"Against Foucault"
Early Middle Foucault (1964-1969) (Part Seven)
Howard Richards

Howard Richards presented this text on 18th May 2013 in Pretoria, South Africa, on video.
The references are at the end of Part Eight.

In the closing words of the last lecture I was talking about Foucault's deconstruction of the idea of man also known as the idea of humanity. I was talking about the deconstruction of the entity Foucault calls *l'homme* in the closing pages of his 1966 book The Order of Things.

Let me go on now to add to my list of ways I think Foucault was right by saying he was also right to identify what he calls the death of *l'homme* with: (1) Neitzsche's death of God, (2) The death of the king in the French Revolution (Foucault 1996 pp. 318-323), and (3) the collapse of belief systems as the transcendental philosophies hastily invented at the end of the 18th century to make up for the lack of God and king lose credibility day by day. I think there really was, and in some circles still is, a belief that humans are human because they are made in the image of God; and I think that Nietzsche and Foucault are right to say that this belief about what makes humans human cannot survive in an atheist or agnostic culture. There really was also a tendency perhaps more emotional than rational to find the meaning of one's life in allegiance to one's earthly lord and master the king. It could not survive the collapse of monarchy. Foucault is also right in my opinion to find Kant's transcendental moral philosophy brilliant but unbelievable.

In the end, say I, many apparently abstruse philosophical issues revolving around what it means to be a human person are issues are about authority; Dewey was right to say that Kant's critique of knowledge posed the central *political* question of modernity. Foucault echoes Dewey by saying that when belief in a transcendental realm dissolves, *l'homme* as conceived by Kant no longer exists. So let us look again at the brilliant but unbelievable idea of a transcendental non-empirical humanity, from a point of view that looks at the functions of moral authority in functioning cultures.

Now, assuming my premise that authority is to a large extent what organizes human life, we can reply to Foucault, that the demise of God, of the monarchy, and of belief in transcendental philosophies, need not mean the demise of all authority, nor – consequently—need it mean the disorganization of human life. Take an extreme case: the disorganization of a human personality collapsing into schizophrenia or worse. It is true, as Foucault assumes and as critical realists state, that there is no *a priori* reason to expect an individual biological human body to be inhabited by a single human personality. A body might be inhabited by multiple personalities as in the case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde or by zero as in the case of a body in a lengthy vegetative coma. A body might house a weak personality tending toward disintegration as in the case of a homeless beggar on the street who has no sustained personal relationship with anybody and whose struggling brain is periodically drowned in shock waves emanating from drugs and from the mass media. Nevertheless –here is my point connecting authority with organization of human life in general and with the integration of individual personalities in particular-- in

those normal cases in western cultures where there is one social person in one physical body, what integrates behavior to make the body's behavior a person's behavior is normally some principle of authority; for example the alliance of *logos* and *thymos* in the soul as Plato conceives it, or the alliance of *Ich* and *Űberich* in the personality as Freud conceives it. If it were true that the French Revolution brought both religion and monarchy to an end, this would indeed mean the end of a world *un gentilhomme ni vit que pour servir son Dieu et son roi.* It would mean not only the dissolution of the principles of one particular societal order but also the disintegration of one historically-given way of being a person in a body.

On Foucault's view the invention around 1800 of *l'homme*, a dual being at once empirical and transcendental, was in principle the invention of an autonomous moral agent whose self-given law was simultaneously the source of its own dignity and of the basic constitutive rules of society. Kant's transcendental human being was a key to solving both general social problems and specific personal problems. Let us assume that Foucault is right to say toward the end of his 1966 book that humanity thus reformulated by Kant and others who argued in a similar vein made psychology possible. Let us assume that Foucault is right to say that humanity so conceived made possible emancipatory social movements whose aim was articulated as reforming social institutions so that *l'homme* would enjoy in real life the rights and the dignity to which he was entitled in thought.

But none of this is equivalent to assuming that Foucault is right to insist that there is no other way to conceive humanity. Even granting that as a matter of historical fact humanity was conceived in Kantian terms in Europe in 1800, this does not imply that there can be no humanity without Kant. It does not imply that other cultures at other times and places lacked a concept recognizable as a concept of humanity, such as for example the African concept of *ubuntu,* nor does it mean that we today cannot reconstruct concepts like human, person, human development, humanity, and human rights in ways that are both believable and functional. We can even rescue some points similar to Kant's, such as the point that humans should be treated as ends in themselves not as means only. To rescue them we do not need to say that the arguments Kant made for them were valid. We can say they are valid for other reasons; we can say they work for us; they function to solve problems.

