Michel Foucault and the Rhythms of Time – Part 3

Monday 1 February 2021, by [Pascal Michon](#)

Sommaire

The Time in Spirals of the Power-knowledge Apparatuses

To understand the originality of the new conception of time developed by Foucault, we must not tack onto his work a conception of Nietzsche which he himself challenged. If we take this precaution, it is then possible to look at this conception for itself, within its own logic. We will see that the time in pieces of genealogy was actually not totally chaotic. This time had a particular form, segmented and composed of beams which interplay and divert each other. It had a specific way of flowing.

In *L'Histoire de la sexualité I – The History of the Sexuality I* (1976), the temporality of the production of society and individual was no longer reflected in terms of structural generation or in terms of a dialectical or a cumulative development, but like a history of mutual reinforcement or conflicting movements of practices and knowledge.

> The "distributions of power" and the "appropriations of knowledge" never represent only instantaneous slices taken from processes involving, for example, a cumulative reinforcement of the strongest factor, or a reversal of relationship, or again, a simultaneous increase of the two terms. (*The History of Sexuality I*, 1976, trans. Robert Hurley, 1978, p. 99)

The "apparatus" *[dispositif]* of "sexuality" that appeared in the West at the end of the 18th century and in which we have been living since then, neither consisted of a sheer system of rules, nor was generated by a vital, natural, already given entity, subjected to repression. It was a dynamic, historically limited organization of powers (clergymen, physicians, parents, educators, social workers, psychologists), knowledge (psychology, psychiatry, criminology, sociology, demography, statistics) and bodies.

> Sexuality is the name that can be given to a historical construct *(dispositif)*: not a furtive reality that is difficult to grasp, but a great surface network in which the stimulation of bodies, the intensification of pleasures, the incitement to discourse, the formation of special knowledge, the strengthening of controls and resistances, are linked to one another, in accordance with a few

> major strategies of knowledge and power. (*The History of the Sexuality I*, 1976, trans. Robert Hurley, 1978, pp. 105-106)

Through the historical study of the interplays of power-knowledge apparatus and of the succession of their conflicts, Foucault reintroduced movement in his descriptions, although without mobilizing a dialectical logic that would transform history into a process suited for the coming of the Transcendence. His new conception of history was based on the notion of contradiction, but he rejected the Hegelian idea of *Aufhebung* [1]. Since there was no exterior teleological determination of the elements of a relation, which would unite them and which could organize them into a hierarchy, the process of history resulted from the reciprocal action of many terms, among which none took the upper hand and incorporated definitively their diversity into a superior synthesis. Power and resistance, for example, were linked by an irreducible tension. There was no power without resistance as there was no resistance without power.

> Resistances do not derive from a few heterogeneous principles; but neither are they a lure or a promise that is of necessity betrayed. They are the odd term in relations of power; they are inscribed in the latter as an irreducible opposite. (*The History of the Sexuality I*, 1976, trans. Robert Hurley, 1978, p. 96)

Similarly, there was a reciprocal influence, yet without reduction of their differences, between the local sources of power-knowledge (relationships between parents and children, penitents and confessors, etc.) and the general movements of history (development of disciplinary knowledge, building of controls, institutions, etc.). Between the former and the latter, there was, as Foucault said, "no discontinuity [...] but neither is there homogeneity" (Foucault, 1976, trans. 1978, pp. 99-100). He described this contradictory situation as "a double conditioning of a strategy by the specificity of possible tactics, and of tactics by the strategic envelope that makes them work" (Foucault, 1976, trans. 1978, p. 100).

Observed in this way, temporality certainly lost the order and the continuity that were often attributed to it. However, we would be wrong in dramatically seeing a pure chaos in it. This vision, through its very excess, showed to what purpose traditional representations of history were used. Foucault did not slip into a complete "liquidization" of the description, perceiving only movements, mobility and multiplicity, where he was previously seeing only the stability and the unity of the rule. Certainly, the historical transformations of powers and knowledge could not be reduced either to the progressiveness of dialectical production, or to the regularity of structural generation, but we could single out configurations having their own internal dynamism each time, their own ways of flowing.

