

## **“Against Foucault” Middle Foucault (1970-1976) (Part Twelve)**

Howard Richards

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Last time we talked about Foucault’s radical period dating approximately from the time of the student revolts of May and June 1968 to 1973 or so. But in just a few years the ultra-revolutionary philosophies of the early 1970s contributed to the wave of anti-Marxism that swept over Paris in the mid and late 1970s. The same philosophical moves that had made Foucault an ultra-radical, much farther to the left than any of the established institutions of the French left, now made him a leader of the anti-Marxist reaction.

There emerged a new group of philosophers known as the *nouveaux philosophes*. Their aim in life was to refute Marxism and to eradicate its influence. The *nouveaux philosophes* quickly seized on the philosophies of non-being and “difference” and “dispersion” as weapons to use in their fight against Marxism. They argued that Marx was the quintessential metaphysician. They argued that metaphysics was oppressive. They did not need to do much original work to make their case, because Foucault and Deleuze and their allies had for the most part already made their case for them. Nietzsche replaced Marx as the *avant-garde* philosopher. Resistance to concepts, to any concepts at all, because concepts are tools of power, became J-F Lyotard’s general incredulity toward metanarratives. The first, indeed apart from psychoanalysis virtually the only, kind of metanarrative toward which the Parisian intellectuals of the late 1970s first directed their incredulity was Marxism. Their incredulity expanded to doubt also any materialist conception of history. It included the economic historians who in their attempts to explain historical discontinuity studied the expansion of markets to include ever-larger geographical areas and indeed in the end the entire globe. That is to say it included incredulity toward the economic reading of history that Foucault had set out to dispute in his 1969 book, *L’Archéologie du Savoir*, and had combated with a proposed methodology whose key word was dispersion. A few years after 1969 the concept of power as the general enemy sows the seeds of a movement that will lead to a philosophy of dispersion by a different path, a path that identifies categories of thought with that general enemy. In the anti-Marxist intellectual atmosphere of Paris in the late 1970s, Foucault would declare “I have never been a Marxist.” Foucault would depict himself as having bravely resisted the almost complete domination of French universities by Marxists and their allies. He would say that his doctoral dissertation had only been approved because he had managed to find a dissertation supervisor who belonged to the one intellectual tradition in French universities that had never been allied with Marxism, namely George Canguilhem. Georges Canguilhem’s work in the history of science had kept anti-Marxism alive and had sheltered Foucault. (Foucault 1994, pp. 113-14)

By now the reader knows that regarding that entity called “power” that reasserts itself after popular revolts, such as those in France in 1848, 1870, 1940, and 1968; the writer (me) holds the opinion that whatever else may explain the resilience of the *status*

*quo ante*, the systemic imperatives of regimes of accumulation explain at least much of it. The reader knows too what the writer thinks about those cases where a new system replaces an *ancien régime* without being quickly reversed by a subsequent reaction, as in China in 1948, and more slowly but not less transformationally in the gradual social democratic evolution of the Scandinavian countries beginning in the 1930s. The new system succeeded in large part because it succeeded in meeting basic human needs. It did not dismantle the previous regime of accumulation and leave a vacuum in its place. In both types of case, those where there is change and those where there is not change; a great part of the swelling tidal advance toward the almost inevitable, or perhaps entirely inevitable, *dénouement*, is to be explained by the ability or inability of one side or the other in the conflict to deliver reliably the daily bread that Adam Smith expected to be reliably supplied by his baker's self-interest. It is not that a few capitalists magically defeat the masses who vastly outnumber them. It is not that a tiny group of revolutionaries styling itself as the vanguard of the proletariat scientifically seizes control of the lives of millions. It is not even, at least not mainly or not entirely, as Antonio Gramsci suggests, that the people voluntarily consent to their own exploitation because they have been socialized to believe heart and soul in capitalist institutions. It is rather, simply and basically, that people must eat. The morning of September 11, 1973, in Santiago de Chile, I saw with my own eyes and heard with my own ears poor people – presumed to be the beneficiaries of socialism, and therefore, when well informed, its partisans— who had been standing in a long line to buy bread, or to try to buy bread, who, upon hearing the news that the armed forces had deposed President Allende, cheered and shouted “We’re free!” I am informed and believe, on the basis of my readings, and on the basis of my conversations with Alexander Kerensky (who was the elected premier of Russia deposed by the partisans of V.I. Lenin), as we walked together from Palo Alto to Stanford on winter mornings, that physical exhaustion from fighting World War I, which had made Russia incapable of providing the basic necessities of life for its citizens, made the masses impatient with democracy (to which they were in any event not accustomed) and ready to accept the dictatorship of those who promised to transfer all power to the *soviets* and to end the war immediately.

