



Foucault Between Past and Future^{*}

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translated from the French by Alberto Toscano

Are Foucault's analyses relevant for understanding the current transformation of societies? In what domains do you think they should be renewed, adjusted, or extended?

Foucault's oeuvre is a strange machine. In fact, it only allows one to think history as present history. In all probability, a large share of what Foucault wrote (as Deleuze very correctly noted) must today be rewritten. What is astonishing – and moving – is that he never ceased searching: testing approximations, deconstructing, formulating hypotheses, imagining, constructing analogies and telling fables, launching concepts, withdrawing or modifying them... Foucault's thought is characterised by a formidable inventiveness. But that's not the essential thing. In my view, it is his method which is fundamental, because it allows him to study and to describe at one and the same time the movement from the past to the present and the movement from the present to the future. It is a method of transition in which the present represents the centre. Foucault is there, in the in-between, neither in the past whose archaeology he writes, nor in the future whose image he occasionally sketches – 'like a face in the sand on the seashore'. It is by starting from the present that it becomes possible to distinguish other times. Foucault has often been reproached for the scientific illegitimacy of his periodisations: we can understand why historians might do this, but at the same time I'd like to say that this is not the real problem. Foucault is there where real questioning is established, and always on the basis of his own time.

With Foucault, historical analysis becomes an action, the knowledge of the past a genealogy, and the perspective to-come, a *dispositif*. For those coming from the militant Marxism of the 1960s (and not from the dogmatic caricatures of the second and third Internationals), Foucault's point of view is naturally perceived as absolutely legitimate; it corresponds to the perception of the event, of struggles, of the joy in taking risks outside of any necessity and of any pre-established teleology. In Foucault's thinking, Marxism is totally dismantled, whether it be from the point of view of the analysis of

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power relations or from that of historical teleology, of the refusal of historicism or of a certain positivism; but at the same time, Marxism is also reinvented and remodelled from the point of view of movements and struggles, that is to say, from the point of view of the subjects of these movements and struggles: because to know is to produce subjectivity.

Before moving on, however, I'd like to take a step back for a moment. It is common to distinguish three Foucaults: up to the end of the 60s, the study of the emergence of the discourse of the human sciences, that is, both what he calls the archaeology of knowledge and its economy, spanning three centuries, and a great reading of Western modernity through the concept of the episteme; then, in the 70s, the inquiries into the relations between knowledges and powers, on the appearance of disciplines, of control and biopower, of the norm and the biopolitical. In other words, both a general analytic of power and the attempt to write the history of the development of the concept of sovereignty from its emergence in political thought all the way up to the present day; finally, in the 80s, the analysis of the processes of subjectivation under the twofold perspective of the aesthetic relation to oneself and the political relation to others – but without a doubt we are really dealing with a single inquiry: the intersection of the aesthetics of self and of political care is in fact what we also call ethics.

Having said that, I am not sure we can distinguish three Foucaults, nor even two, because prior to the publication of *Dits et Ecrits* and of the courses at the Collège de France, there was a tendency not to really take the very last Foucault into consideration. In effect, it seems to me that the three themes on which Foucault's attention focused are perfectly continuous and coherent – coherent in the sense that they form a unitary and continuous theoretical production.

What changes is probably the specificity of the historical conditions and political necessities with which Foucault is confronted and which absolutely determine the fields in which he takes interest. From this point of view, to assume a Foucauldian perspective is also – I am saying this to you in my own words, though I hope they could have also been Foucault's – to put a style of thought (the one that could be recognised in the genealogy of the present, the one that he never ceased promoting when he spoke of the production of subjectivities) in contact with a given historical situation. And this given historical situation is a historical reality of power relations. Foucault repeats it often, when he speaks of his passion for the archives, and of how the emotion which seizes him in reading these archives stems from the way in which they recount fragments of existence: existence, past or present, offered up by these yellowed papers or lived day by day, is always an encounter with power – it is nothing other than this, but that is something of enormous significance.

When Foucault sets to work on the passage from the end of the 18th to the beginning of the 19th century, that is, in the work beginning with *Discipline and Punish*, he finds himself face to face with a specific dimension of power relations, of the *dispositifs* and strategies power implies. What this actually means is that he is face to face with a type of power relation which is entirely articulated onto the development of capitalism. The latter calls for a total investment of life to the extent required by the constitution of a labour force, on the one hand, and the profitability requirements of production, on the

other. Power has become biopower. Now, it is true that although Foucault will later use the model of biopowers to try and formulate a critical ontology of the present, you will seek in vain in the analyses devoted to the development of capitalism for the determination of the passage from the Welfare State to its crisis, from the Fordist to the post-Fordist organisation of work, from Keynesian principles to those of the neo-liberal theory of macro-economics. But it is also true that in this simple definition of the passage from the regime of discipline to that of control, at the beginning of the 19th century, we can already understand how the postmodern does not represent a withdrawal of the State from the domination over social labour, but rather an improvement of its control over life.

