"Against Foucault"
Early Foucault Part Two

Howard Richards

Howard Richards presented this text on 4th May 2013 in Pretoria, South Africa, on video. Later on the same day, he engaged in a dialogue on his readings with Catherine Odora-Hoppers and Evelin Lindner.
The references are given at the end of Early Foucault Part Four.

I continue with remarks on Foucault's early works.

Remark 2: Interviewed by Gerard Raulet, Foucault said that his first book was his doctoral dissertation, his history of madness published in 1961. (Foucault 1994) He preferred to forget a 1954 book written for a series edited by his then supervising professor Louis Althusser. It was an introductory manual for students of psychology oriented toward so-called scientific psychology. It included a lengthy and favorable presentation of the tenets of Soviet behaviorism. (Foucault 1954)

Remark 3: In 1955, in his first published book (not counting the book he preferred to forget), a long introduction (so long that it was longer than the text it introduced) to a French translation of Traum und Existenz by the Swiss psychiatrist Ludwig Binswanger, Foucault described his method as a Heideggerian one in which philosophy was always present but not presupposed. Therefore, he wrote, "…we can dispense with an introduction that summarizes Sein und Zeit with numbered paragraphs, and free ourselves for the less rigorous task of writing marginal notes to Traum und Existenz." (Foucault 1955, p. 68). Following Heidegger, but without explicitly stating the reasons Heidegger gave for taking the positions he took, Foucault rejected all "positivist" psychology. Since positivism has had a long and varied history since it began with Auguste Comte in the early 19th century, it is well to note what sort of thinking he had in mind when he rejected the thinking he named with that word. He glosses his own meaning by saying he rejects all psychology that treated the human mind and the human being as part of nature. The existential analysis of *Dasein,* which Foucault contrasts with "positivism" as its polar opposite, is, "…a form of analysis that designates itself as fundamental with respect to any knowledge that is concrete, objective, and experimental; in which the point of beginning and also the method are determined only by the absolute privilege of their object: man, or rather human being, *Mensch-sein.*" (Foucault 1955, p. 66)

Since Foucault takes Heidegger's position without reviewing Heidegger's reasons for taking it, I will briefly add to what I have already written about Heidegger, reviewing some of the philosophical moves that accomplished the turning of the tables that allowed Foucault and Heidegger to regard naturalistic psychology as naïve, and *Daseinsanalysis* as fundamental, starting with Heidegger's teacher Edmund Husserl. Husserl called for "bracketing the natural standpoint," in other words for putting the natural standpoint between parenthesis and suspending judgment concerning it. The natural standpoint is a standpoint that takes the objects in the everyday world and ordinary ways of thinking about them for granted. Husserl insisted that from a scientific point of view, the natural

standpoint assumes what is to be proved. It accepts without question what needs to be rationally examined. Husserl revived the Hegelian word "phenomenology" and started a school of thought which proposed (as Descartes had proposed more than 300 years earlier) to rebuild knowledge on a sound basis, this time starting (instead of with Descartes' "clear and distinct ideas") with the phenomena given to consciousness. In other words: starting with experience – not the naïve experience of the person who simply reads reality through the lenses of the common sense of her time and place, but the carefully bracketed experience of people who follow Husserl's method for purifying experience of all its built-in assumptions.

Heidegger elaborated Husserl's phenomenological method in his own way, as did Foucault's teacher Maurice Merleau-Ponty. (Merleau-Ponty 1945) Heidegger made "being" the central issue. (His point is clearer in German because the verb to be (*sein*) is spelled with the same letters as the capitalized noun being (*Sein*).) This makes intuitive sense. How can you say anything about anything before you know what "is" "are" and other forms of the verb "to be" mean? At the beginning of <u>Sein und Zeit</u> (pages 5-38) Heidegger proposes a method for going about inquiring what being is. It turns out that the right way to ask the question is to ask about the questioner, i.e. that being for whom being is a question, i.e. human being, designated by Heidegger as *Dasein* (literally being-there). (Heidegger 1927 pp. 7,11,12,41-49) (Instead of just calling it human being, Heidegger needs to coin a term like *Dasein* in order to avoid falling back into the natural standpoint.) *Dasein* (human being) turns out to be a being always interpreting itself; it is a self that is always a question for itself; it is always reading itself, always telling stories about itself; and it always finds itself already thrown into the world, it is already *in-der-Welt-sein*, being-in-the-world, experiencing a world where the sun rises in the East and sets in the West (even though science says the planet earth revolves around the sun) and in which (to borrow an example from Frege) there is a morning star and an evening star (even though science says both are the same planet, Venus). (pages 50-88)