In a capitalist world, or in any world whose basic cultural structure is the western one derived from Roman laws and institutions, the decisions that cause production to go forward depend to a large extent on expectations of profits. (see e.g. Keynes 1936, p. 27; Winter 1996) Therefore it is to the interest in the short run not only of those who stand to make profits, but of all those whose welfare depends on production going forward, to establish conditions under which profits can be made; or else, as Oskar Lange says in “On the Economic Theory of Socialism” (Lange 1936), to replace the dynamic of capitalism quickly with another dynamic, not leaving a gap between one and the other when there is no dynamic; or else, if there is going to be a gradual transition to a new dynamic, or to a new mix of several dynamics or as John Dewey and Karl Popper advocate a transition to a constantly evolving perfecting of mixed institutions, whose evaluation and revision is informed by research in the social sciences and regularly debated in the media and in diverse forms of citizen participation, then there must be a systematic effort to maintain and guide the old plurality of dynamics while the new plurality of dynamics is being invented and tried out – as in Otto Neurath's image of the renewal of a wooden boat, whose planks can be replaced one at a time, but whose planks

cannot be replaced all at once, because that would sink the boat. This situation –the one I have described, the one where some set of incentives and some set of rules is required to organize what Marx called the metabolism of society, its interchange of matter and energy with the environment; in one word, its *work*— is not going to change because somebody “takes power.” It can only be changed by changing the rules. It can only be changed by introducing different norms which channel and guide different dynamics. Foucault was right at the beginning of Les Mots et les Choses when he suggested that society is not organized by the wills of subjects, but by its basic cultural codes. He was wrong to suppose that the codes that are basic are those he called *epistemes*, the ones that govern the production of knowledge.

From the foregoing it follows that ethics runs history. The historical evolution of the institutions which form the great prison which, as Foucault says, we are all – not just the prisoners in jails – now trapped in, is the evolution of basic cultural codes. People follow the basic cultural codes, the customs of their tribes, not mainly because they are following the orders of a God, a father, a chief or king, or a psychiatrist to whom “power” has delegated the role of keeping order; but mainly because the human body is the body of a cultural animal. It is the body of a cultural animal, but it is still a body that must eat to live. Under normal conditions (as Jean Piaget shows) the human embryo develops into a creature that participates in groups with rules. Biology and culture have, on the whole, evolved as they have because they work. They do not work very well; they could work a lot better; they may not work many centuries more; but on the whole they have worked. If they had not worked our species would have become extinct. Even Gods, even fathers, even chiefs and kings, even psychiatrists, follow rules that on the whole facilitate the performance of biological functions.

But maybe I am wrong. Maybe it would be a better way to do philosophy, a better way to decide how to talk, to follow Foucault in saying that the news from biological research is all bad news for humanists. Maybe we learn anti-humanism from biology because biology shows, as Foucault wrote in 1970 that human life is “...a detour to assure reproduction *encore et toujours*,” (Foucault 1970B p. 101). Human life is just a long way around to assure the reproduction of DNA molecules. (Id. p. 100) Maybe saying that myths organize cultures, and therefore perform biological functions as basic as those described in the Works and Days of Hesiod, such as the organization of agriculture and therefore of survival, is not good philosophy.

