

## **“Against Foucault”**

### **Early Middle Foucault (1964-1969) (Part Eight)**

Howard Richards

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Foucault’s 1969 book L’Archéologie du Savoir defines itself as an answer to a question that Foucault succinctly stated in a letter to the French magazine Esprit. In his letter to the magazine he posed the question of the relation of “*la contrainte du système*” (the constraint of the system) to the (for Foucault problematic) human subject. In the English speaking world this is sometimes called the relationship of systems to persons, or of structures to individuals.

It is a question that blends into the question how historical change happens. Do people change history? Or is history driven by forces independent of human will? In Foucault’s terms, as he expresses himself at the beginning of his 1969 book, it is a question about the sources of the innovations that produce historical discontinuities. (Foucault 1968 p. 674) The problem arises, he says in his Introduction to the book (Foucault 1969 pp. 9-24), because historians have treated economic history as a history of physical events, as if the behavior of markets were determined by the same sorts of causal powers as those that determines droughts and floods, births and deaths. He also makes it clear in the Introduction that while the book can be regarded as a critique of some economic interpretations of history, it is also a critique of the somewhat different and also somewhat similar thinking of a certain philosopher he does not name.

I beg leave to remark that the question does not arise in the same way in my mind. Indeed in my mind it does not arise at all. It is a non-question if rules are understood as I have been proposing to understand them, following Wittgenstein, Winch, Hart, Harré and Secord, and Searle. The misunderstanding that makes people worry about whether economic history can be treated as if it were a history of physical events (here I am speaking, not Foucault) is (I claim) a misunderstanding inherent in the very idea of economics. I beg leave to recommend, or rather to repeat an idea I and others have recommended elsewhere, an institutionalist view of economics. Institutions are made of rules. Economics is about institutions. I beg leave to recall that in its early drafts Adam Smith’s Wealth of Nations was the concluding portion of his lectures in the history of jurisprudence. (Richards and Swanger 2006) Economics is located at an intersection of social reality and physical reality where rules also known as norms are found. Its central concepts depend on the legal concepts of property and contract; its history is a history of rules and of the consequences of following rules, most notably those that constitute markets. (Richards 2000)

I have been recommending thinking about rules in ways derived from my readings of late Wittgenstein, Winch, Hart, Harré and Secord, and Searle. I include in the very concept of a rule (or norm) what Hart calls its “internal aspect.” People consciously and deliberately follow rules. Good old Aristotle was on the right track. Conscious deliberation precedes human action. Actions form habits. Habits generate ethics. Ethics organize human conduct.

For this reason when Foucault introduces his letter to the editor and his book saying he will address questions about the constraints of the system *la contrainte du système* his questions seem to me to be non-questions. Of course I realize that when Millicent Jones goes to the shopping mall to buy a Barbie Doll for her three year old daughter Dierdre, Millicent does not know that the norms of a society of mass consumption have been shaped by a structural need to maintain a regime of accumulation that creates the conditions for making profit and therefore the conditions for keeping what we call “the economy” going. But Millicent does deliberately buy the Barbie Doll. She knows that other little children have them and she wants her daughter to have one too. To understand the rules that guide her behavior we need to understand their internal aspect, what goes on in her mind as she follows them. Call my approach here phenomenological. Surely Millicent does not know the history of the rise of consumerism. Nor does she intend the consequences of millions of people acting as she does. Nevertheless to understand her and to change the world we need to understand the Millicents on their own terms and to acknowledge their autonomy as human persons.

