

The Return of the Subject in late Foucault

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*The following essay is an initial attempt to extend the comparison of the thought of Michel Foucault with that of the Frankfurt School, begun in my *Logics of Disintegration* (Verso, 1987), to cover the work of Foucault's last phase. It does not claim to be a comprehensive analysis, but simply seeks to establish two fundamental points: firstly, that the return of a self-constituting subjectivity in Foucault's final writings cannot be seen as merely a shift of emphasis within a consistent project (as suggested, for example, by Deleuze, in his book on Foucault), but arises out of the intractable dilemmas of Foucault's earlier work, and represents a break with many of its assumptions; secondly, that the form in which Foucault introduces the concept of the subject, namely as an undialectical reaction to the political implications of philosophical 'antihumanism', raises as many problems as it solves. A somewhat different version of this essay is to appear in German in the anthology *Die Aktualität der 'Dialektik der Aufklärung': Zwischen Modernismus und Postmodernismus*, published by Campus Verlag, Frankfurt (1989). I am grateful to the Verlag for permission to republish this material here.*

In the final years of his life, Michel Foucault came to acknowledge that he could have avoided many detours and oversights in his own research, had he been familiar with the work of the Frankfurt School at any earlier date. Despite these recognized affinities, however, there is clearly a significant gap in the way in which regulating power and its dominated other, and the relation between them, are theorized in the two cases. For the classical Frankfurt School the oppressiveness of this relation is the result of the preponderance in modern society of a restricted means-end rationality, which cannot be seen as exhausting the promise of reason as such. This means that the corporeal is not seen as intrinsically irrational. Freud's error, for example, is to take the conformist ego's view of the drives as threatening and chaotic for an immutable truth. Conversely, instrumental reason itself appears irrational from the standpoint of a suffering nature which it overrides. Each aspect of a divided reason experiences the irrationality of its other. Foucault, of course, rejects this perspective, since – along with other post-structuralist thinkers – he suspects that the promise of an undivided reason has totalitarian implications. He argues that we cannot speak of reason and its history as such, but only of a plurality of practices, of 'forms of rationality', which compete and overlap with each other. Our task is to situate ourselves within this ever-shifting field of struggles, without anticipating any ultimate 'reconciliation'.

The problem with Foucault's position is that it deprives the concept of rationality of any determinate content. The diversity of rationalities is simply equivalent to the diversity of practices. This generates two major problems. Firstly, there is the question

of the general connection between power and knowledge on which his work of the 1970s, in particular, is based. Although his evident intention is to present power and knowledge as internally related (hence his use of the hyphenated term 'power-knowledge'), this relation is in fact most frequently portrayed in terms of the *institutional preconditions* for the formation of certain types of knowledge. Foucault's fundamental argument is that it is the opportunities for close surveillance opened up by the asylum, the hospital, the prison, which makes possible the elaboration of the corresponding 'human sciences'. Thus, in an interview dating from 1975, he suggests that:

The archaeology of the human sciences has to be established through studying the mechanisms of power which have invested human bodies, acts and forms of behaviour. And this investigation enables us to rediscover one of the conditions of the emergence of the human sciences: the great 19th century effort in discipline and normalization.¹

But to talk in this way is in fact to make a relation between power and knowledge non-intrinsic. Foucault does not explain how the 'effort in discipline and normalization' is *enhanced* by the application of scientific knowledge. The reason for this failure is not difficult to discover. For, were Foucault to admit that the application of scientific knowledge increases the effectivity of action, he would be obliged to abandon his underlying relativist stance, and to admit the reality of 'progress' in at least one dimension of rationality: the cognitive-instrumental dimension. Hence the crossing of the 'technological' threshold by disciplines, the spiralling reinforcement of power and knowledge which Foucault evokes, remains theoretically unexplained.

