

## **“Against Foucault” Early Foucault Part Three**

Howard Richards

Howard Richards presented this text on 6th 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.

Remark 9: My questions now are: Does Foucault give any good reasons for considering the principle that nature judges culture to be false? Is Dewey wrong when he says philosophical (ethical) hypotheses are to be evaluated by their consequences? Ought institutions to be reformed because they are defective when they fail to assure that everybody has food, clean water, pure air, shelter against cold and heat, and medical care; or are the institutions that do not facilitate the provision of basic security for all simply different, no better and no worse, but only other series of experiences, miserable ones, that people in the course of history happen to have? It seems clear to me that Foucault would answer this last question in the affirmative, that is to say, choosing the first and not the second option – judged by his practical political activities, and by the favorable impressions he had of Swedish social democracy when he lived and taught there. This would be my resolution of my doubts about the passage I said I could not understand above: Foucault did not say *le lyrisme de la déraison* in a good society would be physically functional, but if you had asked him he would have said so. It also seems clear that Foucault did give good reasons, noted above in Remark 7, why such prosaic achievements as those I have listed in the last question are, although necessary, not sufficient. People also need *le lyrisme de la déraison*. I would say, being fairly confident that I am agreeing with Foucault but using language he would probably not use: People need mystical experiences; they need them so badly that they will get them from rock music concerts, from football frenzy, from all night *fiestas*, from experimental sex, from substance abuse, and/or from violence if they do not get them from religion, and/or art. The need for *le lyrisme de la déraison* is both an intrinsic and an instrumental need. It is the latter because social structures that do not cultivate it collapse in quarrels. For lack of charm they do not maintain workable human relationships. They do not succeed in meeting even basic physical needs because they fail at what Hanna Arendt calls “the art of living together.”

Remark 10: I am reasonably certain that Foucault would agree with the critical realist that society should adjust to physical reality in order to provide concrete benefits for its members. Nevertheless, what he emphasizes is a different point: that people who claim to know what reality is and how to adjust to it, abuse their position as possessors or *soi-disant* possessors of knowledge. Doctors and other experts exercise unwarranted control over other people’s bodies, on the pretext that they, the experts, know what people’s needs are and how to meet them. But surely neither Foucault nor anyone else would deny that there are physical needs that would exist even if there were no doctors, or even if there were none of the cultural forms we know. Foucault sheds some light, and perhaps

also some darkness, on this question in his discussions of signs and symptoms in La Naissance de la Clinique (finished 1961, published 1963). This book continues the humanist and anti-positivist work of the book on madness. Its general thesis is that the medical gaze, *le regard médical*, the clinical experience, should not be taken for granted as part of nature, for it is a product of history that could only come into existence after the historical conditions of its possibility were met. It is an undesirable product of history: the human being becomes an object, a case. However, so much of the book is about historical facts that it could almost pass for materialist history, and indeed Louis Althusser thought it was. Much of it could have been written by Fernand Braudel or by Immanuel Wallerstein. The clinical experience, the experience of diagnosis of the patient at the clinic, arose out of the rough and tumble of political struggles, and out of a series of efforts to reorganize medical practice to make it work, in the aftermath of the French Revolution. The old university faculties of medicine had been abolished and dissolved. Something had to be done to train and certify doctors, and to organize health services. But Foucault adds a non-naturalistic dimension, a Heideggerian one, to his otherwise Braudelian history of medicine. Or – to put it the other way around – Foucault, coming from a background strongly marked by phenomenological studies with Merleau-Ponty and of Heidegger; and following out early Heidegger’s principle that human being is through and through interpretive and historical; and following it out with a personal passion to redeem outcasts and to expose the frauds of those who abuse science to abuse power; is in La Naissance de la Clinique in the process of becoming more and more immersed in history’s material details. Foucault’s methodology coincides with his way of looking at the history of science. Science’s very categories change in time; in this respect its categories are no different from myths; the history of science intertwines with that of myths. (See Foucault’s 1961 review of Alexandre Koyre’s La Revolution Astronomique: Copernic, Kepler, Borelli (Foucault 1961A)). It is not simply the case that after shutting down the old medical establishment, the French Revolution had to reorganize medicine somehow to provide for the health of the people. It is rather the case that the very possibilities of thinking and seeing “medicine,” “health,” and “people” are historically contingent and hotly, often violently, contested. In the new order, that of the modern clinic, the doctor or the apprentice-in-training-to-be-a-doctor (or, more impersonally, *le regard médical*) sees the patient at the clinic. The doctor or assistant takes the pulse, measures the heartbeat, weighs the patient, asks questions, listens to patient’s self-reports, examines the body, checks the temperature, and *diagnoses*. In the *signs* the doctor sees *symptoms*. Symptoms of what? Symptoms of the underlying cause, the disease. Given the underlying cause, the patient’s condition can be expected to develop – give or take individual differences – as other cases with the same diagnosis develop. It can be treated with the same remedies. The sign/symptom structure of the diagnosis is, Foucault points out, homologous with ideology (ideology as an empiricist semiotic, a systematic study of ideas of the sort Destutt de Tracy proposed when he coined the word). It follows the same pattern in relating words to things as other ideologies. It is a social product, as are other ideologies. Very well, says the critical realist. At a phenomenological level, the relation of sign to symptom is an ideology. Foucault is quite right to say that the *regard* is *fondeur* with respect to the object of discourse. (Foucault 1963, p. vii, x) But, continues the critical realist, if the correct diagnosis is that the patient has measles, the reason why the diagnosis is correct is that the patient has measles. Measles is the physical reality the

doctor has detected. I do not believe that anywhere Michel Foucault specifically denies this point, and if he were to deny it, I would not believe that he could have any good reasons for denying it. When the signs are taken as symptoms of measles, the diagnosis is either right or wrong depending on whether the patient has measles or does not; and whether the patient has measles or not depends on the presence or absence of certain germs in the blood and tissues, which have certain molecular structures. Of course, admits the critical realist, there are socially created realities (Harre 1979), and in an important sense the molecular structures of measles germs can be counted among them; they are ideologies too; they are part of the discourse of chemistry and bacteriology; but, adds the critical realist, in an important sense they are not. (Bhaskar 1978, 1979)

Remark 11: I will not give reasons why critical realism is a plausible position to hold vis a vis other contemporary philosophical positions, since to do so would be to repeat unnecessarily what has already been written by Roy Bhaskar, Rom Harre, Margaret Archer, Heikki Patomaki, and others.