> Relations of power-knowledge are not static forms of distribution, they are 'matrices of transformations'." (*The History of the Sexuality I*, 1976, trans. Robert Hurley, 1978, p. 99)

There were local settings, which produced organized sequences of time, and we could "seek rather the pattern of the modifications which the relationships of force imply by the very nature of their process" (Foucault, 1976, trans. 1978, p. 99). In the transformations of the relation between power

and sex that occurred in the 19ᵗʰ century, there was no doubt an increase of the efficiency of control, but, added Foucault, there was above all a reciprocal reinforcement of power and pleasure, "a sensualization of power and a gain of pleasure" (Foucault, 1976, trans. 1978, p. 44). Using a mechanical metaphor, he compared these processes to

> mechanisms with a double impetus: pleasure and power. The pleasure that comes of exercising a power [..] the pleasure that kindles at having to evade this power [...] The power that lets itself be invaded by the pleasure it is pursuing; and opposite it, power asserting itself in the pleasure of showing off, scandalizing, or resisting. (*The History of the Sexuality I*, 1976, trans. Robert Hurley, 1978, p. 45)

All these changes formed a series of comings and goings, which progressively increased, or decreased, the tension: "capture and seduction, confrontation and mutual reinforcement" (Foucault, 1976, p. 45). After each step the respective places shifted and the general form of temporal processes looked like a bouquet of rising or descending spirals.

> These attractions, these evasions, these circular incitements have traced around bodies and sexes, not boundaries not to be crossed, but *perpetual spirals* of power and pleasure. (*The History of the Sexuality I*, trans. Robert Hurley, 1978, p. 45)

Further on in the book, we find the same idea.

> It [the power] attracts its varieties by means of spirals in which pleasure and power reinforce one another; it does not set up a barrier; it provided places of maximum saturation" (*The History of the Sexuality I*, 1976, trans. Robert Hurley, 1978, p. 47).

Still further on.

> Pleasure and power do not cancel or turn back against one another; they seek out, overlap, and reinforce one another. They are linked together by complex mechanisms and devices of excitation and incitement. (*The History of the Sexuality I*, 1976, trans. Robert Hurley, 1978, p. 48)

The Elastic Time of the History of Moral Subject

In *L'Usage des plaisirs – The Use of Pleasure* (1984a, trans. 1985) and *Le Souci de soi – The Care of the Self* (1984b, trans. 1986), Foucault abandoned the history of sexuality for a history of "the forms and modalities of the relation to self by which the individual constitutes and recognizes himself *qua* subject" (1984a, trans. 1985, p. 6), a history thanks to which he hoped to be able to understand the birth of the "subject of desire" (1984a, trans. 1985, p. 6). But this new turn in his work gave rise once again to many critiques.

The fact that the individual, at the same time both subjugates and subjectivizes himself seemed to many, at best paradoxical, at worst a useless complication to bring to light the fact that the individual possesses a priori an ethical subjectivity. Seeking to understand how the individual institutes himself as a subject, Foucault would play with words and hide under the cloak of the "individual" and his "practices," the classical patterns of the subject (it is he who observed and understood his own state, imagined what he could be, wanted to transform himself and then acted accordingly). According to others, since the subject was simultaneously constituting and constituted, free and produced by practices, Foucault would repeat the error for which he had blamed Husserl and he would give a transcendental value to empirical contents. The surprising reappearance of a theme—which was until then at the neuralgic center of Foucault's own critiques and refusals—would be the symptom of the "failure" of the archaeological and genealogical methods to supersede the phenomenology and the aporia of the analytic of finitude. Foucault would have ended up to be very close, in his last years, to Heideggerian hermeneutics and ontology of time (Dreyfus and Rabinow, 1982), which could be read "as the *unthought* of Foucault's work—not what he wouldn't have thought of, or what he would have forgotten, but what functioned in it without being clearly formulated and thus demanded an exterior elaboration" (Han, 1998, p. 27). Finally, the truth of Foucault's conception of time would thus be found in Heidegger.