In actual fact, we find this intuition developed everywhere in Foucault, as if the analysis of the passage to the post-industrial era constituted the central element of his thought, even though he never speaks of it directly. The project of a genealogy of the present, which entirely structures his own relationship to the past ever since the beginning of the 70s, and the idea of a production of subjectivity which allows, from the interior of power, the modification and hindrance of its functioning as well as the creation of new subjectivities – both of these elements of Foucault's work are unthinkable outside of the material determination of this present and of the transition that embodied it. The passage from the modern definition of the political to the definition of a biopolitical postmodern – this was, I believe, Foucault's extraordinary intuition.

In Foucault, the concept of the political – and that of action within a biopolitical context – differs radically from the conclusions drawn by Max Weber and his 19th century epigones, as well as from the modern conceptions of power (Kelsen, Schmitt, etc.). Foucault was probably receptive to their theses – but I have the impression that from '68 onwards, the framework changes radically, and Foucault can no longer take such theories into consideration. For those of us who continue to use Foucault despite him, beyond him – and this is an extraordinarily generous gift on his part: Foucault was endowed with a generous thought, something rare enough to justify stressing this fact – there is nothing to renew or to correct in his theorisations: it suffices to extend his intuitions on the production of subjectivity and its implications.

For example, when Foucault, Guattari and Deleuze supported the struggle over the prison question in the 1970s, they constructed a new relation between knowledge and power: this relation does not simply concern the situation inside the prisons but the set of those situations in which spaces of freedom may develop according to the same model, in which one may encounter small strategies of the torsion of power from within, the reappropriation of one's own individual and collective subjectivity, the invention of new forms of community of life and struggle – in brief: what we call subversion. Foucault is a great thinker not only because of the remarkable analytic of power which he carried out, because of his methodological illuminations, or because of the unprecedented manner in which he merged philosophy, history and the care for the present. He left us with intuitions whose validity we ceaselessly verify; in particular, he redefined the space of political and social struggles and the figure of revolutionary subjects vis-à-vis 'classical' Marxism: according to Foucault, revolution is not – or in any case not only – a prospect of liberation, it is a practice of freedom. Revolution means producing oneself and others in struggles, innovating, inventing languages and

networks, producing, reappropriating the value of living labour. It is tricking capitalism from the inside.

Don't you think we are currently witnessing a certain sidelining of Foucault in most of the intellectual currents in France which declare their wish to reconnect to social and political critique? What is happening in the rest of Europe (Italy, for example) and the United States?

Foucault is detested in academic milieus. I think he was sidelined ever since the 60s, then there was the promotion to the Collège de France, all the better to isolate him – and not just because the university never forgives intellectuals for their success. Sociological positivism of Bourdieu's kind was certainly very fecund, but it was not capable of connecting with Foucauldian thought, choosing instead to denounce its subjectivism. Obviously, there is no subjectivism in Foucault. Bourdieu probably took note of this in his final years.

What Foucault always rejects, in every nook and cranny of his work, is transcendentalism, those philosophies of history which refuse to put into play all the determinations of the real in the face of the networks and conflicts of subjective powers. By transcendentalism I basically mean all those conceptions of society which claim to be able to evaluate or manipulate it from an external, authoritarian standpoint. No, that is simply not possible. The only method that allows us access to the social is that of absolute immanence, of the continuous invention of both the production of sense and the *dispositifs* of action. As is also true of other important authors of his generation, Foucault settles accounts with all the reminiscences of structuralism – that is, with the transcendental fixation of epistemological categories prescribed by structuralism (today this error is reproduced in a certain renewal of naturalism at work in philosophy, as well as in the human and social sciences...).

In France, Foucault is rejected because, from the standpoint of his critics, he does not sign up to the mythologies of the republican tradition: no one is farther from sovereignism, be it Jacobin in kind; from unilateral secularism, be it egalitarian; from the traditionalism of the conception of the family and its patriotic demographics, be it assimilationist, and so on. Does that mean that Foucault's methodology is reducible to a relativist, sceptical position, in other words, to the degradation of an idealist conception of history? Once again, no. Foucault's thought aims to ground the possibility of subversion – the word is more mine than his, Foucault would speak of 'resistance' – in a complete separation vis-à-vis the modern tradition of the nation-state and of socialism. This proposal is anything but sceptical or relativist, on the contrary, it is built on the exaltation of the *Aufklärung*, of the reinvention of man and his democratic power, after all the illusions of progress and common reconstruction have been betrayed by the totalitarian dialectic of the modern. All in all, Foucault could appropriate the motto of the young Descartes: *larvatus prodeō*, I advance masked.