Secondly, there is a deep difficulty in Foucault's accounts of the relation between disciplinary power and the body, 'rationalities' and their 'other'. Since Foucault wishes to avoid judging power-knowledge complexes from a normative standpoint, by assessing the force of the *claim* embodied in the label 'rationality', he is obliged to refuse any distinction between facticity and validity, and therefore cannot denounce the human sciences as forms of distortion or misrepresentation. For Foucault, as we know most clearly from *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, the 'objects' of discursive formations are defined by these formations. But this abstention from judgements of validity leads to difficulties when Foucault wishes to give his position a critical edge. An attack on disciplinary power, for example, could only be carried out from the standpoint of an alternative conception of the body. But for Foucault this second conception could only be part of another power-complex, and could not claim any greater 'truth' or normative superiority.

Foucault's response to this dilemma remains fundamentally ambiguous. On the one hand he is tempted to abandon his critical

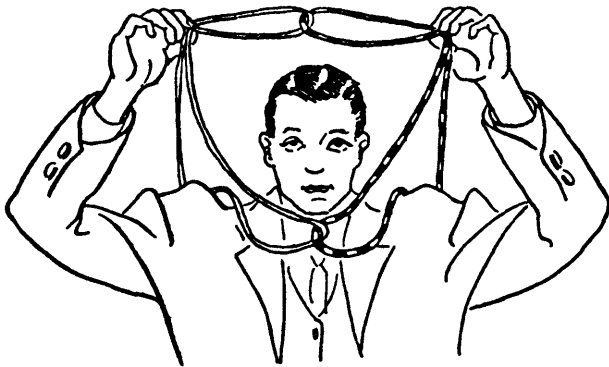
claims, suggesting that

It is necessary to pass over to the other side – the other side from the ‘good side’ – in order to try to free oneself from these mechanisms which make two sides appear, in order to dissolve the false unity of this other side whose part one has taken.²

On the other hand, Foucault is clearly unable entirely to abandon an emancipatory perspective. But this perspective is condemned to remain tentative and fleeting, since it seems to require, in contrast to Adorno and Horkheimer’s exposure of the irrationality of the dominant *ratio*, an espousal of irrationality itself.

This difference is clearly apparent in the differing attitudes of Adorno and Foucault to the idea of a utopia of non-regulated sensuousness. In *The History of Sexuality*, for example, Foucault permits himself to evoke fleetingly a ‘different economy of bodies and pleasures’ which would no longer be subordinated to the confessional quest for identity,³ but this remains only an elusive suggestion. Any more positive determination of the body and its needs would contravene Foucault’s deep inclination towards relativism. By contrast, in *Negative Dialectics* Adorno argues explicitly that ‘all happiness aims at sensual fulfilment and obtains its objectivity in that fulfilment. A happiness blocked off from every such aspect is no happiness.’⁴

Even if one rejects the suggestion that its implications are totalitarian, there is clearly a justified worry behind Foucault’s resistance to the project of the restoration of the integrity of a



bisected reason. His suspicion is that the totalization of instrumental reason is too simple a story to account for the complexities of modernity. Paradoxically, it is Foucault – often taken to be an archetypal thinker of ‘postmodernity’ – who can be seen as defending a conception of the pluralism and openness of modernity, while Adorno and Horkheimer appear to be ‘postmodern’ in their virtual extinction of the emancipatory power of reason. The direct statement in *Dialektik der Aufklärung*, that ‘Enlightenment is as totalitarian as any system’⁵ suggests the difficulties which Adorno and Horkheimer will have in giving any coherent account of the progressive dimension of Enlightenment univer-

salism. As Herbert Schnadelbach has written, with reference to Horkheimer’s moral philosophy:

One could almost identify critical theory as a whole with the conviction that the General and the Powerful *cannot* be good because it is general and powerful; in other words, the Good in this world is to be sought in the ephemeral, the weak, in the individual impulse, in the exception, indeed in the improbable – in the unexpected and actually unwise goodness of individual motives and actions.⁶