I have suggested in other writings that evoking respect for traditional patterns of social authority is the main payoff for Heidegger of his strategy for turning the tables on the neo-Kantians, thus establishing the interpretation of experience as a foundation of knowledge prior to natural science. The world where the sun rises in the East and sets in the West, and where there is a morning star and an evening star, is the same world that has the heaven above and the earth below (a point Heidegger elaborates in his essay on "The Thing" (Heidegger 1987)) The main payoff for early Foucault is that *Daseinsanalyse* authorizes the study of "concrete experience." (For Heidegger the question of being – far from being empty and general – is the "most concrete question." (Heidegger 1927 p. 9) Foucault's work will give new meaning to the word "experience." That "concrete experience" is for him a doorway to realms disregarded by naturalistic psychology quickly becomes apparent in Foucault's comments on Binswanger's <u>Traum und Existenz</u>. Descartes, the grandfather of modern science, had worried that everything he thought he knew might be false because although he thought he was sitting in his robe in a chair beside the fire, he might be dreaming. Merely dreaming. Freud had rescued dreams from being "mere dreams." Foucault writes of Freud, "With his book <u>Traumdeutung</u> the dream made its entry into the field of human meanings." (Foucault 1955, p. 69) But Freud only rescued the semantics of dreams. He interpreted fire as a symbol for sex or water as a symbol for death. It was not until the coming of Ludwig

Binswanger, the Heideggerian author of <u>Traum und Existenz,</u> that science took seriously the morphology and the syntax of dreams.

Later in his career Foucault will rescue not only dreams but also madness, art, criminality, unusual sexual behavior, the history of the sciences, and history itself from reduction to the pre-formed categories of naturalistic analysis (which early Foucault calls "positivist"). What he did always was "concrete analysis." It started with *Mensch-sein* and later, after a series of transformations, it became the creation of "... a history of different modes by which, in our culture, human beings are made subjects;" and still later it became a history of sexuality. Consistently until the end of his days, in spite of the changes his thought underwent from one period of his life to another, and even though in 1969 he decided that in some senses it was good and not bad to be a "positivist" and study "positivities" (Foucault 1969), his studies always carried an anti-naturalist message, although not always the specifically Heideggerian message of his 1955 introduction to Binswanger. "This project locates itself in opposition to all the forms of psychological positivism that seek to extinguish the meaningful content of the person by using the reductive concept of *homo natura*, and it replaces them into the context of an ontological reflection that takes as its major theme the presence of being, existence, *Dasein*." (Foucault 1955 p. 66) When in 1983 Foucault identifies with social struggles that "… underline everything which makes individuals truly individual," he is talking about the freedom to be authentic, to be crazy, to be an artist.

Remark 4: Although early Foucault took phenomenological hermeneutics in a somewhat different direction, which, with the benefit of hindsight, we can call a characteristically Foucauldian one, he also participated in characteristically Heideggerian moves. Pierre Bourdieu has shown that Heideger was the academically respectable spokesperson for numerous popular conservative writers who dreamed of soulful rural utopias of yesteryear and despised and feared the soulless urban masses. (Bourdieu 1985) Although I have found nothing in writing regarding Foucault's mother's ideology, since we do know that a conservative one would have served her material interests, and since we do know from Bourdieu's research and other sources that a conservative romanticism was in the air in Europe, one can entertain the hypothesis that Foucault himself imbibed popular conservatism with his mother's milk. Consistently with this hypothesis, in his early work Foucault, following Heidegger, re-enchanted the disenchanted modern world. In the process he returned to it a vivid sense of right and wrong.

Here are two examples in the form of quotes from Foucault's first book [with explanatory notes in brackets]:
 (i) "Every act of expression is to be understood against the background of these primary orientations [those of *Daseinsanalyse*]; it is not produced *ex nihilo*, but it situates itself in their trajectory, and it starts with them, as the starting point of a curve to which one must attribute the *ensemble* of the movement of its total accomplishment. It is in that measure that there can be a [philosophical] anthropology of art, which is in no way a psychological reduction. It cannot be a matter of tracing back the structures of expression to the determinism of unconscious motivations, but it is a matter of being able to acknowledge them along all the line of transformation of human freedom. Along that line that goes from near space to distant space, we will encounter a specific form of expression; there where existence knows the dawn of triumphant departures, the voyages

and adventures, the marvelous discoveries, the sieges of towns, the unforgotten exiles, the stubborn insistence on returning, the bitterness of the things found unchanged and aged, throughout the length and breadth of that Odyssey of existence, in the 'great songs woven of dreams and realities' epic expression takes its place as a fundamental structure of the expressive act." (Foucault 1955, p. 105)