We must all, I think, admit the following: national-socialism is a pure product of the dialectic of the modern. To free ourselves from it means going further. The *Aufklärung*, Foucault reminds us, is not the utopian exaltation of the light of reason; on the contrary, it is the dystopia, the daily struggle around the event, the construction of politics on the

basis of the problematisation of the 'here and now', the themes of emancipation and freedom. Do you really think that Foucault's battle around the question of prisons, carried out with GIP at the beginning of the 1970s, is relativist and sceptical? Or the position taken in support of the Italian autonomists at the most difficult moment of repression and of the historical compromise in Italy?

In France, Foucault has often been the victim of a reading carried out by his friends, students and collaborators. Anti-communism played a key role in this regard. The methodological break with materialism and collectivism was presented as a vindication of neo-liberal individualism. When he deconstructed the categories of dialectical materialism, Foucault was of precious use; but he also reconstructed those of historical materialism, which did not go down so well. And when the reading of the *dispositifs* and the work on the critical ontology of the present refer to the freedom of the multitudes, to the construction of common goods, to the contempt for neo-liberalism, all the disciples scurry away. Perhaps Foucault died at the right moment.

In Italy, in the United States, in Germany, Spain, Latin America, and now more and more in Great Britain, we did not experience this perverse Parisian game aimed at marginalising Foucault from the intellectual scene. In these places he was not passed through the murderous filter of the ideological quarrels of the French intelligentsia: he was read in function of what he said. The analogy with the tendencies that renewed Marxist thought at the end of the 1970s was regarded as fundamental. This is not simply in terms of chronological coincidence. Rather, it is the feeling that Foucauldian thought should be understood in the midst of a whole series of attempts – practical or theoretical – of emancipation and liberation, in the overlapping of epistemological preoccupations and ethico-political perspectives, implying a violent critique of parties, of the reading of history and of the subjects that were supposed to underlie it. I think that European workerists and American feminists, for instance, found in Foucault numerous avenues of research and, especially, the spur to transform their meta-languages into a common, perhaps universal, language, for the coming world – or in any case for the coming century.

You write with Michael Hardt in Empire that 'the biopolitical context of the new paradigm is completely central to our analysis' (p. 26). Can you explain the link, which is not at all immediately evident, between the new forms of imperial power and 'biopower'?

Your debt with respect to Michel Foucault, which you often bear witness to, does not exempt him from certain criticisms. For instance, you write that he did not manage to grasp 'the real dynamic of production in biopolitical society'. What do you mean by that? Should we draw the conclusion that Foucault's analyses lead to something like a political impasse?

Starting off from these two questions, I would like to attempt to clarify what it was that in *Empire* Michael Hardt and I borrowed from Foucault, and what we instead felt compelled to criticise. Speaking of empire, we did not only try to identify a new form of global sovereignty differing from the form of the nation-state: we tried to grasp the material, political and economic causes of this development and, simultaneously, to

define the new fabric of contradictions that it necessarily harbours. For us, from a Marxian point of view, the development of capitalism (including in the extremely developed form of the global market) takes root in the transformations, as well as the contradictions, of the exploitation of work. It is the workers' struggles which transform the political institutions and forms of power of capital. The process that led to the affirmation of the hegemony of imperial rule is no exception: after 1968, after the great revolt of waged workers in the developed world and that of colonised peoples in the third world, capital could no longer (on the economic and monetary terrain, as well as military and cultural one) control and contain the flows of labour force within the limits of the nation-state. The new world order corresponds to the need for a new order in the world of work. Capitalism's response takes shape at different levels, but the technological organisation of labour processes is fundamental.

We are dealing in effect with the automation of industry and the informatisation of society: the political economy of capital and the organisation of exploitation begin to develop more and more through immaterial labour; accumulation concerns the intellectual and cognitive dimensions of work, its spatial mobility and temporal flexibility. The whole of society and the life of men thus become the objects of a new interest on the part of power. Marx (in the *Grundrisse* and *Capital*) predicted this development which he called the 'real subsumption of society under capital' with remarkable accuracy. I believe that Foucault understood this historical passage since he in turn described the genealogy of the investment of life by power – of individual life just as much as social life. But the subsumption of society under capital (just like the emergence of biopowers) is far more fragile than we might believe – and in particular than capital itself believes, or than the objectivism of the Marxist epigones (the Frankfurt School, for instance) is willing to recognise.