Despite his ostensible reluctance to interpret modernity in terms of any unilinear model of rationalization, Foucault does perceive – and is even more hostile to – the rise of the universal claims of bourgeois morality. This can be seen clearly from certain passages in *Madness and Civilization*, where Foucault argues that it is precisely the emergence of conscience which makes the insane legitimate targets for correction. ‘The fundamental principles of bourgeois society,’ he writes, ‘permit this conscience which is both private and universal to reign over madness without any possible contestation.’⁷ Thus, there is a fundamental difficulty in the positions both of Adorno and Horkheimer and of Foucault, in relation to the coherent formulation of the practical consequences of their respective positions. The former *retain* a concept of the subject, but in a form which condemns the subject to an inevitable, totalizing process of reification. (The equation of the universal and the rational in the moral philosophy of German Idealism simply perpetuates the domination of nature.) By contrast, Foucault, for most of his career, theorizes the subject as entirely constructed through social practices, and in this respect acquires greater freedom of interpretation, to the extent that he sometimes denies being able to give any determinate content to the concept of modernity.⁸ Yet the price of this abandonment is an inability to think the concept of emancipation coherently at all, since, as we have seen, Foucault is deeply suspicious of what Horkheimer and Adorno term the ‘remembrance of nature in the subject, in whose fulfillment the unacknowledged truth of all culture lies hidden’.⁹

This difficulty in part explains the abrupt theoretical shift which characterizes Foucault’s late work. It is impossible not to read this work both as an attempt to overcome the ambiguity of his earlier relation to concepts of power and emancipation, and an admission of the limits of the ‘postmodern’ thought which attempts to bypass the concept of the subject, and consequently destroys any coherent notion of freedom at all. Foucault’s task, in his late work, will be to articulate the concepts of subjectivity and freedom in such a way as to avoid any suggestion that such freedom must take the form of the recovery of an authentic ‘natural’ self.

This move is reinforced by Foucault’s conviction that modern technologies of power and the belief in authenticity are intimately related: the notion of a liberation of nature, underpinned by a scientific theory of the deep self, such as psychoanalysis, leads simply to a deeper enslavement. In fact, the first volume of *The History of Sexuality* can be seen as Foucault’s attempt to provide a genealogy of ‘deep subjectivity’. Foucault draws attention to the dissolution of the forms of group identity which characterize traditional societies, and their replacement by a form of identity which depends increasingly on the capacity of the individual to reflect upon and articulate the domain of private experience, suggesting that this transition is epitomized in the change in meaning of the word ‘avowal’:

For a long time, the individual was vouched for by the reference to others and the demonstration of his ties to the commonweal (family, allegiance, protection); then he

was authenticated by the discourse of truth he was obliged to pronounce concerning himself.¹⁰

Foucault correlates this transition with the shift from epic narrative to the modern literature of introspection, and with the rise of philosophies of consciousness, 'the long discussions concerning the possibility of constituting a science of the subject, the validity of introspection, lived experience as evidence of the presence of consciousness to itself'.¹¹ Yet Foucault wishes to suggest that our broadened access to an 'inner world' distinct from the external worlds of both nature and the social is the result of a forgotten coercion:

One confesses – or is forced to confess. When it is not spontaneous or dictated by some external imperative, the confession is wrung from a person by violence or threat; it is driven from its hiding place in the soul or extracted from the body.¹²

By linking the capacity for avowal to the inquisitions of the confessional, Foucault is able to argue that 'the obligation to confess is so deeply ingrained in us, that we no longer perceive it as the effect of a power which constrains us; on the contrary, it seems that truth, lodged in our own secret nature, "demands" only to surface'.¹³

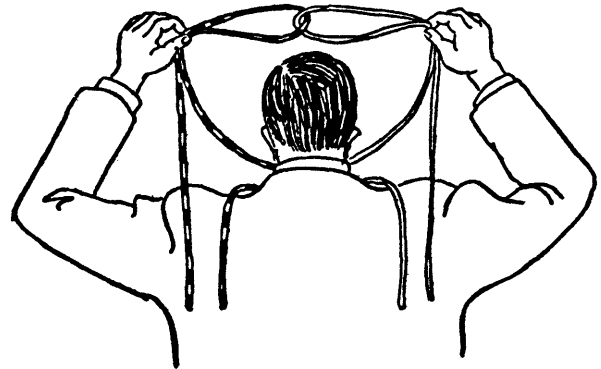
It is interesting to compare this argument with one of its prototypes – Nietzsche's account of the origins of bad conscience, in the second essay of *On the Genealogy of Morals*. For it is clear that, despite his emphasis on the cruelty which is required for moral imperatives to be internalized, Nietzsche does not consider the emergence of an intensified awareness of one's own inner impulses to be simply a power-induced illusion. He writes:

Let me hasten to add that the phenomenon of an animal soul turning in upon itself, taking arms against itself, was so novel, so profound, mysterious, contradictory, and pregnant with possibility, that the complexion of the universe was changed thereby. This spectacle (and the end of it is not yet in sight) required a divine audience to do it justice. It was a spectacle too sublime and paradoxical to pass unnoticed on some trivial planet. Henceforth man was to figure among the most unexpected and breathtaking throws in the game of dice played by Heraclitus's great "child", be he called Zeus or Chance. Man now aroused an interest, a suspense, a hope, almost a conviction – as though in him something were heralded, as though he were not a goal but a way, an interlude, a bridge, a great promise...¹⁴

Nietzsche, in other words, while intensely aware of the paralyzing capacity of an excessive self-consciousness, does not consider the discovery of inner depth to be simply a power-induced illusion. Rather, this discovery must be incorporated and transcended towards a new spontaneity. I would argue, by contrast, that in his position Foucault has conflated two issues. His critique of the culture of therapy, and of a self-destructive cultivation of subjectivity is undoubtedly legitimate. Yet these cultural developments need not be the only forms which a more fluid access to inner nature can take. There is also the possibility of more self-expressive shaping of everyday life, which would enable the subjective and public geography of contemporary societies to enter into a more balanced relationship.

I would argue that the Frankfurt School have a more complex account of these problems. Adorno and Horkheimer are by no means oblivious to the manipulative potential of psychoanalysis. In *Minima Moralia* Adorno is ruthless in his exposure of psychoanalysis as a form of social control:

Psychoanalysis prides itself on restoring the capacity for pleasure, which is impaired by neurotic illness. As if the mere concept of a capacity for pleasure did not suffice gravely to devalue such a thing, if it exists. As if a happiness gained through speculation on happiness were not the opposite, a further encroachment of institutionally planned behaviour-patterns on the ever diminishing sphere of experience.¹⁵



It is clearly a similar concern which underlies Foucault's attack on the 'repressive hypothesis', in the first volume of *The History of Sexuality*, and his suspicion of doctrines of liberation which rely on a conception of a 'deep self' which needs to be uncovered through some privileged form of cognitive access. Yet, at the same time, Adorno's position also indicates what might be suspect about Foucault's refusal of the deep self. Adorno does not deny the 'bottomless fraud of mere inwardness'.¹⁶ In *Minima Moralia* he argues that 'authenticity itself becomes a lie the moment it becomes authentic, that is, in reflecting on itself, in postulating itself as genuine, in which it already oversteps the identity which it lays claims to in the same breath'.¹⁷ But he also sees the smoothing over of 'terror before the abyss of the self' as equally a function of the technologies of social adaptation.¹⁸ A similar conception was, of course, made popular by Marcuse during the 1960s, in the form of an account of 'repressive desublimation'. Long before Foucault, the Critical Theory tradition had highlighted the possibility of a regressive form of libidinal emancipation which simply slotted individuals even more efficiently into the existing system of production and consumption. However, for Critical Theory, this possibility does not invalidate the insights of psychoanalysis into the fatality of the dialectic between nature and society. The tendency of Critical Theory, from the late 1930s onwards, was to distance itself from psychoanalysis as a supposedly positive science of the mind, and from the adaptational function of therapeutic practice, while at the same time retaining Freud's metapsychological insights, as a theorization, at the level of the individual psyche, of the inherently conflictual character of culture.¹⁹

In his late work Foucault attempts to escape these complexities, by advocating what he terms an 'aesthetics of existence',

inspired by his research into the ethical codes of Greek and Roman Antiquity. He appeals to a notion of pure self-stylization, which would not be imposed as a universal norm, but would rather be open to the choice of the individual. However, it is difficult to see how in contemporary society any such turn towards an aesthetics of existence could be anything other than a reinforcement of social tendencies towards atomization. Not only this, but Foucault fails to appreciate the dialectic inherent in the concept of individuality itself. For Adorno and Horkheimer:

The independence and incomparability of the individual crystallize resistance to the blind, repressive force of the irrational whole. But, historically, this resistance was only made possible by the blindness and irrationality of each independent and incomparable individual.... The radically individual features of a person are both components in one, the factor which has been able to escape the ruling system and fortunately lives on, and the symptom of the injury by which the system maims its members.²⁰

In contrast to this dialectical conception, in much of his work of the 1970s, Foucault describes individualization in a one-sided manner as merely the effect of technologies of power. Then, in his last works, he surprisingly shifts to a positive evaluation of the individual cultivation of the self. However, what appears to be the advocacy of an arbitrary stylization of life in these works could easily reinforce the situation described in *Dialektik der Aufklärung*:

Pseudo-individuality is rife: from the standardized jazz improvisation to the exceptional film star whose hair curls over her eye to demonstrate her originality. What is individual is no more than the generality's power to stamp the accidental detail so firmly that it is accepted as such.¹⁹

The possibility of such an outcome is reinforced by the fact that Foucault explicitly attacks the 'idea of an analytical or necessary link between ethics and other social or economic or political structures'.²²

The problematic features of Foucault's conception can be further highlighted by enquiring what the content of Foucault's concept of the aesthetic might be, in his invocations of an aesthetics of existence. In one sense, this term is clearly an anachronism when applied to the ethical codes of Antiquity, since, as Foucault himself makes clear, such codes were deeply embedded in a nexus of social relations of power and prestige: the modern autonomy of the aesthetic is here nowhere visible. Furthermore, to speak of the possibility of an 'aesthetics of existence' is to describe a situation in which the aesthetic would lose its specificity. For, as Rudiger Bubner has argued:

Familiarity with a life-world, in which we feel at home, is to such an extent the reservoir of aesthetic effects, that its loss would be at the same time the loss of aesthetic possibilities. We experience unburdening, alienation, new reflections, full illumination, pure content, only in contrast to our everyday view of things. If this disappears, because artistic phenomena take its place, then the fiction begins to petrify.²³

This argument suggests the curious relation in which Foucault's critique of the deep self stands to the neo-conservative critique of contemporary culture. On the one hand, he denounces the cult of subjectivity and authenticity, yet at the same time his very solution implies a breaking down of the barrier between art and life, and a proliferation of lifestyles not primarily oriented towards competition and achievement which, for the neoconservatives, would be subversive and socially destructive.

One final question which cannot be avoided concerns the nature of the freedom which late Foucault invokes, both as the basis of resistance to power, and as the freedom of self-creation. The introduction of a concept of freedom seems to mark a particularly abrupt break with Foucault's earlier work, where the subject, with its illusion of autonomy, is theorized as a construction of power and discourse. Despite this, Foucault, in his essay on Kant's '*Was ist Aufklärung*', speaks of the 'constitution of ourselves as autonomous subjects' and, in an interview with Gerard Raulet, states that his concern is 'an analysis of the relation between forms of reflexivity – a relation of self to self – and hence between forms of reflexivity and discourse of truth, forms of rationality and effects of knowledge'.²⁴ Yet this admission of reflexivity as the defining attribute of subjectivity raises enormous problems which remain entirely unexplored in Foucault's late work.

Only one of these can be mentioned here. The obvious paradox of a reflexive account of self-construction is that the self must already exist in order to construct itself. It is this problem which comes to the fore in post-Kantian idealism and is most earnestly grappled with by Fichte. For Fichte the self must be an act of self-positing which posits itself as precisely this act. But this conception of the self as act, rather than as substance, or even as a formal unity, has two important consequences. Firstly, our language, designed for coping with the objective world, becomes inherently problematic when confronted with the task of explicating the structure of self-awareness. For Fichte, the fundamental orientation of language is towards objectivity, and it is for this reason that he introduces the neologism '*Tathandlung*' (as opposed to '*Tatsache*') to describe the 'givenness' of the activity of the self. In other words, the problem of the difficulty of access to subjectivity begins here, and is not simply a construct of power. Secondly, this activity of the self, and its tendential release from all objective restriction, becomes the principle of morality.