Foucault addresses the conundrums posed by people being at the same time individual persons and parts of systems in a different way. He has in mind the discoveries of Levi-Strauss, Lacan, and Dumézil regarding unconscious hidden deep structures that determine what goes on in people’s minds without them knowing anything about them or making any decisions regarding them. He writes about economic historians who find long period continuities that for some readers look like consequences of systemic constraints. He appears to have in mind the *Annales* historians, Marc Bloch, Lucien Febvre, and Fernand Braudel. (Foucault 1969A p. 773) I have been subscribing to a point of view in which the systemic imperatives of capitalism are real enough, but are not systemic constraints analogous to the underlying structures found by Chomsky in languages or Levi-Strauss in myths; I think Levi-Strauss mixed genres of causality when he said he was inspired by Lyell’s geology and by Marx’s economics as if the underlying invisible determining structures of tectonic plates deep in the earth were similar to the logic of capital accumulation. What happens in commercial transactions like Millicent buying a Barbie Doll is that people buy and sell. They know what they are doing. Usually they have not read Karl Marx or Rosa Luxembourgh or John Maynard Keynes. They do not know the long-term consequences of many people following the same norms they follow. Nevertheless, they know what they are doing. They are buying and selling. Contracts are meetings of minds usually written on paper and signed; property rights are recorded on deeds at courthouses. The system is made up of what Aristotle called *praxis*, i.e. physical activity accompanied by talk; it is made up of what Saint Thomas called human acts; of what Rom Harré calls self-monitoring activity. From such a point of view the question what to do as an activist to move history in desirable directions has a straightforward generic answer: work to improve the rules that guide human life and constitute institutions. (Richards and Swanger 2008)

Now back to Foucault: The philosopher he does not name is of course Jean-Paul Sartre. *L’Archéologie du Savoir* is partly an engagement with a Sartrean version of Marx, a version which conceives of revolution as subjective consciousness assuming the management of human affairs (Foucault 1969, p. 22). It is also an avoiding of an ethical reading of Marx, a reading which critiques and proposes to modify the rules that govern market transactions and property rights. In his Introduction, Foucault refers rather to an

Althusserian Marx, an anti-humanist one who achieved an epistemological mutation. (Foucault 1969, pp. 21-24). Now back to me again: It is the ethical reading which (I am claiming) is crucial today. It is crucial to overcoming the worldwide defeat of labor by capital produced by free market globalization. It is crucial to repealing the systemic imperatives that are driving global warming. It is crucial to softening the hardness and stabilizing the chronic insecurity of life under capitalism. It is crucial for showing young people that it is feasible to follow better paths to happiness than the paths of drugs, alcohol, wild sex, and the thrills of violence. We live in a world where production is done for profit and where the right to consume normally depends on success in selling something; a world in which meeting people's needs, ecology, and everything else must take second place behind doing whatever it takes to persuade people with money to invest and to advance operating funds. To get out of the traps we are in we need to motivate production and distribution if not entirely differently then at least supplementarily; and to make such needed improvements practical we need cultures of solidarity –which requires, in turn, non-authoritarian authority.

Back to Foucault: Foucault's philosophical target, the Sartrean revolutionary consciousness, is, at one and the same time, like the tendency of the economic historians, a big theory that threatens to become a total theory purporting to explain everything. At the same time Sartre's philosophy views humans as condemned to be free whether they want to be free or not. (Here I read Sartre as not breaking with this central tenet of his early work in his later work closer to Marxism.) Without ever mentioning him by name Foucault complains about Sartre in lines like this one: "Time is conceived in terms of totalization and revolutions are never understood as anything other than achievements of consciousness." (Foucault 1969 p. 22)

Foucault's methodological alternative opts for dispersion. He proposes dispersion as a guide to the right way to do research. It separates the sheep from the goats, the sense from the nonsense, legitimate research like his own from bogus totalizing. It cuts the ground out from under big pretentious theories like those of Sartre and the economic historians. "Dispersion," as Foucault employs the notion, dissolves both historical totalities and conscious human subjects. The method begins at a descriptive level defining the items to be described as *énoncés*, or, interchangeably, as *événements discursifs*. (locutions or discursive events). (Colin Gordon reads "*énoncés*" as "effective oral or written utterances" (Gordon 1985, pp. 243-44)) What is special about Foucault's *énoncés*, or *événements discursifs*; what clearly distinguishes them from Wittgenstein's language-games, is that they are to be understood as dispersed. They are not to be understood as patterns. I take "dispersed" to mean something like "separated" and "individual." Domains of *énoncés* are "...constituted by the set of all *énoncés* (whether spoken or written) in their dispersion of events .... It is a population of events in the space of discourse in general." (Foucault 1969 p. 38) Foucault's *énoncés* are also different from some other notions taken to be the ground-level starting point of a scientific method, because they are not to be taken as documents, but rather as monuments. This means that they do not represent anything. They just are. A document would be documentation of something, representing something beyond itself. A monument just is.

