

“Against Foucault”

Early Middle Foucault (1964-1969) (Part Five)

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The references are at the end of Part Eight.

Let me restate the point of talking about measles at the risk of being repetitive, for the sake of being clear. You may remember that I talked about measles in connection with Foucault’s book The Birth of the Clinic (*La Naissance de la Clinique*, written 1961, published 1963).

There is a disease called measles. It thwarts life and is therefore a problem. The problem should be solved.

Voilà, there you have it: a metaphysics and an ethics; that is to say, an illustration of a metaphysics and an ethics. The metaphysics is realism. The ethics is solidarity. The social philosophy: a hyper-Popperian pragmatism. Illustration: there should be medical doctors, vaccinations, nurses, caring parents, clinics, research institutions....; in general, there should be a health care system designed and periodically evaluated and improved to cope with the measles problem, among others.

My pragmatism is hyper-Popperian rather than simply Popperian because Karl Popper himself never acknowledged that achieving social democracy requires transforming the basic structures of the modern world. And because Popper was unwilling to work with, rather than against, the ancient emotions he called tribal. (Richards and Swanger 2006, chapter 9) It is a pragmatism blended with realism that acknowledges that truth works because it is true. You may if you wish say I am not a pragmatist even though I want to call myself one, but please do not attribute to me the view that the meaning of truth, of what is, of being, can be reduced without remainder to the meaning of “what works.”

To do philosophy is to decide how to talk. In the early 1960s Foucault decided to talk about medicine in terms of ideology. I have decided to talk in terms of problem-solving. Following Dewey, I take the view that talking itself evolved to solve problems. If I were to make a list of examples of what I mean by “problem,” I fear it would remind some readers of the Argentine poet Jorge Luis Borges’ famous list of animals, attributed to an ancient Chinese encyclopedia, which includes animals belonging to the Emperor, stray dogs, embalmed animals, imaginary animals, animals that from a distance look like flies, and other categories that seem to have either nothing in common or no proper separation from each other entitling them to be discrete items on one list. Foucault quotes Borges’ list of kinds of animals in full at the beginning of his preface to Les Mots et les Choses (1966) (a book whose English title, The Order of Things, is a translation of the title Foucault had originally intended for the French edition) because, he says, this is going to be a book about what it is possible to say. Borges’ list plays with what it is possible to say by being transgressive. Borges discloses and destabilizes the rules by violating them. He laughs at “our millennial practice of Same and Other.” (Foucault 1966, p. 7)

In the course of the book Foucault helps me to improve my own practice of Same and Other by naming a common feature of each of the items on my list of problems to solve, and by helping me to articulate a reason why deciding to speak in terms of problem-

solving is a good decision. Foucault helps me by providing some history of the word “life,” which I then connect with the word “problem.” Foucault writes, “. . . here the relations of importance are the relations of functional subordination. If the number of cotyledons is decisive for classifying plants, it is because they play a specific role in the function of reproduction, and they are linked, therefore, to all of the internal organization of the plant; they indicate a function which commands all the dispositions of the individual.

Thus, for the animals, Vick d’Azyr has shown that the alimentary functions are without doubt of the greatest importance; it is for that reason that [quoting d’Azyr] ‘constant relationships exist between the structure of the teeth of carnivores and those of their muscles, of their fingers, their claws, their tongue, their stomach, and their intestines.’ Their character is not therefore established by a relation of the visible to itself; it is not in itself more than the visible point of a complex and hierarchical organization whose functions play an essential role of command and determination. It is not because something is frequent in observed structures that it is important; rather it is because it is functionally important that it is frequently observed. . . . One thus understands in what conditions the notion of life was able to become indispensable to making orderly sense of natural beings.” (Foucault 1966, pp. 240-41)

Building on such an idea of life as systems providing for the performance of vital functions, in the spirit of Dewey a “problem” can be regarded as an obstruction, an impediment, a frustration, of the vital functions that constitute it, including those of reproduction, nourishment, respiration, circulation, and others. Again building on Dewey, taking cognizance of the fact that most human behavior is conventional (customary, norm-guided, rule-following) the general form of most major problem solving is to modify the rules that constitute institutions (modify the culture, the conventions) so that they function in ways that assure the performance of the vital functions of life. This includes unavoidably, in the modern world-system we live in, modifying those basic cultural structures that govern property ownership and the exchange of goods and services in (and outside of) markets. A society that continuously engages in such modifications (some basic, some non-basic) for the sake of continuously improving the welfare of its population is called a social democracy, or, in Popper’s terminology, an open society.