It is not that the Foucault of the early 1970s and I disagree about the facts discovered by the biologists. It is a matter of choosing to speak a different language, to see the world through different lenses, to do social science with a different conceptual framework.

Maybe I am wrong. Maybe it is true, or warranted by the facts, or the best discursive choice all things considered, to say that ethics is nothing but politics and sex taboos; and that once one chooses liberation as one’s ethical principle regarding sex, there is nothing else for ethics to be about but politics; and that politics is about power. So much for ethics. Perhaps the best thing to do about power is to resist it, and perhaps the best way to resist it is to transgress rules. Maybe that would be best.

But in saying that maybe it would be best to forget ethics and to promote the general practice of seeking to destabilize an oppressive society by transgressing rules, I

do not want to be unfair to Foucault. I do not even want to say I disagree with him. I have two reasons for not even wanting to say I disagree with him.

First: because Foucault changed his mind, or at least his emphasis; what he said in 1972 was not what he said in 1984. He clarified one point in 1976: “To use terror for the revolution is in itself a totally contradictory idea.” (Foucault 1976 p. 85) In 1982 he suggested in a seminar at the University of Vermont that he had previously overemphasized domination and power. (Foucault 1982, p. 785). By 1984 Foucault was saying things with which I could not agree more, such as that power “..should be given legal rules, techniques of management and also of morality, an *ethos*, a practice of self, so that the games of power can be played with a minimum of domination.” (Foucault 1984 p. 727)

Second: because perhaps I have misunderstood him. However, my response to the fear that I may have misunderstood exactly what Foucault was trying to say is not to redouble my efforts to understand exactly what he was trying to say, partly because I do not think he himself ever knew exactly what he was trying to say. And partly because the futile attempt to grasp the ever-receding mirage of “what Foucault really meant” would only divert me from what I am really interested in. What I am really interested in is solving problems, and to that end I am interested in building cultures of solidarity, in which people cooperate and share resources (not by abolishing private property but by establishing clear rules of the game that work out for everybody’s benefit). Cooperation and sharing will lead, I believe, to better solutions to problems, partly because solving the problems will be the objective. (Therefore, in principle, cooperation and sharing includes inventing cultures that play friendly competitive games in which self-interest is harnessed, as Adam Smith recommended, to facilitate cooperation.) They (the cultures of solidarity) would be diverse, each in a sustainable relationship to its environment, each held together by perpetually evolving and increasingly non-authoritarian ethics.

Skeptics will say I am naïve to expect ethics to play a larger role in the future than it has in the past. In reply I say that ethics (i.e. norms, including laws) has in fact played a major role in the past. (I also say that progress in the scientific study of human moral development makes possible a future when people are assured basic love and trust in early childhood –which is fundamental for breeding normal humans and not breeding sociopaths – and then educated both to comply more with existing cultural norms and to work harder to improve those norms.)

In order to make my case that rules and norms have been major causal factors in the historical process that has brought us to where we are today I am tempted to make a detour. “Where we are today” refers to our being trapped, or at least embedded, in a global modern world-system mainly organized by the rules and norms of commercial exchange. To show the historical role of legal and ethical norms in bringing us here where we are, I am tempted to take a detour to comment not on Foucault himself, but on a text Foucault declares to have been from 1970 onward a seminal source for him, namely Friedrich Nietzsche’s Genealogy of Morals. But since these lectures are supposed to be about Foucault, I will refrain from turning them into lectures on Nietzsche. Instead I will put the written texts of two of my essays that refer to Nietzsche on line so that anybody who wishes to do so may read them. These lectures themselves will move on to what is probably Foucault’s most famous book, his study of the history of prisons known as Surveiller et Punir in French and as Discipline and Punish in English. This is where we

have to go to see the next phase in the development of Foucault's thinking about power and resistance. This is where we have to go to study Foucault's most famous concept, namely "normalizing" or "normalization."

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