For several chapters Foucault elaborates on how to do archaeological research starting with *énoncés*, building up a theoretical machinery whose parts are defined in

terms of *énoncés*, in which each part is as subtle and elusive as *énoncés* themselves. The parts of the apparatus include discursive formations, objects, concepts, and what Foucault calls archives. An archive is a full set of “discourses effectively pronounced.” (Foucault 1969A p. 772). An archive is not just as any set of items but a set which has its own principles of transformation. Foucault invents here a number of other technical terms I do not name because I do not think their bare names out of context mean anything. Let’s focus on how this proliferation of technical terms starts, on what remains constant as they multiply, and on how it ends. It starts with *énoncés*. He starts with a rough idea of *énoncés* and then tries to make his way of using that term more precise later. What remains constant is dispersion. All along –true to his anti-totalizing, anti-Sartrean, bent-- he sticks with dispersion. When he discusses the historical *a priori* –what three years earlier in 1966 was the historically given equivalent of Kant’s universal conditions of the possibility of experience; and eight years earlier in 1961 was what made it possible, for example, to experience insanity in the 19<sup>th</sup> century but not in the 17<sup>th</sup>-- even “that *a priori* must give an account of the *énoncés* in their dispersion.” (Foucault 1969 p. 167) It ends with the archive. “The archive is first of all the law of what can be said, the system which governs the appearance of singular events. .... it is that which, at the very root of the *énoncé-événement*, and in the body where it is given, defines the entry into the game of the system in which it can be said.” (Foucault 1969, p. 170) The archive thus claims to avoid being a structure or a generality of any kind. It purports to be faithful to the basic idea of dispersion, of separation, of individuality, but nonetheless to provide a sort of law, a law defining what can be said.

If you find it incredible that Foucault can remain true to his principle of dispersion and also find in an “archive” something that defines what it is possible to say, then you are in good company. Richard Rorty for one remarked that of all Foucault’s books The Archaeology of Knowledge was the least convincing.

Foucault’s arguments against *l’homme* take a turn with the publication of The Archaeology of Knowledge in 1969. In his own mind the turn apparently came a few years earlier. Foucault said that he had finished writing The Archaeology of Knowledge before the tumultuous events in France in 1968, even though the book was not published until 1969. (Foucault 1980, p. 71). Now with the new turn the arguments against humanism rely more on Alain Robbe-Grillet who wrote novels in which events lack patterns and characters lack coherent personalities. The arguments against humanism rely less on Claude Levi-Strauss who thought cultures were governed by the patterns of underlying myths. They rely more on the idea that when Sigmund Freud psychoanalyzed someone he found something like a pulsing of desire instead of a dual empirical/transcendental being, and less on the idea that when Jacques Lacan analyzed someone he found language instead of an individual. They rely more on dispersion and less on system.

Thus three years later Foucault is still an anti-humanist, but his reasons are roughly the opposite of what they were three years earlier. In The Order of Things man, *l’homme* does not exist because he has been swallowed up by great self-governing cultural codes where there is no room and no need for a conscious subject. In The Archaeology of Knowledge human beings as conscious subjects do not exist because everything is fragmentation, dispersion, separation.

