

Michel Foucault. Power, Truth, Strategy
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POWERS AND STRATEGIES

An interview with Michel Foucault conducted by the *Révoltes Logiques* collective (Jean Borreil, Geneviève Fraisse, Jacques Rancière, Pierre Saint-Germain, Michel Souletie, Patrick Vauday, Patrice Vermeren).¹

Révoltes Logiques: Histoire de la folie ends by unmasking illusions about the "liberation" of the insane. *The Birth of the Clinic* begins with the derision of medical humanisms and "acephalic phenomenologies of understanding". Nevertheless, leftist and post-leftist orthodoxy have readily summed up efficacy and oppression in "confinement", and made Michel Foucault a sort of modern Pinel prelude to the gay liberation of desires and things marginal. The same theme serves to reduce the analysis of mechanisms of domination to the pure relation of exteriority between power and the pleb, by posing the relation:

Classical Reason = Marxism
Confinement = Gulag.

Isn't there a reversal here which makes the critique of enclosure the catch-phrase of certain neo-liberalisms or neo-populisms?

Foucault: I do indeed fear a certain usage of the Gulag-Confinement parallel. A certain usage which consists in saying: we all have our Gulag; it is there at our doors, in our cities, in our hospitals, in our prisons; it is here in our heads. I fear that, under the pretext of "systematic denunciations", an inviting eclecticism is being set up which shelters all sorts of manoeuvres. One embraces, in a vast indignation, with a great "Lamourettian sigh", all the political persecutions of the world, thus allowing the P.C.F. to take part in a meeting where Pliouchitch is to speak. Which authorises the said P.C.F. to hold three discourses:

- out loud: Here we are, you and us, all together and very unhappy; the problems of the U.S.S.R. are the same as those of every country in the world, neither less nor worse and conversely. Let's share our struggles, that's to say divide them.

- to the electoral partners: See how we too are free with regard to the U.S.S.R. Like you, we denounce the Gulag: let's get on with it.
- within the P.C.: See how clever we are in avoiding the problem of the Soviet Gulag. We dissolve it in the troubled waters of political confinement in general.

It seems to me that one has to distinguish the *Gulag institution* from the *Gulag question*. Like all political technologies, the Gulag institution has its history, its transformations and transfers, its functioning and its effects. The confinement during the Classical age in all likelihood forms part of its archaeology.

The Gulag question, however, marks a political choice. There are those who pose the question of the Gulag, and those who do not pose it. To pose it means four things:

- To refuse to question the Gulag on the basis of Marx's or Lenin's texts, by asking through what error, deviation, misrecognition, speculative or practical distortion the theory could have been betrayed to this extent. On the contrary, to pose it is to question all these discourses, however old they are, on the basis of the reality of the Gulag. Rather than looking in those texts for what could condemn the Gulag in advance, it's a question of asking what in them allowed it, what continues to justify it, and what makes it possible to still accept today the intolerable truth. The Gulag question must not be posed in terms of error (theoretical reduction of the problem), but in terms of reality.
- To refuse to restrict the interrogation to the level of causes alone. To immediately ask; what is the "cause" of the Gulag (Russia's delayed development, the transformation of the party into a bureaucracy, the economic difficulties peculiar to the U.S.S.R.), is to make the Gulag a sort of illness-abscess, an infection, degeneration or involution. It is to think it only negatively, as an obstacle to be removed, a dysfunctioning to be corrected. The Gulag, maternity illness in the country that is painfully giving birth to socialism. The question of the Gulag must be posed in positive terms. The question of causes cannot be dissociated from that of functioning: what use is it? what function does it assure? into which strategies is it integrated?

The Gulag must be analysed as a politico-economic operator in a Socialist State. No historicist reduction of the problem. The Gulag is not a relic or a continuation. It is solidly present.

- To refuse to give oneself a filtering principle with which to undertake the critique of the Gulag, a law which would be internal to one's own discourse or one's own dream. By this I mean that one should give up the politics of inverted commas; not get out of it by assigning a set of discrediting inverted commas to soviet socialism which shelter the good, true socialism — without inverted commas

— which alone will provide the legitimate point of view from which to carry out a politically valid critique of the Gulag. In fact, the only socialism which merits these derisory inverted commas is the one which leads the dreamy life of ideality in our heads. We must on the contrary open our eyes to that which allows people over there, on the spot, to resist the Gulag; to that on the basis of which it becomes unbearable, and which can give to those of the Anti-Gulag the courage to stand up and to die in order to be able to say a word or a poem. We must know what makes Mikael Stern say "I will not give up"; we must know as well how those "almost illiterate" men and women who had been gathered together (under what threats?) to accuse him found the strength to publicly exonerate him. It is to them that we must listen and no longer to our sentimental little song of secular love for "socialism". On what do they support themselves, what is it that gives them their energy, what is it that operates in their resistance, what is it that makes them rise up? And above all do not ask them if they are still, in spite of everything, "communists", as if that were the condition for our accepting to hear them.² The lever against the Gulag is not in our heads, but in their bodies, in their energy, in what they do, what they say and what they think.