Michel Foucault was not opposed to social democracy. He was favorably impressed by its Swedish version when he was a cultural attaché in Uppsala, and he was offered a post as cultural attaché in New York by the French socialist president François Mitterand (which he declined). However, his purpose in the passage I have quoted was not to contribute to a realist socialist ethic; it was to show how “*quelque chose comme la biologie va devenir possible.*” (Foucault 1966 p. 245). There had to be a concept of life as constituted by systems that perform vital functions before biology as we know it could become possible. It remains to inquire why he thought it important to determine the historical conditions of possibility of the science of biology, and, indeed, those of all the sciences.

Les Mots et les Choses, Foucault tells his readers in his preface, is going to be about “the fundamental codes of a culture –those that regulate its language, its perceptive schemas, its exchanges, its techniques, its values, the hierarchy of its practices. . . .” (Foucault 1966 p. 11) In contrast to Histoire de la Folie which was about the Other

(*l'Autre*), it is going to be about the Same, the mainstream (*le Même*). It is a book about how things can be mastered, organized in networks, designed according to rational schemas. (Foucault 1996B, p. 498)

At the beginning of the book Foucault produces an example of a fundamental cultural code. It was resemblance in renaissance Europe. Already at the beginning of the second chapter he writes, “Until the end of the sixteenth century, resemblance played a constructing role (*rôle batisseur*) in the knowledge (*savoir*) of the western culture.” (Foucault 1966 p. 32) (The second chapter is in a sense the first chapter, since the first chapter in the published book was written subsequently as an afterthought when the manuscript was already completed.) The idea that resemblance could play a *rôle batisseur* for a whole culture echoes Roussel (whom Foucault mentions on page 9); for, as a writer of fiction could *batir* (build) whole imaginary worlds starting with a grammatical relationship, so an entire culture could endlessly build variations on structurally possible relationships of sign to sign. Forms of resemblance proliferated in late medieval and renaissance Europe: *amicitia, consonantia, concertus, continuum, paritas, proportio, similitudo, conjunctio, copua, aequalitas*, and under this last head *contractus, consensus, matrimonium, societas, pax et similia*. (Foucault 1966 p. 32) Foucault discusses four similitudes at length: *convenientia, aemulatio, analogie, sympathies*.

I offer, instead, the alternative of identifying the fundamental codes of a culture (which I call “basic cultural structures”), not with a fundamental code that builds knowledge in a culture, but with those rules that govern the satisfying of basic needs, agreeing with Vick d’Azyr, quoted in the passage from Les Mots et les Choses reproduced above, that for any animal the alimentary functions are of the greatest importance; and finding (as a fact that is both *a priori* plausible and empirically observed) that in any culture the ways basic needs are satisfied (or not satisfied) has pervasive effects on every institution including but not limited to those that produce knowledge. (Richards 1995, Richards 2000, Richards and Swanger 2006, Richards 2007). In the case of the modern world-system, the fundamental codes (or basic rules) are those of property ownership, commercial exchange, and, for everybody except the leisure class work. I believe that most anthropologists view culture in a manner more akin to mine than akin to Foucault’s, since they tend to speak of cultures as hunting and gathering, nomadic pastoral, settled pastoral, slash and burn agricultural, settled agricultural, fishing, and the like, according to their food source; and as class-divided only after the agricultural revolution made it possible to produce surpluses that could be used to maintain upper classes. Claude Levi-Strauss, to be sure, viewed culture in a manner more akin to that of the Foucault of 1966.

My realist problem-solving approach calls particularly for two kinds of respect: respect for physical reality as a judge whose requirements culture must ultimately satisfy; and respect for common sense (whatever it may be at any given time and place) as the locus of the patterns of legitimate authority that currently exist (which must necessarily be the point of departure for constructive change).

