of his life as related to what has now become his essential being: his criminality. The person is eclipsed by his file. The institutional dossier in this sense assumes the knowledge of Fate and the power of History. It encompasses the subject, enacts a closure and delivers the delinquent-as-object.

Ironically, men and women in maximum-security and in other total institutions arrive at a point where they seem almost inaccessible to further extensions of power. They acquire a power in turn of total resistance and intransigence, because having been arrested in their living and dispossessed of their distinctiveness, they arrive at the limits of social and carceral power against them. They arrive also at the limits of their own sensibility to suffering. When a person's subjectivity has been most totally cancelled, it can at that very point, reassert itself from below with a haunting vengeance. Hence the almost proverbial, "Freedom is having nothing more to lose" or, "What are you going to do, put us in jail?" Foucault called this phenomenon "la plèbe", that which

in the social body, in classes, groups and individuals ... in some sense escapes relations of social power, something which is by no means a more or less docile or reactive primal matter, but rather a centrifugal movement, an inverse energy, a discharge ... This measure of plebs is not so much what stands outside relations of power as their limit, their underside, their counterstroke, that which responds to every advance of power by a movement of disengagement.²

The text which follows was produced by a man who throughout the opening weeks of class wore dark sunglasses and sat in total silence. He was absolutely "disengaged" in his refusal to be reduced and subordinated further from criminal to student. To the extent that I could, I put in abeyance the teaching role in which I was constituted before him. We found ourselves facing each other in what my students came to call a "no man's land" or an "ar-

VOICES FROM THE MARGIN

mistice in a cold war". Nate Jones wrote "Holiday '72" not as an assignment but as a gift. It is a product of the subjectivity that reasserts itself in one who cannot be put into jail because he is already there.

"Holiday '72" is the account of a summer trip he took before his disappearance from society. This work, in its openness, in its freedom from shame, and always in its poignancy, imparted to me perspectives on life, on survival and on crime to which I had never been exposed. It illuminates with its inverse energy the margins of discourse. And in this light, eyes whose gaze has burned, if not always penetrated beyond capitalist society, become mirrors, reflecting and refracting it up from its underside.

This writing was for Nate a celebration and a remembrance of freedom. It is the outrageous and joyous freedom of the person who has already been marginalized, but never totally excluded from society, simply because he is there. It is also a freedom burdened at times with rage and exhaustion, carried by a man who does not belong anywhere and who can never take tomorrow for granted. This man's journey across Canada was a journey into self-realization and self-knowledge, always — we would say "limited" but Nate's word here would be — "clarified" by necessity, by the need to insist almost constantly on the right to be where he was and to remain alive and in control.³

From a traditional sociological perspective, this work represents a phenomenological view of criminal life, and it involves at times what are called "neutralization techniques" or "strategies of legitimation". I refrain from the presumption or duty of locating and analysing examples of "bad faith" or "false consciousness". Rather than qualifying this work in any particular way, I would refer to Foucault's point in "Truth and Power" as an outer limit against which to interrogate it. Foucault wrote:

The struggle around the prisons, the penal system and the police-judicial system, because it has developed 'in solitary', among social workers and ex-prisoners, has tended increasingly to separate itself from the forces which would have enabled it to grow. It has allowed itself to be penetrated by a whole naive, archaic ideology which makes the criminal at once into the innocent victim and the pure rebel — society's scapegoat — and the young wolf of future revolutions. This return to anarchist themes of the late nineteenth century was possible only because of a failure of integration of current strategies. And the result has been a deep split between this campaign with its monotonous little chant, heard only among a few small groups, and the masses who have good reason not to accept it as valid political currency, but who also — thanks to the studiously cultivated fear of

SUZANNE BELLRICHARD

criminals — tolerate the maintenance, or rather the reinforcement, of the judicial and police apparatuses.⁴

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Notes

1. Michel Foucault, "Prison Talk" in *Power/Knowledge*, ed. by Colin Gordon, New York: Pantheon Books, 1980 (1972), p. 38.
2. Op.cit., "Power and Strategies", p. 138.
3. One may note the presuppositions or ideological investments of both terms. "Limited" implies social privilege; it takes for granted freedom from necessity as a need in itself for a certain "quality of life". "Clarified" accepts the lack of this social privilege, but compensates for it with another: access to criminal behavior. This points to the working-class criminal's desire for social and economic equality. He is insulated from guilt partly because our society itself pretends that equality is a right — denied it, he takes it. He is partly insulated because he pays for his seizure of "equality" in the risk he takes in performing criminal acts.
4. Op.cit., "Truth and Power", p. 130.

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