- To refuse the universalising dissolution of the problem through the "denunciation" of every possible confinement. The Gulag is not a question to be posed uniformly to whatever society. It must be posed specifically to every socialist society, to the extent that none of them since 1917 has managed to function without a more or less well developed Gulag system.

In sum, it seems to me that the specificity of the question of the Gulag must be stressed against any theoretical reduction (which makes it an error readable from the texts), against any historicist reduction (which makes it a conjunctural effect isolable on the basis of its causes), against any utopian dissociation (which would place it, along with "pseudo-socialism", in opposition to socialism "itself"), and against any universalising dissolution into the general form of confinement. All these operations — and there cannot be enough of them to fulfill so difficult a task — have the same role: to continue, despite the Gulag, to keep a certain form of leftist discourse circulating among us, the organising principles of which would remain the same. It seems to me that Glucksmann's analysis escapes from all of these so readily practised reductions.³

This being said with respect to the specificity of the Gulag question, two problems remain:

- How to relate concretely, both in analysis and in practice, the critique of the technologies of normalisation which derive historically from the classical confinement and the struggle against the soviet Gulag, insofar as it is a historically rising peril? Where are

the priorities? What organic ties are to be established between the two tasks?

- the other problem, which is tied to the preceding one (the answer to the second conditioning in part the answer to the first), concerns the existence of a "pleb", the constant and constantly silent target for the apparatuses [*dispositifs*] of power.

For the first question, it appears to me to be impossible at present to provide any peremptory individual answer. We must attempt to elaborate one by way of the political conjunctures which we have now to cross. For the second, on the other hand, it seems to me that at least an outline of an answer may be given. Without doubt the "pleb" must not be conceived of as the permanent foundation of history, the final objective of all subjections, the never totally extinct hearth of every revolt. The "pleb" undoubtedly has no sociological reality. But there is indeed always something which in some way escapes the relations of power; something in the social body, in the classes, in the groups, in the individuals themselves which is not at all the more or less docile or reactive raw material, but which is the centrifugal movement, the inverse energy, that which escapes. "The" pleb, undoubtedly, does not exist; but there is "plebness". There is plebness in bodies and in souls, it exists in individuals, in the proletariat and in the bourgeoisie, but with a diversity of forms and extension, of energies and irreducibilities. This measure of plebness is not so much that which is outside relations of power as it is their limit, their underside, their counter-punch; it is that which responds to every advance of power by a movement to disengage itself; it is therefore that which motivates every new development in the networks of power. The reduction of the pleb may be achieved in three ways: either by its effective subjection, or by its utilisation as pleb (cf. the example of delinquency in the nineteenth century), or when it stabilises itself according to a strategy of resistance. Taking this point of view of the pleb, that of the underside and the limit of power, is thus indispensable for the analysis of its apparatuses; on that basis its functioning and its developments may be understood. I do not think that may be confused in any way with some neo-populism which substantifies the pleb, or some neo-liberalism which harps on the theme of its basic rights.

Révoltes Logiques: The question of the exercise of power is readily thought of today in terms of love (of the master) or of desire (of the masses for fascism). Can one do a genealogy of this subjectivisation? And can one specify the forms of consent, the "reasons for obeying", the functioning of which is travestied by this subjectivisation?

It is around sex that is instituted, according to some, the ineluctability of the Master — according to others, the most radical subversion. Power is then represented as interdiction, the law as the form

and sex as the substance of that which is forbidden. Is this apparatus — which authorises two contradictory discourses — tied to the "accident" of the freudian discovery, or does it refer to a specific function of sexuality in the economy of power?

Foucault: It seems to me that these two notions, love of the master and desire of the masses for fascism, cannot be approached in the same way. Certainly, in both cases one finds a certain subjectivisation of power relations; but it is not produced in the same way in each case.