I have been saying, in agreement with Charles Taylor, that respect for common sense follows smoothly from applying the phenomenological interpretive analysis of being-in-the-world of early Heidegger, and of similar thinkers like Hans-Georg Gadamer and Paul Ricoeur. Applied phenomenology has become a source of useful tools for Paulo Freire

and his many followers, for community organizers generally, and for anybody who seeks to facilitate citizen participation in democratic social change. (Freire's practice of organizing adult education starting with a codification of a thematic universe draws directly on Husserl's idea of a theme in a lived-world –*Lebenswelt* in Husserl's terminology, roughly equivalent to *in-der-Weltsein* in Heidegger's) An interpretive social science of everyday life leads inevitably to acknowledging that the kind of society we are in and in which we have our everyday experience is what Taylor calls a bargaining society; it is a property-owning society, sometimes called an acquisitive society or a commercial society. Unavoidably questions comes up like the question whether land like the land Foucault's mother inherited from her ancestors should remain private property, or should be socialized or pressed into the service of public or community needs or of the needs of the propertyless in some way. Thematizing the rules of everyday life and problematizing them de-naturalizes them In Freire's terms it raises consciousness.

Foucault declared in an introduction to the English translation of Les Mots et les Choses that he had broken with his past when he was a student of Merleau-Ponty and a devotee of early Heidegger, and he had now written an anti-phenomenological book His declaration should be marked with an asterisk and qualified with marginal notes, even assuming that his biographer is right to note that the book was regarded by some as a polemic against Maurice Merleau-Ponty from beginning to end, and assuming that his biographer is well-informed in asserting that the original manuscript included many direct attacks on Jean-Paul Sartre that Foucault suppressed before publication. (Eribon 1989 pp. 184-5) It is true that there is no *Dasein* in Les Mots et les Choses. There is no stand-in for the first person singular conceived as knower. Les Mots et les Choses is a book about words which do not originate in the mouths of speakers and about ideas that are not located in minds. But it is not a book about objective physical reality either. It is not about ecology; or about the ecology of culture. Foucault still rejects, for example, placing "...the appearance of culture, the dawn of civilizations, in the movement of biological evolution." (Foucault 1996 p. 344) He still seems to feel, as he implied in 1955, that conceding that humans are part of nature, accepting *homo natura*, would constitute giving in to the enemy, whatever the enemy might be; whether it is as in 1955 and 1961 "positivism" or whether it is something else. He once described his research for Les Mots et les Choses as doing an ethnology of our culture, or at least an ethnology of our rationality, our discourse. (Foucault 1969C p. 606) He writes a book about a domain whose boundaries he never succeeds in marking where subjective consciousness used to be located before subjectivity and consciousness were banished from it.

Foucault still stands, moreover, in Heidegger's shoes and in Husserl's, because he, like they, is engaged in a project of massive trumping. As in a card game the player with the trump card wins no matter what cards other players may have, so a philosopher who holds the intellectual equivalent of a trump card can afford to disregard massive evidence and argument adduced by other players. For early Heidegger his inquiry into "being" and "time" was trumps because science depended on it. It did not depend on science. Centuries earlier Aristotle's inquiry into the meaning of *ousia* in the book that came to be called Metaphysics was trumps because it established first principles everything else depended on, but which themselves did not depend on anything. (Richards 1995) Similarly, Foucault proposes a trump (remember that I am talking about 1966) when he subtitles Les Mots et les Choses "an archaeology of the human sciences." Archaeologists

are people who dig. The word suggests that Foucault is not digging up foundations, but digging deeper, to find what lies under the foundations. He says his book is going to work at an “archaeological level,” to be contrasted with the level of “surface effects.” (Foucault 1966 p. 14) It is to be about “that experience of order, massive and first in its being,” and something “more solid, more *archaïque*, less doubtful, always more ‘true’ than the theories that try to give it an explicit form, an exhaustive application, or a philosophical foundation.” (Foucault 1966 p. 12) There is a line in a magazine article Foucault published the same year he published *Les Mots et les Choses* that illumines how the trumping process works: “The plot (*fable*) of a story takes place inside the mythical possibilities of a culture; the writing of the story takes place inside the possibilities of a language; its fiction inside the possibilities of the act of speaking.” (Foucault 1996A p. 506) Viewing matters in this manner, it appears that the person who investigates possibilities trumps the person who investigates actualities, since the latter works within a framework framed by the former. In this respect the post-phenomenologist anti-phenomenological Foucault follows exactly the imperial strategy of Husserl and Heidegger. As orthodox phenomenologists defined “regional ontologies” which articulated the modes of being of the objects of study proper to specific academic disciplines inside the larger framework of general phenomenology, so Foucault in the last chapter of *Les Mots et Les Choses*, Chapter 10, defines the fields of each of the human sciences, and identifies the central concepts of each one inside the discourse he himself has established during the course of the book. His archaeological discoveries of the conditions of possibility of their disciplines, which are reported in the previous nine chapters, presumably authorize him to tell other scholars what the boundaries and key organizing concepts of their respective fields of study are. “It is that [the knowledge produced by archaeology] that makes possible the appearance at a given time of a theory, of an opinion, of a practice.” (Foucault 1966B, p. 498. Compare Heidegger 1927, p. 9). I do not mean to suggest that Foucault ever succeeded in explaining what he meant by “archaeology.” I do mean to suggest that what is ultimately at stake is authority.