By contrast, Foucault's contention is that ethical self-construction operates in a reflexive medium, yet at the same time he wishes to deny that this medium itself has any ethical relevance. It is merely the locus of 'games of truth'.²⁵ However, many of Foucault's late formulations appear to contradict this denial. Thus, his argument against humanism, in the essay on Kant, is fundamentally that it fixes a conception of the human being: 'what is called humanism has always been obliged to lean on certain conceptions of man borrowed from religion, science, or politics. Humanism serves to color and to justify the conceptions of man to which it is, after all, obliged to take recourse.' To this Foucault opposes an awareness of the contingency of all historical institutions and practices, and 'the principle of a critique and a permanent creation of ourselves in our autonomy'.²⁶ Indeed, in some of his very last interviews, Foucault argued that his role was 'to show people that they are much freer than they feel, that people accept as truth, as evidence, some themes which have been built up at a certain moment in history, and that this so-called evidence can be criticized and destroyed'.²⁷ Yet, once he has made this move, there is one clear sense in which the ethical relevance of the question of a true or false self-relation cannot be avoided: the sense in which it is possible for the self to be ignorant of its own autonomy, in other words its own activity. Foucault may deny the specific construal of that activity, inspired by psychoanalysis, which is presented in *Dialektik der Aufklärung*, as a simultaneous emancipation from and perpetuation of the compulsion of nature. But it appears that, at the end of his life, he could no longer avoid the fact that the understanding of social and historical processes is, if not a component of our self-understanding, at the very least a contribution to our liberation from self-misunderstanding.

Notes

- 1 Michel Foucault, 'Body/Power', in Colin Gordon (ed.), *Power/Knowledge*, Brighton, 1980, p. 61.
- 2 Michel Foucault, 'Non au Sexe Roi', *Le Nouvel Observateur*, 644, 12-21 March 1977, p. 113.
- 3 Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality; Volume One: An Introduction*, Harmondsworth, 1978, p. 159.
- 4 Theodor Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, London, 1973, p. 202.
- 5 Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, London, 1979, p. 24.
- 6 Herbert Schnädelbach, 'Max Horkheimer and the Moral Philosophy of German Idealism', *Telos* 66, Winter 1985-6, p. 87.
- 7 Michel Foucault, *Histoire de la folie à l'âge classique*, collection TEL edn, Paris, 1976, pp. 465-66.
- 8 See 'Structuralism and Post-structuralism: an Interview with Michel Foucault', *Telos* 55, Spring 1983, p. 200.
- 9 *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, p. 40.
- 10 *The History of Sexuality; Volume One*, p. 58.
- 11 *Ibid.*, p. 64.
- 12 *Ibid.*, p. 59.
- 13 *Ibid.*, p. 60.
- 14 Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, essay 2, para. 16.
- 15 Theodor Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, London, 1974, p. 62.
- 16 *Ibid.*, p. 64.
- 17 *Ibid.*, p. 154.
- 18 *Ibid.*, p. 65.
- 19 See Wolfgang Bonss, 'Psychoanalyse als Wissenschaft und Kritik. Zur Freudrezeption der Frankfurter Schule', in Wolfgang Bonss and Axel Honneth (eds.), *Sozialforschung als Kritik*, Frankfurt, 1982, pp. 397-405.
- 20 *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, p. 241.
- 21 *Ibid.*, p. 154.
- 22 Michel Foucault, 'On the genealogy of Ethics', in Hubert Dreyfus and Paul Rabinow, *Michel Foucault; Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics*, 2nd edition, Chicago, 1982, p. 236.
- 23 Rüdiger Bubner, 'Moderne Ersatzfunktionen des Ästhetischen', *Merkur*, No. 2, February, 1986, p. 107.
- 24 'Structuralism and Post-structuralism: an Interview with Michel Foucault', p. 203.
- 25 Michel Foucault, *L'usage des plaisirs: Histoire de la sexualité 2*, Paris, 1984, p. 13.
- 26 Michel Foucault, 'What is Enlightenment', in Paul Rabinow (ed.), *The Foucault Reader*, Harmondsworth, 1986, p. 44.
- 27 'Truth, Power, Self: An Interview with Michel Foucault', in Luther H. Martin, Huck Gutman and Patrick H. Hutton (eds.), *Technologies of the Self*, London, 1988, p. 10.

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