While agreeing with Foucault that transcendentalism of a Kantian sort is no longer believable, I also agree with Roy Bhaskar that a transcendentalism of another sort is believable. I do not agree with Foucault's general objections to any transcendental argument whatever (Foucault 1969). Bhaskar's sort of transcendentalism says the following. Critical realism has been justified by Bhaskar with a transcendental argument that asserts what must be the case for science to have had the success it has in fact had. Bhaskar makes a quasi-Kantian argument that the condition for the possibility of science is the existence of a real world independent of the ways humans conceive it. (Bhaskar 1979) I endorse this transcendental argument for naturalist realism; it is one of the premises presupposed by my claim that nature judges culture; and hence by my claim that nature helps to provide good reasons for preferring one pattern of authority over another. There must be authority. Human institutions cannot function without it. Some forms of authority are better than others, notably what I have been calling non-authoritarian authority. To get on with the business of life we *need* concepts of what it means to be

Howard Richards, 2013

human, of human rights and of human duties. Some concepts of humanity, of human rights, and of human duties are better than others.

I have been saying to Foucault, OK even if we assume Kant was one hundred percent wrong, there are still good reasons for holding humanistic ideals. Now let me backtrack a little. I do not actually think Kant was one hundred percent wrong. The respect for persons Kant called for can be defended maybe ten percent by modified versions of the reasons Kant gave for respecting persons. But mainly, I would say roughly 90%, for reasons Durkheim gave. Moral authority is a physical necessity without which no culture can function. What ought to be respected in the end is a functioning culture. A functioning culture is the current accommodation of culture to physical reality; it is the rules of the culture that exists here and now, wherever here may be and whenever now may be. It has to be the starting point for improving norms and institutions to make them more compatible with physical reality, or to make them better in any way. Respect for that animal whose ecological niche is culture needs to be respect for culture. Kant is unavoidable for a reason Durkheim gave: we in the modern West happen to have a *conscience collective* that denies that there is a *conscience collective*. It asserts that we are all individual subjects with rights who deserve respect. We need to accept Kantian ethics (and build on it, and reform it) just because it is part and parcel of the actually existing common sense of the world we live in. If Kantian respect for persons is unavoidable –even if it is unavoidable for the practical reasons Durkheim gave and not for the transcendental reasons Kant gave—then the Foucault of 1966 is avoidable. We can still be humanists even if the philosophical arguments for humanism that flourished in Europe in 1800 are no longer convincing.

For Foucault the death of *l'homme* spells the futility of misguided projects seeking "..the liberation of *l'homme*, human being in plenitude." (Foucault 1966B p. 502) For this reason Foucault must be acquitted of any charge of avoiding Marx. He attacks Marx head on. He attacks the very idea of human liberation. He attacks the very idea of emancipation. He attacks Sartre's philosophy of human liberation (not Sartre alone, but Sartre and others who think in similar ways) as straightforwardly as Ludwig von Mises attacks proposals to socialize ownership of the means of production. (However, it was Guy Debord, not Foucault, who persuasively argued that Sartre was deluded when he wrote of a proletarian revolution as if it were a real possibility.) (Debord 1994)

Foucault briefly summarized his anti-Sartrian (anti-emancipation) strategy in an interview with Madeleine Chapsal (Foucault 1966 C, p. 514) as follows:

Madeleine Chapsal: As a philosopher, what most interested Sartre?

Michel Foucault: …Sartre wanted to show… that there was meaning (*sens*) everywhere. But that expression, in his thought, was very ambiguous: to say "there is meaning" was at the same time an observation and an order, a prescription. There ought to be meaning; that is to say, we ought to give meaning to everything….

Chapsal: When did you stop believing in meaning ?

Foucault: The point of rupture was the day when Levi-Strauss for societies and Lacan for the unconscious showed us that the *meaning* was probably no more than a surface effect, a mirroring, a foam; and that what deeply ran through us, what was there before we were, what sustained us in time and in space was the *system*. (Foucault 1966C, p.)

Foucault's answer fits the pattern of the varied arguments I am assembling in favor of the view that interpreting the meanings of everyday events leads to engagement with the ethical issues concerning property rights and the commodification of human relationships classically posed by the works of Karl Marx. The phenomenology of daily life –as in Sartre or as in the linguistic hermeneutics of Charles Taylor -- leads to radical criticism. The French structuralism of the 1960s, or Pareto's theory of residues and derivatives, or any social science that avoids looking directly at the rules of everyday language games does not lead to radical criticism. It leads away from raising consciousness by critiquing those rules. It leads away from democracy, not mainly because the ideas of ordinary people are held to be illusions while only sophisticated scholars understand the deeply hidden processes that produce those ideas; but rather mainly because the rule-following of everyday life is seen as lacking causal efficacy; it is not, as it is in critical realist social theory, the very source and constitution of social structure; it is not the script of the actors in the theater where social change must be performed; it is the opposite of Aristotle's uncaused cause, it is the effect that causes nothing; the uncausing effect, mere surface, mirroring, foam.