With the passing of time, we can judge better both the continuity and the articulations of his thought. His approach remained fundamentally genealogical: the aim was not only to demystify the pseudo-evidence of the *cogito* on which we lean, by showing the historical construction of what we take for natural and transcendental [2], but also to find in the past other forms of subjectivation, which, Foucault hoped, could be used as basis for an alternative definition of the subject, usable today (Foucault, 1984c/1994, trans. 1984, p. 343 and pp. 349-350). On the other hand, Foucault did not aim at a genealogy of the subject conceived as a unitary entity, but he contented himself by following only the history of the moral subject. As far as the epistemic and the political subjects were concerned, he referred to his former studies (Foucault, 1982a/1994, pp. 222-223 and 1984c/1994, trans. 1984, p. 352). That implied that there were not *one* but *many* subjects to which the individuals had access according to various ways (epistemic rules, mechanisms of knowledge-power, practices of the self) and varying temporalities (the *epistemaï*, the apparatus and the practices of the self had different chronologies) [3]. Thus to affirm that the individual sets himself up as moral subject did not imply the autonomy of his sensibility or of his reason, nor even of his will or of his imagination. Both the former and the latter were all instituted, but in various ways and within interfering histories. What distinguished moral from epistemic and political subjects was that it was instituted by a *folding of the forces* upon themselves [4]; whereas the epistemic subject was cast within a *system of rules* and the political subject emerged in the midst of a *field of force relations*. Thus we must see the individual as the seat of an ill-assorted bouquet of processes of subjectivation, which leaned on each other according to an irregular and changing pattern.

It is true that the incompletion of Foucault's work certainly played a great role in the misconception of his effort to build an ethics yet maintaining the same spirit as in his former studies. And I must say a few words about that. If he explicitly contemplated its possibility, Foucault didn't have enough time to present a complete and organized historical description of all these modes of subjectivation. His last two books did concentrate essentially on the relation between practices of the self and problematizations, between working on one's own life and "games of truth." But they left their relations with the technologies of power a little bit in the darkness, without anywhere considering either their relations with the epistemic systems. The former were not absent, as, for example, in the reflection on the power belonging, in Greece, to the master of the house over his wife and his people, but the problem was only tackled in other contemporary texts [5]. I cannot but ask the

reader to look at these texts, which are essential to understand the global meaning of Foucault's thought in its last stage. While restricting myself to the texts he published himself and knowing that this limitation entails an under-representation of the theme of power (except the very particular topic of the power over oneself), which we must keep in mind, it is still possible to grasp the principal characteristics of the last Foucaldian conceptions of time.

First of all, there is, in these studies, a type of temporality, familiar to Foucault's readers, which seems to bring them some years back. The ancient subjectivation patterns have known, between the 5h century BC and the 3rd century AD, a long and relatively stable period of time, during which, as we shall see, lifestyles were subjected to very slow mutations. When Christianity prevailed in the 4th century in the entire Graeco-Roman world, a deep transformation made the old culture fall apart and a new era of the history of subjectivation began—the one we are still living in as a matter of fact—characterized by the constitution of individuals as subjects of desire.

Looking more closely though, we can see that these outlines differ from the epistemic patterns, which they recall, by a few aspects, which are important.

1. If Foucault gave very few explanations about the practical reasons that provoked this rupture, these reasons were not absent. There was, as we have already seen, a number of unpublished essays, which we shall have to take into account one day. But we can already figure out what Foucault had in mind through what Paul Veyne (1930-) said on a very close issue. It is probable that, like his friend and interlocutor, Foucault first thought of the change in the modes of domination that occurred under Constantine with the Christianization of the imperial power. Veyne provided as example the cessation of the gladiator fights, in the late Roman empire, and their reproblematization. This phenomenon, according to him, was directly linked to the installation, in the post-Constantine Rome, of a new type of power. The sovereign did not treat the people as a herd of sheep on which he had to watch, but, henceforth, as a group of children requiring education. Since the power acted in a paternal way and no longer in a pastoral way, the gladiator performances, which exalted the animal force and energy, were doomed to disappear. Thus the sudden transformation of the customs in the 4th century AD was directly linked to the growth of new domination technologies (Veyne, 1978, p. 204-210).