       (ii) "…the experience of dreaming cannot be separated from its ethical content. Not because it reveals secret penchants, unspeakable desires that bring to the surface nude instincts, not because dreams are able, like Kant's God, to 'plumb the depths of hearts and kidneys;' but because it restores to its authentic sense the movement of freedom, because it shows in what way it is grounded or alienated; because it shows whether it is constituted as radical responsibility in the world, or whether it forgets itself and abandons itself to the fall into causality. The dream is the absolute revelation of ethical content, the naked heart." (Foucault 1955, pp. 91-92)

       As a critical realist, I want to say that such characteristically conservative ideas and passions (those of Heidegger, those of Bourdieu's popular proto-fascist writers in central Europe in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, those of early Foucault, those of similar contemporary thinkers) can be understood, accommodated, and respected within an ecological view of the physical functions of human cultures.

       I should say here, hoping it will be understood implicitly elsewhere, that although in some important ways some of his work is appropriately called anti-naturalist, I do not believe that Michel Foucault ever denies the main premises of critical realism. The dialogue between him and critical realists is not one between people who agree on the definitions of the terms, but disagree about the truth values of the statements made with the terms; so that some say yes where others say no, some say true where others say false; it is rather a dialogue among speakers who have made different choices about how to speak. Although in later years Foucault became famous for showing how discourses create their objects, to my knowledge he never said there are no natural objects prior to people giving names to them, nor that the natural world is unknowable, nor that socially created realities are the only realities, nor anything similar to any of these three claims but expressed in different terms. Sometimes he makes it a point to distinguish nature from culture. (e.g. Foucault 1966) He also makes it a point to distinguish legitimate natural science from bogus disciplines that pretend to be natural science. (e.g. Foucault 1976, p. 73)

Remark 5: Foucault was driven to the study of the history of mentalities by the same anti-positivist anti-naturalist concerns that drove his 1955 work on dreams. In 1957 he contributed to an anthology on contemporary philosophy a chapter on "Psychology from 1850 to 1950." Foucault began his review of a century of psychological research and writing by saying that psychology had inherited from the Enlightenment the desire to align itself with the natural sciences and to find in human beings the prolongation of the laws that govern natural phenomena. Thus alignment with the natural sciences and seeking to prolong natural laws into the explanation of human behavior are what Foucault has in mind in rejecting positivism. From its beginnings until the middle of the 20th century psychology had been unable to escape the contradiction between its project (to understand human beings) and its postulates (anti-historical positivism). He concludes, "Is the future of psychology not then to be found in taking seriously its contradictions, the

very contradictions that gave it birth? There would not then be any psychology possible except by the analysis of the conditions of human existence and by the recurring to the study of what is most human in man, that is to say, his history." (Foucault 1957A p. 137; see also Foucault 1957B) Thus Foucault sets the stage for his doctoral dissertation, his history of madness, Histoire de la Folie. It was a study of a psychological topic, insanity, written using an historical methodology. Its aim would be humanistic: to recover what is most human from the grip of a dehumanizing positivism.

Remark 6: His 1961 doctoral dissertation, Histoire de la Folie a l'Age Classique (Madness and Civilization) was a polemic against positivism from beginning to end. (Foucault 1961, pp. 67-70, 166, 179, 188-9, 208, 274, 428, 440, 472, 548, 552, 572, 598; cf. Derrrida 1994 pp. 65-68). Like Sein und Zeit it was a story of decline and fall. In the early days, "*En marche vers Dieu, l'homme est plus que jamais offert a la folie, et le havre de verité vers lequel finalemente la grace le pousse, qu'est-il d'autre, pour lui, qu'un abime de déraison?* (Foucault 1961, p. 51) (On the way to God, man is more than ever opened to madness, and the haven of truth toward which finally grace pulls him, what else is it, for him, than an abyss of unreason?) The story ends sadly: "*Le positivisme alors ne sera plus projet theorique, mais stigmate de l'existence alienée. Le statut d'objet sera imposée d'entrée de jeu à tout individu reconnu aliené.*" (Foucault 1961, p. 575) (Positivism, now, would now no longer be a theoretical project, but the stigma of alienated existence. The status of object would be imposed at the beginning of play on every individual considered insane.) One is reminded of Heidegger's famous question, "What has happened to us in the roots of our being now that science has become our passion?"