To this line of thought, a line of thought which identifies progressives with the critical examination of the rules that govern the institutions that function in everyday life and structuralism with conservative elitism, the obvious objection is: But what about Louis Althusser? Was he not supposed to be a Marxist? And was he not a French structuralist of the 1960s? My answer to this question is E.P. Thompson's: Althusser recycled the latest trends in bourgeois ideology into a Marxist form. "Althusser announces , as original and rigorous Marxist theory, notions disintegrative of the full historical process, notions highly regarded within bourgeois historiography ...." (Thompson 1995 p. 123) When ideas like Althusser´s come to define Marxism, honorable scholars like Cornelius Castoriadis decide to leave the Marxist tradition because "... they see it as irreparable, inherently elitist, dominative, and anti-democratic (the ´scientists´ and the vulgar rest)...." (Thompson 1995 p. 227) For Foucault in 1966, on the other hand, Althusser's efforts inside the Communist Party to free Marxism from humanism were steps in the right direction. Foucault writes, "Our task today is to free ourselves definitively from humanism, and in that sense our work is political." (Foucault 1966 C, p. 516) (Foucault later emerged as a critic of Althussser as well as of Marxism in general. (Foucault 1978 p. 611)) The Foucault of 1966 considered that the powers-that-be East and West were defrauding the people under the cover of an empty rhetoric of human rights and human dignity. "Experience shows that in their development the sciences of man lead rather to man's disappearance than to his apotheosis." (Foucault 1966 B p. 502) Foucault has in mind especially his own interpretations of the scientific advances due to Claude Levi-Strauss, Jacques Lacan, and Georges Dumezil.

In his interview with Madeleine Chapsal he disclosed why he decided to cast what he wanted to say in terms of an *episteme* incompatible with *l'homme.* Foucault's answers

Howard Richards, 2013

to Madeleine Chapsal illumine the overall design and plan of <u>Les Mots et les Choses</u>. Foucault tells her and us that today (in France in the 1960s) knowledge is reverting to the Empire of the Sign, to the *episteme* of the classical age. *L'homme* must disappear for the same reason he appeared; he could not appear in the 17th and early 18th centuries because he was incompatible with the *episteme* of Representation; he appeared when it ended, as that dual being the subject at once empirical and transcendental, required by modernity; he must now disappear as Levi-Strauss, Lacan, and Dumezil dissolve the subject into the system. "In a certain fashion we are returning to the point of view of the 17th century, with this difference: not putting man in the place of God, but rather an anonymous thought, a knowledge without a subject, a theory without identity…" (Foucault 1966C p. 515). What I am suggesting is not that Foucault interpreted his immediate intellectual environment in the light of 17th century thought but rather the reverse; in <u>Les Mots et les Choses</u> he created an interpretation of the 17th century for the purpose of grounding an argument he wanted to make in his immediate intellectual environment. (He himself says that contemporary French debates on humanism provided the "point of historical possibility" for his own archaeological research. (Foucault 1969 p. 26)) Foucault was perfectly aware that for the renaissance humanists man was a being made in the image of God and placed by Him a little lower than the angels, that for Shakespeare man was an actor on the stage of life, that for Descartes he was a *chose qui pense* (thing which thinks). If during those centuries man (and woman) did not exist, in spite of what appeared to be endless talk about them, it was because the endless talk was not specifically about *l'homme* as a later age would come to define him. Foucault found in the 17th century a passion for conceiving knowledge in terms of tables, for classifying everything. In those tables there was no need to create a space in the table for locating *l'homme* as classifier; there was no need for the Kantian rational being whose *a priori* categories determined the conditions of any possible experience. Why not? Because God has already classified everything when He created it. Things were simply there. Hume was possible because God had been there ahead of him, laying out a field of phenomena which only had to be perceived, and then represented. But Hume was only possible for a while and to a certain extent; as Foucault says more elaborately and in more detail in the chapter of <u>The Order of Things</u> (Chapter 7) on the limits of Representation. Hume himself was consistent enough to realize that on his own worldview he himself was not necessary; he could find no perception of the self, and therefore rightly concluded that in the terms of the *episteme* he was working with he had no good reason to believe in his own existence, or in that of anything else, or of any links between causes and effects. It was because the classical *episteme* of Representation was not viable without God that there had to be a Kant. There had to be a Kant because someone had to find a way to do God's work making sense of the world in the absence of God. Kant found a way: the invention of *l'homme.* There had to be *l'homme* to make modernity viable. So conceived, *l'homme* was needed, but he is not needed anymore according to Foucault. He is not needed now that we have systems. "By system, one should understand a set of relations which maintain themselves, which transform themselves, independently of the things they link. One has been able to demonstrate, for example, that the Roman myths, and those of Scandinavia and the Celts, caused to appear gods and heroes quite different one from another but the organization that linked them (those cultures were ignorant of each other) their hierarchies, their rivalries, their betrayals, their contracts, their adventures