His increasing emphasis on the dispersed and the singular (reminiscent of the emphasis on “differences” of Jacques Derrida, who, in a review article, had accused the early Foucault of being a totalitarian structuralist (Derrida 1963)) leads the Foucault of 1969 to apologize for what he now regards as his own earlier errors. The same author who earlier had said he ceased to believe in Sartrean meaning because Levi-Strauss and Lacan had convinced him that meaning was a mere surface effect of deep underlying structures, the same person who earlier had spoken of the archaeological level as if it were a deep underlying level, now says, “What I am researching are not secret relationships, hidden, more silent or deeper than the consciousness of men. I seek on the contrary to define the relationships that are on the very surface of discourse; I seek to make visible what is only invisible because it is too much on the surface of things.” (Foucault 1969A p. 772). According to his own reconstruction and correction of his own past, in Histoire de la Folie he was still writing as if history had some sort of subject, not to be sure a Cartesian or Husserlian or Humean individual consciousness, but some sort of “anonymous and general subject of history,” (Foucault 1969 p. 25) which had “experiences” of *folie* that differed from one period of time to another. In Naissance de la Clinique he was too close to structural analysis, in danger of ignoring the specificity of the problem posed. In Les Mots et les Choses he had written of cultural totalities, the famous *epistemes*. Having used the totalizing explanations of the structuralists to argue that the human subject was an outdated illusion that should be abandoned, he now distances himself from them. At one point now in 1969 he says that among all the diverse trends in social science, the central transformation taking place in our time is the one that questions the subject; it questions the privilege of the human. His own thought is part of this great transformation. It is located beside structuralism, not in it. It is another part of the same anti-humanist transformation. (Foucault 1969A p. 779). Elsewhere, in an interview for an Italian magazine, he says that for a long time he had a “badly resolved conflict” between his literary interests, the eroticism of Bataille and the preoccupation with language of Blanchot (he also discusses Sade, the musicians Boulez and Barraqué, and the painter Klee) on the one hand; and on the other hand his interest in the positive sciences, for example the studies of Georges Dumézil and Claude Levi-Strauss. The former led to the dispersion, the dissolution, the disappearance, of the erotic subject and the speaking subject. They suggested to him a theme which he then transposed to the latter, to structural and “functional” social science: an analogous disappearance of the subject. (Foucault 1969C pp. 614-15) As in the hot intensity of orgasm one can cease to exist as a social person, so in the cold light of science one can cease to exist as a social person. The social necessity of a humanist ideal is now “...neither more nor less than that of the idea of God.” (Foucault 1969C p. 619). “The role of the philosopher, which is that of saying ‘what is happening’ consists perhaps today of showing that humanity is beginning to discover that it can function without myths. The disappearance of philosophies and religions relates no doubt to something of that sort.” (*Id.* p. 620)

Now I would like to do a little flashback to 1963, which I believe will shed some light on the Foucault of 1969. In a 1963 homage to one of his sources mentioned above, Georges Bataille, Foucault devotes many pages to long paradoxical poetic sentences whose meaning is that at this point in the history of culture there is no meaning. (Foucault 1963) On about the twentieth page he takes a break from fanciful images as if he needed to catch his breath, and there he explains what the worldview he is praising, that of the

erotic author Georges Bataille, is an alternative to. The outdated common sense his and Bataille's philosophical poetry is intended to get beyond is identified with an economic interpretation of history, "...based entirely on need, and need based itself on the model of hunger." (Foucault 1963, p. 49) I regard this as a scrap of evidence supporting my thesis, which is akin to the thesis of Jurgen Habermas, that Foucault can be read as a young conservative who opposed common sense because he realized (consciously, semi-consciously, or unconsciously) that common sense, ordinary meaning, and an economic interpretation of history go together. They jointly lead to the herd morality, the democracy, the socialism, and the anarchism that Friedrich Nietzsche, another of Foucault's sources, hated and feared.

L'Archéologie du Savoir set out to be an explanation of the archeological method, offered as an alternative to the sort of economically oriented history practiced by the *Annales* school and as an alternative to Sartre's vision of conscious revolutionary transformation. It regarded as error much of what Foucault himself had done in the past. But one can read the book as marking a turn toward a version of positivism, if one sees a similarity between his point of departure in the single isolated *enoncé* and the atomic facts of positivism, and if one takes his use of the word "*positivité*" to be a sympathetic echo of the word "positivism."

Foucault's positive turn would be followed about a year later by a Nietzschean turn, influenced especially by Friedrich Nietzsche's seminal Genealogy of Morals. After the Nietzschean turn, Foucault would with a few exceptions cease to call his work archaeology and would begin usually to call it genealogy instead. \* However, he still found uses for both terms. In a 1977 lecture in Italy he said, with some qualifications I omit: "...`archaeology' would be the appropriate methodology for the analysis of local discursivities, and `genealogy' would be the tactics whereby, on the basis of the descriptions of these local discursivities, the subjected knowledges which were thus released would be brought into play." (Foucault 1985, p. 85)

Let me now do a short review of the main works discussed so far.