What is troubling in the affirmation of the desire of the masses for fascism is that the *affirmation* covers up the lack of any precise historical analysis. I see here especially the effect of a general complicity in the refusal to decipher what fascism really was (a refusal translated either by generalisation — fascism is everywhere and above all in our heads — or by marxist schematisation). The non-analysis of fascism is one of the most important political facts of these last thirty years. This allows it to be used as a floating signifier, the function of which is essentially that of denunciation: the methods of every power are suspected of being fascist just as the masses are suspected of being so in their desires. Under the affirmation of the desire of the masses for fascism lies a historical problem which we do not yet have the means to resolve.

The notion of "love of the master", I believe, poses other problems. It is a certain way of not posing the problem of power, or rather of posing it in such a way that it cannot be analysed. This by the inconsistency of the notion of the master, only haunted by the various phantoms of the master with his slave, of the master with his disciple, of the master with his worker, of the master who speaks the law and who speaks the truth, of the master who censures and forbids.

The point is that this reduction of the instance of power to the image of the master is tied to another: the reduction of the procedures of power to the law of interdiction. This reduction to the law plays three main roles:

- it allows a schema of power to be put forward which is homogeneous at whatever level one places oneself and in whatever domain: family or State, relation of education or of production;
- it allows power to be only ever thought in negative terms: refusal, delimitation, obstruction, censure. Power is that which says no. Any confrontation with power thus conceived appears only as transgression;
- it allows the fundamental operation of power to be thought of as a speech act: uttering of the law, discourse which forbids. The manifestation of power takes on the pure form of "thou shalt not".

Such a conception procures a certain number of epistemological benefits. This through the possibility of tying it to an ethnology centred on the great kinship prohibitions, and to a psychoanalysis centred on the mechanisms of repression. One single and identical

"formula" of power (interdiction) is thus applied to all forms of society and to all levels of subjection. Now, by treating power as the instance of negation, one is led to a double "subjectivisation": on the side on which it is exercised, power is conceived as a sort of grand, absolute Subject — it matters little whether real, imaginary or purely juridical — who articulates what is forbidden: the Sovereignty of the Father, the Monarch or the general will. On the side on which power is suffered, there is an equal tendency to "subjectivise" it, by determining the point at which the acceptance of the interdict occurs, the point at which one says "yes" or "no" to power; it is in this way that, to account for the exercise of Sovereignty, one supposes either the renunciation of natural rights, or the social contract, or the love of the master. It seems to me that the problem is always posed in the same terms, from the edifice constructed by the classical jurists up to present conceptions: an essentially negative power which presupposes on one side a sovereign whose role is to forbid, and on the other side a subject who must in some way say yes to this interdict. The contemporary analysis of power in terms of libido is still articulated by this old juridical conception.

Why the secular privilege of such an analysis? Why is power so regularly interpreted in the purely negative terms of the law of interdiction? Why is power immediately reflected as a system of right? It will no doubt be said that in western societies right has always served as a mask for power. This explanation does not seem totally sufficient. Right has been an effective instrument for the constitution of monarchical powers in Europe, and for centuries political thought has been ordered around the problem of Sovereignty and its rights. On the other hand, right has been a weapon of struggle against this same monarchical power that had used it to affirm itself, particularly during the 18th century. Finally, it has been the principal mode of representation of power (and by representation one must not understand screen or illusion, but real mode of action).

Right is neither the truth nor the alibi of power. It is both a complex and partial instrument of it. The form of law and the prohibitive effects which it bears need to be resituated among many other non-judicial mechanisms. Thus the penal system must not be analysed purely and simply as an apparatus of interdiction and of the repression of one class by another, nor as an alibi which shelters the lawless violence of the dominant class; it permits a political and economic management through the difference between legality and illegalisms. Similarly for sexuality: the interdict is undoubtedly not the major form in which it is invested by power.

Révoltes Logiques: The analysis of the techniques of power is opposed to the discourses on the love of the master or the desire for fascism. But doesn't it leave room for them by absolutising power, by presupposing that it is always already there, persevering in its being

against an equally persevering guerilla warfare by the masses, and by leaving aside the question: Whom and what does it serve? Isn't there behind that an ambiguous relation between political anatomy and marxism: the class struggle rejected as *ratio* of the exercise of power, yet functioning as final guarantee of intelligibility with respect to the dressage of bodies and minds (production of a labour force fit for the tasks assigned to it by capitalist exploitation, etc. .)?