Remark 12: Acknowledging the existence of physical realities is a step toward acknowledging the need to change social realities so that they in turn will change physical realities, which will then in turn change social realities again – hopefully, if all goes well, favoring non-authoritarian authority by making a society’s norms more respectable and more respected because the norms are working better at a physical level. Social realities change physical realities not only because discourses define their objects, as in the case of madness-talk creating the category of “insane” and placing certain persons in it. The social changes the physical also because human action guided by conventional rules changes what physically happens. For example: the futures of plant and animal species today depend less than previously on random mutations and old-fashioned Darwinian natural selection, and more on the relationship of the species to the activities of *homo sapiens sapiens*. Human activities, in turn, are programmed by culture. The future of a species is likely to depend today on whether urbanization will destroy its habitat; or on whether, as in the case of the coyotes who hunt rats in the landscaped borders of the freeways of Los Angeles, human activity is creating new opportunities for the species; or on whether heating of waters due to human CO2 emissions is moving the species’ habitat out of the temperature range it requires; etc. *But* the activities of *homo sapiens sapiens* – the ways our particular species interchanges matter and energy with the environment – are driven by the prevailing basic cultural structures, notably by capital accumulation. It is still true that human activities are driven by capital accumulation to a major extent – certainly to an extent large enough to impact the future of many species – even after due account is taken of the endless attacks on totalizing theories that have proliferated since May of 1968. The conventional social rules that organize commerce conducted for the purpose of turning money into more money explain a lot and move many activities, even though they do not explain all or move everything.

Remark 13: As I write this, on the sidewalk outside my hotel poor people are trying to sell trinkets nobody wants or needs. Basic conventional rules, the ones derived from the Roman *jus gentium*, explain and animate what they are doing. On the sidewalk they are doing a form of selling that amounts to begging, since it is more likely that someone will

buy from a desire to help than from a desire to own; it is a combination of selling and begging that could easily turn into stealing if a seller-beggar encountered a tourist in a dark alley. Their pain and their needs are physical realities, even though there are many layers of cultural interpretation intervening between the cellular level and the experienced *in-der-Welt-sein* of a contemporary impoverished Latin American urban *Dasein*. They are physical realities interwoven with the legal norms written down in the Civil Code.

Remark 14: In 1961, when a reporter from Le Monde asked Michel Foucault who had inspired the methodology he employed in Histoire de la Folie, in reply he named two literary artists, Maurice Blanchot and Raymond Rousset, and one specialist in the study of the religious myths of ancient India, Georges Dumézil. (Weber 1961) Let us pretend that it is still 1961, and we know who Foucault told Le Monde the inspirers of his methodology were, but we do not know what Michel Foucault will write next; we can only speculate. Let us pretend that we have to speculate without knowing what in the later sixties, the seventies and eighties he will say about the choices he made in 1961. His interests in language and myths, one might speculate, might lead him to study language-games as episodes in the natural histories of human beings. Having written a cultural history of a science (psychiatry), he might have decided to write next a scientific history of a culture, in which he would analyze the material conditions that influence the generation, growth, and selective survival of symbolic structures. Given that he had chosen not to tell the reporter from Le Monde that Heidegger was a major influence, even though there are numerous employments of Heideggerian concepts in Histoire de la Folie (see Foucault 1961, pages 52, 140, 166, 178, 179, 180-82, 298, 210, 264, 278, 282, 472) we might guess that in 1961 in public Foucault is backing away from Heidegger. He might have written the material history of the juridical myths that constitute the conditions of possibility of the concrete experiences of entrepreneurs, accountants, lawyers, and economists. He had indeed already advanced in that direction regarding the concrete experiences of doctors and patients by writing La Naissance de la Clinique (which by the end of 1961 he had finished writing but had not published), a study of how the forces of history had shaped the culture of the medical profession. What actually happened was that on Christmas Day of 1961, right after finishing La Naissance de la Clinique he began to write an article that grew until it became a book on a purely literary subject, Raymond Rousset. (Defert and Ewald 1994, p. 24) My suspicion is that having gotten into writing history, as he said, to rescue from positivist psychology what is most human in human beings (Foucault 1957A, 1957B) he found himself veering toward historical materialism more than he wanted to veer. Histoire de la Folie and even more so La Naissance de la Clinique tend toward the conclusion, in my opinion contrary to their author's intentions, that material conditions determine the course of history. His next book, a book devoted to a purely literary topic, Raymond Rousset (1963A) was a first step in avoiding that unwanted conclusion. It was followed later and more famously by Les Mots et les Choses (1966), a book Jean-Paul Sartre quickly recognized as a disguised polemic against materialist accounts of history. Still later it was followed by explicit critiques of seeing economics as the mainspring of history in Archéologie du Savoir (1969) and in Foucault's lectures at the Collège de France and in Foucault's published books in the 1970s.