In truth, the real subsumption of society (i.e. of social labour) under capital generalises the contradiction of exploitation to all levels of society itself, just like the extension of biopowers leads to society's biopolitical response: no longer powers [*pouvoirs*] over life, but the power [*puissance*] of life as the response to these powers; in sum, real subsumption leads to the insurrection and proliferation of freedom, to the production of subjectivity and the invention of new forms of struggle. When capital invests the entirety of life, life reveals itself as resistance. It is therefore around this point that the Foucauldian analysis of the reversal of biopowers into biopolitics influenced our own analyses on the genesis of empire: briefly, this genesis occurs when the new forms of work and struggles, produced by the transformation of material into immaterial labour, reveal themselves to be productive of subjectivity.

Having said that, I do not know if Foucault would have been wholly in agreement with our analyses – though I hope so! – because to produce subjectivity, for Michael Hardt and I, is really to find oneself in a biopolitical metamorphosis that opens onto communism. In other terms, I think that the new imperial condition in which we live (and the socio-political conditions in which we construct our work, our languages, and therefore ourselves) puts what we call the common at the centre of the biopolitical context: not the private or the public, not the individual or the social, but that which, all together, we construct so as to guarantee humanity the possibility of producing and reproducing itself. In the common, nothing of that which makes for our singularity is

either suspended or effaced: singularities are only articulated to one another in order to obtain an 'assemblage' – the term is Deleuze's – in which each power [*puissance*] finds itself multiplied by the others, and in which each creation is immediately that of others.

So I believe that the threads linking the creative revision of Marxism (to which we adhere) to Foucault's revolutionary conceptions of biopolitics and of the production of subjectivity are quite numerous.

Foucault's last two works on the modes of subjectivation seem to have attracted your attention less than the others. Is the construction of an ethics and of styles of life foreign or resistant to biopower a path too far removed from the one you propose (the figure of the communist militant)? Or are there instead possibilities of a deeper agreement which we have failed to perceive?

Foucault's last works had a huge influence on me, and I think that what I have just said about *Empire* amply demonstrates it. Allow me to tell you a slightly curious story: in the midst of the 1970s, I wrote an article on Foucault in Italy – on what today goes by the name of the 'first Foucault', the Foucault of the archaeology of the human sciences. In that article, I tried to indicate the limits of this type of inquiry as well as, I hoped, a possible step forward, a stronger insistence on the production of subjectivity. At the time, I was myself trying to exit a Marxism which, albeit profoundly innovative on the theoretical terrain – inasmuch as it asked if a 'Marx beyond Marx' could be envisaged – presented instead on the terrain of militant practice the risk of terrible errors.

What I mean by that is that in the years of passionate struggle that followed 1968, in the situation of fierce repression that the right-wing governments wreaked on the social movements of contestation, many among us ran the risk of a terroristic drift, and some succumbed to it. But, behind this extremism, there was always the conviction that power was purely and simply one, that biopower made left and right identical, that only the party could save us – and if it wasn't the party, then it was armed vanguards structured like small parties in military guise, in the great tradition of the 'partisans' of World War II. We understood that this military drift was something from which the movements would not recover; and that it constituted not only a humanly unsustainable choice, but a political suicide. Foucault, together with Deleuze and Guattari, put us on guard against this drift. In this regard, they were all genuine revolutionaries: when they criticised Stalinism and the practices of 'real socialism' they did not do so in a hypocritical and pharisaic manner, like the 'new philosophers' of liberalism; they searched for the way to affirm a new power [*puissance*] of the proletariat against the biopower of capitalism.

Therefore, the resistance to biopower and the construction of new styles of life are not distant from communist militancy, if we agree to think that militancy is a common practice of freedom, and that communism is the production of the common. Like in *Empire*, the figure of the communist militant is not borrowed from an old model. On the contrary, it presents itself as a new type of political subjectivity which is constructed on the basis of the (ontological and subjective) production of struggles for the liberation of work and for a more just society.

For us, but also, I think, for today's social movements, the importance of Foucault's last works is thus exceptional. In them, genealogy loses all of its speculative character and becomes political (a critical ontology of ourselves), epistemology is 'constitutive', ethics assumes 'transformative' dimensions. After the death of God, we witness the renaissance of man. But we are not dealing with a new humanism; or more precisely it is a question of reinventing man within a new ontology – it is on the ruins of modern teleology that we will recover a materialist *telos*.

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Antonio Negri's most recent publications include *Empire* (Harvard, with Michael Hardt), *Multitude: War and Democracy in the Age of Empire* (Penguin, with Michael Hardt), *The Politics of Subversion: A Manifesto for the Twenty-first Century* (Polity), *Time for Revolution* (Continuum), *Subversive Spinoza: (Un)contemporary Variations* (Manchester), *Books for Burning: Between Civil War and Democracy in 1970's Italy* (Verso), *Insurgencies: Constituent Power and the Modern State* (Minnesota), and *Negri on Negri* (Routledge).

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