Remark 7: Also like Sein und Zeit, Histoire de la Folie can be treated – quite apart from its author's explicit claims – as a prophetic book that reveals what must be done to cure modernity of its crisis of authority. I will here use Histoire de la Folie to revise my own proposals for social transformation without claiming to speak for Foucault. In the final chapter Foucault says that Descartes' approach to truth made impossible *le lyrisme de la déraison*. (Foucault 1961, p. 638) It would seem to follow that if early Foucault and his allies succeed in dispelling the illusions of a Cartesian approach to truth generally, and of naturalistic psychology specifically, then *le lyrisme de la déraison*, which continued to exist during the times when a Cartesian approach to truth was rising and gradually becoming dominant – the poetry and prints of William Blake come to mind; as do Nietzsche's last words, proclaiming himself to be at once Christ and Dionysius; as do Friedrich Hölderlin and other romantics Foucault mentions appreciatively – will again be available. Perhaps it will save us. Perhaps the following words of Foucault tell us what it is: "Thus, in the common discourse of delirium and dream we find together the possibility of a poetry of the world; since madness and dream are at once the moment of extreme subjectivity and that of ironic objectivity, there is here no contradiction: the poetry of the heart, in the final solitude of its lyricism, exasperated, finds itself being by an immediate return the original song of things; and the world, long silenced by the tumult of the heart, finds again its voices." (Foucault 1961, p. 639) I do not fully understand what Foucault might have meant in the lines I have just quoted. Clearly he is in favor *le lyrisme de la déraison*. Perhaps like Plato he conceives of divine madness

being integrated into a healthy harmonious well-disciplined personality and a just social order; perhaps he is mainly interested in authority figures leaving individuals alone so they can enjoy *le lyrisme de la déraison* by themselves. In any case, early Foucault and Heidegger make me fear the emotional power of fascism; and they make me believe that social democracy must compete with it to succeed. People cannot endure even the Supreme Good if it is boring. Although I do not fully understand what Foucault might have meant in this passage, I do think he reflects here in poetic language an important fact: most people, maybe all people, maybe some people all the time and all people some of the time, are not satisfied with dull routine and live for excitement. Whether one deduces this fact from phenomenological *Daseinsanalyse*; or intuits it identifying with poets, novelists, and playwrights one admires; or proves it by writing a history of madness; or breathes it every day as part of the breath of personal experience; or, as appears to be the case with Foucault, derives it from all four of these sources; or whether, like Elias and Dunning, one extracts it from sociological analysis of human behavior (Elias and Dunnning 1986); or whether, like me, one deduces it from emotional proclivities of the human body hundreds of thousands of years old; it is, undoubtedly, a fact.

Remark 8: The word "experience" takes on new meanings as Foucault researches the historical conditions of the possibility of having one. The subject of an experience is no longer a John Locke or a David Hume sitting by himself having his sense impressions. The subject of a Foucauldian experience in Histoire de la Folie is likely to be "the nineteenth century" or "*l'age classique.*" Nor is Foucault an Immanuel Kant who prescribes once and for all the conditions of *any* possible experience. Foucault delineates the "concrete *a priori*" that determines what experiences are possible at a given time and place. (He will later delineate the concrete *a priori* that made Hume possible. (Foucault 1966, chapter 7))
 Let me give an example. Actually my example will be a paradigm in Thomas Kuhn's sense, because it will be the central particular scientific achievement of Michel Foucault in Histoire de la Folie.
        The condition of possibility of the *age classique*'s experience of *folie* was *déraison*. *Déraison* was the background, the *fond*, against which it was possible to see and to talk about "the fool." *Déraison* in turn presupposed and meshed with a set of institutions, practices, and meanings, all of which themselves came into being during earlier periods of historical time. It required, in particular, notions of reason, in comparison with which there could be unreason.
 (For Foucault an "experience" is simultaneously what is *seen* and what is *said*.)
        The condition of possibility of the nineteenth century's experience of insanity was early Foucault's *bête noire*, the psychology that seeks to align itself with the natural sciences and to find in human beings the prolongation of the laws that govern natural phenomena. It classifies mental illnesses as botanists classify plants. Foucault turns the tables on the "hard scientists," who in their proud overconfidence had regarded themselves as the real scientists of the social and psychological domains, by describing in great detail the historical processes that had to occur before it would become possible for them to have the experiences they have.