Howard Richards, 2013

obeyed a single system." (Foucault 1966C p. 514) Foucault goes on to talk about codes in biology, about Lacan's psychoanalysis, about recent discoveries in prehistory, and concludes: "Before any human existence, before any human thought, there was already a knowledge, a system, which we rediscover." (*Id*. p. 515) From the premise of the nonexistence of humanity, Foucault draws the conclusion that all projections for the liberation of humanity, or for the emancipation of humanity, are nonsense.

Foucault admits, even in <u>Les Mots et les Choses</u> that his reading of intellectual history is unusual. He admits that it is more common to see in the 17th and early 18th centuries not so much a passion for representation in tables as a passion for Galilean physics, for Cartesian analytic geometry, and finally for a Newtonian mechanical worldview, culminating in Kant's granting to the principles of Newtonian physics the status of *a priori* synthetic conditions of any possible experience. It is more common to see in Kant's ethics a realm of ends modeled on Roman Law as the social equivalent of the laws of nature. It is more common to see mechanistic thinking in political economy conceived as social physics. (e.g. Husserl, Merchant) Foucault distinguished his project in <u>The Order of Things</u> by saying that the mathematizing of the world characteristic of the period he studied applied mainly to simple phenomena, such as the orbits of planets which could be represented as one conic section or another, while making tables applied to his preferred field of study, complex phenomena: life, language, exchange.

Later, in a theoretical work devoted to methodological issues <u>L'Archéologie du Savoir</u> Foucault agrees with his critics. (Foucault 1969 pp. 26-28, 256-275; Foucault 1969B) In 1969 he admits that his 1966 interpretation of the 17th century was arbitrary. Its *episteme* was Representation because Foucault decided to talk that way, not because of anything in his sources that compelled him to do so. Next time we will examine in more detail the Foucault of 1969 so remarkably different from the Foucault of 1966.

Now let me close by giving another reason why *l'homme* survives in spite of Foucault's low opinion of him. Here I refer to the survival not only of humanity as conceived in other ways in other cultures at other times, but the survival even of the specifically Kantian creature Foucault designates as *l'homme*.

Let us peer into the maternity ward of the late 18th century and witness again the birth of *l'homme*. Immanuel Kant, who according to *l'homme*'s birth certificate was his father, although he lived in the 18th century had little or no truck with that century's foucauldian *episteme*, neither with Linnaeus, nor with the Port-Royal grammar, nor with debates among theorists of wealth concerning currency devaluations in France. He was a died-in-the-wool Newtonian. When he wrote *jede naturliche ding wirkt nach Gesetze*, (everything in nature works according to laws) the *Gesetze* he had in mind were Newtonian laws plus the similar laws he expected would be discovered in the future. When he wrote *nur ein vernunftige Wesen kann nach der Vorstellung des Gesetz taten* (only a rational being can act according to the conception of law) he had in mind the capacity of human beings to follow moral and juridical rules conceived as analogous to physical laws.

OK. But now let the critical realist speak. Let the critical realist make a case that the rule-following creature Kant described actually exists. She exists not where Kant said she was –in the realm of pure reason—but where Kant said she was not –in the realm of empirical facts. This remarkable human capacity, this conception of law, this capacity to form groups whose members respect the rules of the group, does not depend on a transcendental premise that Kant affirms and Foucault denies. It is observed. The biologist-turned-psychologist Jean Piaget (Piaget 1932) showed empirically that children growing up under normal conditions develop patterns of behavior guided by norms of mutual respect remarkably similar to the ideals Kant had described more than a century earlier in his philosophy. Piaget's findings have been amplified, modified, and generally confirmed, within and across several rather different cultures, by hundreds of researchers working in the field of the psychology of moral development. For this and other reasons we can say that the human being is biologically programmed to be ethically programmed. Non-authoritarian moral authority is not an unrealizable utopian dream nor is it a metaphysical postulate. It is everyday life. *L'homme* survives because people (and indeed *la femme* even more than *l'homme*) really are what the liberal thinkers at the beginning of the 19th century thought they were: social animals who can learn (and normally do learn) to respect moral and legal rules. The rule of law as a principle of political authority is viable because of a biological proclivity.