Foucault: It is true, it seems to me, that power is "always already there", that one is never "outside", that there are no "margins" in which those in rupture with the system may gambol. But this does not mean that it is necessary to admit an unavoidable form of domination or an absolute privilege of the law. That one can never be "outside of power" does not mean that one is in every way trapped.

I would suggest rather (but these are hypotheses to be explored):

- that power is coextensive with the social body; there are not, between the links of its network, any golden sands of basic freedoms;
- that power relations are intermingled with other types of relations (of production, kinship, family, sexuality) where they play both a conditioning and a conditioned role,
- that these relations don't obey the unique form of interdiction and punishment, but that they take multiple forms;
- that their interweaving sketches out the general facts of domination, that this domination is organised in a more or less coherent and unitary strategy; that the dispersed, heteromorphous and local procedures of power are readjusted, reinforced and transformed by these global strategies, and all this with numerous phenomena of inertia, dislocation and resistance; that one must not therefore accept a primary and massive fact of domination (a binary structure with on one side the "dominating" and on the other, the "dominated") but rather a multiform production of relations of domination which are partially integratable into the strategies of the whole;
- that relations of power do in fact "serve", but not at all because they are "in the service" of an economic interest taken as primitive, but because they can be used in strategies;
- that there are no relations of power without resistances; that the latter are all the more real and effective to the extent that they are formed there where the relations of power are exercised; resistance to power doesn't have to come from elsewhere in order to be real, nor is it trapped because it is the compatriot of power. It exists all the more insofar as it is there where power is; it is therefore, like power, multiple and integratable into global strategies.

The class struggle may not therefore be "the ratio of the exercise of power", and yet be the "guarantee of intelligibility" of certain grand strategies.

Révoltes Logiques: Can the analysis of the guerilla warfare between the masses and power escape the reformist thought which makes revolt an indicator which compels those on top to new adaptations, or the lure by which a new form of mastery is instituted? Can rejection be thought outside of the dilemma of reformism or angelism?⁴ The interview with Deleuze in *L'Arc*⁵ gave to theory the function of a tool-box in the service of new political subjects, on the basis of experiences like that of G.I.P. Today, now that the traditional parties have reinstalled their hegemony on the left, how can the tool-box be made something other than an instrument for research into the past?

Foucault: The critique of reformism as a political practice must be distinguished from the critique of a political practice by the suspicion that it might give rise to a reform. This second form of critique is frequent in extreme-left groups and its use forms part of the mechanisms of micro-terrorism with which they have often functioned. It consists in saying: "Look out: whatever the ideal radicality of your intentions, your action is so local and your objectives so isolated that the opponent will be able to handle the situation on this precise point, to give way if necessary, without in any way compromising his global situation; better, he will on the basis of that locate the necessary points of transformation; and there you are co-opted." Anathema is cast. Now it seems to me that this critique "by" reformism rests on two errors:

- the misrecognition of the strategic form taken on by processes of struggle. If one admits that the form, both general and concrete, of struggle is that of contradiction, then it is certain that everything that can localise it, everything which allows accommodation with it, will have the value of a brake or blockage. But the problem is to know whether the logic of contradiction can indeed serve as a principle of intelligibility and as a rule for action in political struggle. This touches on a momentous historical question: how is it that since the nineteenth century the specific problems of struggle and its strategy have so constantly tended to be dissolved in the meagre logic of contradiction? There are a whole series of reasons for that which it will be necessary one day to attempt to analyse. It is necessary in any case to try to think struggle and its forms, objectives, means and processes according to a logic which will be freed from the sterilising constraints of the dialectic. In order to think the social bond, the "bourgeois" political thought of the eighteenth century took up the *juridical form of the contract*. In order to think the struggle, the "revolutionary" thought of the nineteenth century took up the *logical form of the contradiction*: the latter is no doubt worth no more than the former. On the other hand, the great States of the nineteenth century took up a strategic thought, whereas the revolutionary struggles only thought their strategy in a very conjunctural way, always trying to inscribe it

on the horizon of contradiction.