When the digging of Foucault the archaeologist of European culture digs up the key cultural codes of Europe at a time just prior to the early 1600s, it uncovers Resemblance. According to Foucault, as noted above, Resemblance was a fundamental code governing knowledge in Europe at the time of the Renaissance. He calls it the Renaissance’s *episteme*. At the beginning of the 17th century it rather abruptly comes to an end. “We must stop for a moment at that point in time when resemblance will detach itself from its connections with knowledge (*savoir*) and disappear, at least in part, from the horizon of knowledge (*connaissance*). At the end of the 16th century, and still at the beginning of the 17th....” (Foucault 1966, p. 32). Europe’s new *episteme* will be Representation; Representation will reign throughout four of the ten chapters of the book (chapter three through six); throughout the classical age of the 17th and 18th centuries, until the French Revolution and the beginning of what Foucault calls *notre modernité* at the end of the 18th and beginning of the 19th centuries.

Foucault’s periodization discombobulates my mind. Assuming the truth of my modest hypothesis that humans are animals who need to eat, I am accustomed to identifying as the major changes in history the ones that affect how people survive. Accordingly I am persuaded by the periodizations of those historians and social scientists who classify the kind of world we live in as Marx classified it, as “...that form of society whose wealth

appears as a vast collection of items for sale,” (of “*Waren*”, usually translated as “commodities”) because in our modern world most people survive by purchasing what they need from among the items for sale in markets. Those items were produced by hired labor for the purpose of selling them. I find convenient Immanuel Wallerstein’s periodization that makes the modern world-system begin in the 15th century when the expansion of long distance trade was made possible by the exploratory voyages of Portuguese navigators. It makes sense to me; as does Fernand Braudel’s account of the gradual transformation of material life due to the penetration downward into the lives of the majorities of the new forms of social relationship created by large scale commerce, finance, and, later, production; and as does Karl Polanyi’s account of a “great transformation” in which economic relations become “disembedded” from the general matrix of social relations. Periodizations of historical events that take into account the logic of capital accumulation provide me with contexts for at least trying to understand the diverse factors and the achievements of human inventiveness that have led to the rise of science, the protestant reformation, early modern philosophy, colonialism, the reception of Roman Law and the promulgation of modern commercial and civil codes, nationalism, mass consumption society, mass media, marginalized surplus populations, and wars.

Foucault’s periodization making modernity begin around 1800 because Europe’s *episteme* changed from Representation to Modernity then helps me to see that logically there could not have been modern biology, or modern medicine, or modern economics, or modern linguistics, before certain conditions of possibility identified by Foucault were satisfied. But it does not associate periodizing with a dynamic force that moves events. It refrains from identifying causal powers and therefore does not provide all the guidance concerning why things happen and how to make more good things and fewer bad things happen that activists who want to make a difference for good in the world would desire. I concede that there is a danger that I may think I understand more than I do understand. It may well be that when I act as a communitarian social democrat, who seeks to re-embed economic relations into social relations, and to build another world not dominated by the logic of capital accumulation; I am acting on false premises. My realist understanding of history might be false. My social change efforts might be doing more harm than good. The reason or part of the reason for my blunders might be that Foucault’s understanding of history is true and mine is not. Consequently, I will continue to read Foucault. I will seek especially to find in his texts some reason or reasons why my understanding of history is not just different from his, but mistaken in ways his investigations will call to my attention, so that with Foucault’s help I can rectify my understandings and my actions.