Foucault's first book, the one he preferred to forget, was an exposition of the materialist psychology he later devoted himself to fighting. His 1955 introduction to Binswanger defended *Mensch-sein* with arguments borrowed from Heidegger. His 1957 articles on psychology recommended the study of history as the only possible route to understanding human beings. His 1961 polemic against positivism Histoire de la Folie amassed enormous quantities of historical detail to show that the social world taken for granted by contemporary psychology and psychiatry is neither natural, nor eternal, nor universal, nor desirable. La Naissance de la Clinique (written 1961, published 1963) did the same for medicine.

Immersion in the details of history, according to the interpretation I am offering, led Foucault in a direction he did not want to go. His next book Raymond Rousset (1963) praised literary imagination more than historical fact. He now appeared as an historian inspired mainly not by his Marxist teacher Louis Althusser, not by his phenomenology teacher Maurice Merleau-Ponty, and not by the professor of the history of science Georges Canguilhem who sponsored his dissertation. Now Foucault was inspired by his independent reading of works of fiction. Language structures experience. Foucault learned this from literature and applied it to history.

The thesis of Les Mots et les Choses (1966) is that cultural codes determine not precisely history but the organization of knowledge at any given point in history. The cultural codes determine so much that the human subject fades away. In its Kantian form as *l'homme* the human subject disappears completely. A strange result. Foucault says he learned from Levi-Strauss and from Lacan that social science can proceed without subjects, and from his literary readings that novels can be written without characters. What is strange is that a philosopher who had dedicated himself so passionately to defending *Mensch-sein* against its positivistic enemies should regard this news as good news. One can hardly resist the hypothesis that there is some underlying constant in Foucault's motivation, such that at one time humanism and at another time anti-humanism serve for him the same constant purpose.

It is not hard to find a constant purpose served by varying philosophical arguments when comparing Les Mots et les Choses (1966) to L'Archéologie du Savoir (1969). The constant purpose is to refute Jean-Paul Sartre. Foucault deleted explicit references to Sartre from the first book prior to publication, but he clearly makes Sartre a target in his Introduction to the second. The second book is far from the all-embracing cultural codes of the first. The second book announces itself from the beginning as offering an alternative methodology of social science designed to correct the errors of people like Sartre (whom he does not, however, actually name); that is to say, the errors of people who think both that subjective consciousness determines human action and that economic forces determine the course of history. (Foucault 1969, p. 22) The methodology offered corrects archaeology as it explains it. Foucault now resembles an Ockham's Razor positivist historian, who parsimoniously shaves the documents he finds in libraries. The primary unit of discourse found in the document (the statement, the *énoncé*) does not represent anything. It has no necessary connection with anything else. Knowledge begins in dispersion. (Foucault 1969, pp. 32-66) "The analysis of statements [*énoncés*], then, is a historical analysis, but one that avoids all interpretation." (Foucault 1972, p. 27) If finally a study of the entire archive shows that there are patterns in the dispersion that mark historical discontinuities or exclude certain possibilities, they are not patterns determined by an originating consciousness or by laws of historical development. (Foucault 1969, pp. 217-231) The 17<sup>th</sup> and early 18<sup>th</sup> century classical age of the 1966 book by 1969 no longer has an *episteme*, a cultural code, which imposes its form on all its discourse. On the contrary, to refer to the classical age is now simply to give a name to observed continuities and discontinuities. (Foucault 1969, pp. 230-31) Sartre is wrong once again, but now for different reasons.

## References

\* From 1971 on Foucault usually called his studies genealogies, following the paradigm of Nietzsche's genealogy of morals. He even re-described his pre-1971 works as genealogies. (See Foucault 1983, p. 618). However, he also sometimes continued to speak of his work as archaeology. (See Foucault 1976, p. 172; Foucault 1984 p. 632)

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