- the phobia of the reformist response by the opponent is also tied to another error. This is the privilege accorded to what is actually called without laughing the "theory" of the weakest link: a local attack is supposed to have sense and legitimacy only when directed towards the element which, when broken, will permit the total rupture of the chain: local action then, but which by the choice of its emplacement will act radically on the whole. Here too, it would be necessary to ask why this proposition has had such success in the twentieth century, and why it has been erected into a theory. Certainly it allowed the thinking of that which had been unforeseeable for marxism: the revolution in Russia. But in a general way it must be recognised that it is a question there not of a dialectical proposition but of a strategic one — very elementary, moreover. It was the strategical minimum acceptable for a thought ruled by the dialectical form and it has remained still very close to the dialectic, since it enunciated the possibility for a local situation to stand for the contradiction of the whole. Hence the solemnity with which a "theory" was erected on this "leninist" proposition which is only just at the level of the early training of a sub-lieutenant of the reserve. And it is in the name of this proposition that one terrorises any local action with the following dilemma: either you attack locally, but you must be sure that it is the weakest link such that its rupture will blow everything up; or the whole thing didn't blow up, the link wasn't the weakest and the opponent had only to reorganise his front, the reform has reabsorbed your attack.

It seems to me that all this intimidation by the fear of reform is tied to the insufficiency of a strategic analysis appropriate to political struggle — to struggle in the field of political power. The role of theory today appears to me to be exactly that: not to formulate the global systematicity which puts everything in place; but to analyse the specificity of mechanisms of power, locate the liaisons, the extensions, to build step by step a knowledge of strategy. If "the traditional parties have reinstalled their hegemony on the left", and on the various struggles which they haven't controlled, one of the reasons — amongst many others — was that the only thing given to analyse their unfolding and their effects was a profoundly inadequate logic.

Theory as a tool-box means:

- that it is a question of constructing not a system but an instrument: a *logique* appropriate to power relations and to the struggles taking place around them;
- that this research can only be done step by step, on the basis of a reflection (necessarily historical in certain of its dimensions) on given situations.

N.B. These questions were put to me in writing. I answered them in the same way, but by improvising and changing practically nothing from the first draft. Not through any belief in the virtues of spontaneity, but in order to leave a problematic character, voluntarily uncertain, to the assertions advanced. What I have said is not "what I think" but often what I wonder whether it couldn't be thought.

Translated by Paul Patton

NOTES

- 1 Published in *Les Révoltes Logiques*, 4 (Winter, 1977): [Tr.]
- 2 Note that one does not find in France, as in other countries, the regular publication of Soviet counter-culture. It is there and not in the texts of Marx that we should find material for reflection. [M.F.]
- 3 Foucault is referring to André Glucksmann's *La Cuisinière et le Mangeur d'Hommes*, Paris, Seuil, 1975. [Tr.]
- 4 "Angelism" refers to a certain current of thought amongst the so-called "new philosophers", in particular to Christian Jambet and Guy Lardreau's *L'Ange*, Paris, Grasset, 1976. [Tr.]
- 5 "Intellectuals and Power", *L'Arc*, 49 (1972). Translated in *Telos*, 16 (Summer, 1973), and reprinted in Bouchard (Ed.), *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice*, Cornell, 1977. [Tr.]

POWER AND NORM: NOTES*

N.B. — This translation is of a series of notes taken at a lecture given by Michel Foucault. It therefore has a very summary character, and while it has been included for its range of suggestions and indications, it should be clearly understood that in no sense is this a text "by" Michel Foucault. In the original lecture, the analysis of power relations was embedded in a long and detailed historical analysis of specific institutions. [Eds].

It has been necessary to free ourselves from four sorts of analysis of power:

1. from the theoretical schema of appropriation of power, that is, from the idea that power is something that is possessed — something that some definite people possess — something that others do not possess. And that there is in society a group of people, a class, which possesses power and which is supposed to be the bourgeoisie;
2. from the notion of the localisation of power, that is, the idea that political power is always localised in a definite number of elements and essentially in the state apparatuses. Thus from the notion of the correspondence between forms of power and political structures;
3. from the notion of subordination. Thus from the idea that power is a definite type of maintenance, continuation and reproduction or a mode of production; that is, that power is always subordinated to a mode of production, which is always prior, if not historically, then analytically;
4. from the notion according to which power, within the order of knowledge, produces nothing but ideological effects.

1. — The formula "They have the power" may have its value politically; it does not do for an historical analysis.

Power is not possessed, it acts in the very body and over the whole surface of the social field according to a system of relays, modes of connection, transmission, distribution, etc. Power acts through the smallest elements: the family, sexual relations, but also: residential relations, neighbourhoods, etc. As far as we go in the social network, we always find power as something which "runs through" it, that acts, that brings about effects. It becomes effective or not, that is, power is always a definite form of momentary and constantly reproduced