2. Foucault restored two great ethical models which had converged in the radical reformulation of the subjectivation modes as subject of desire.

> This Hellenistic model, which I want to analyze with you through Epicurean, Cynic, and Stoic texts, was concealed historically and for later culture by two other great models: the Platonic and the Christian models. (*The Hermeneutics of the Subject,* 1981-82/2001, trans. Graham Burchell, 2005, p. 244).

The first of these models appeared in Plato and would later spread largely throughout the Neoplatonic schools, which would participate for a long time in the training of the elites, as well as in the Gnostic movements (Foucault, 1984a: fr256 and 1981-82/2001, p. 244). From the 4th century BC, the Platonic texts did clearly break with some of the common conceptions of their time, and set a new pattern for the care of the self, organized by the relation to truth.

> [From the *Alcibiades*] the care of the self essentially consists in "knowing oneself." The entire surface of the care of the self is occupied by this requirement of self-knowledge, which, as you know, takes the form of soul's grasp of its own being. (*The Hermeneutics of the Subject,* 1, 1981-82/2001, trans. Graham Burchell, 2005, p. 244).

The *Symposium* and the *Phaedrus* indicated, as far as they were concerned, "a transition from an erotics structured in terms of 'courtship' practice and recognition of the other's freedom, to an erotics centered on an ascesis of the subject and a common access to truth" (Foucault, 1984a, trans. 1985, p. 244).

The second source of the great divide of the 4th century AD was the Christian model, particularly in its ascetic-monastic form, born in Egypt and in Syria, of which Foucault suggested some characteristics in the published volumes of *The History of the Sexuality* and which should have been the heart of its last volume entitled *Les Aveux de la chair* (finally published in 2018) – *The Confessions of the Flesh* (2021). This model also entailed the reduction of the relation to one's self to the knowledge of this self. But it differed from the Platonic model because this knowledge occurred not as a *reminiscence* but as an *exegesis* or a deciphering of the secret movements of the soul (Foucault, 1981-82/2001, trans. 2005, p. 245). In Christianity there was a whole range of hermeneutical technologies, which considered "the soul as a domain of potential knowledge where barely discernible traces of desire would need to be read and interpreted" (Foucault, 1984a, trans. 1985, p. 89). Because the individual was only aware of himself in the recognition that his truth escaped from him and in the interpretation of the signs, which his hidden part sent to him, he was then instituted as subject of desire (Foucault, 1984a, trans. 1985, p. 89).

3. The long and relatively homogeneous period of time that covered the main part of Antiquity did not have the immobility of an *episteme*. It went through a type of mutation, which implied, for Foucault, a new conception of temporality. He noted that there was from the models of ancient Greece (4th century BC) to those of the climax of the Roman Empire (3rd century AD) a whole set of recommendations, prohibitions or social norms that remained remarkably constant. The main dietetic precepts changed very little (Foucault, 1984b, trans. 1986, p. 104). The advice concerning the sexual life remained more or less the same (Foucault, 1984b, trans. 1986, p. 237). The new reflections on marriage, which appeared in particular in the Stoic texts of the Imperial era sought "to define a mode of coexistence between husband and wife, a modality of relations between them, and a way of living together that are rather different from what was proposed in the classical texts" (Foucault, 1984b, trans. 1986, p. 150), but they did so "without calling the traditional structures into question" (Foucault, 1984b, trans. 1986, p. 150), especially without ever thinking of proposing to fit the marriage "into a different legal framework" (Foucault, 1984b, trans. 1986, p. 150). Last but not least, the new valorization of love for boys was partly conserved in spite of a new valorization of the theme of love between sexes (Foucault, 1984b, trans. 1986, pp. 202-203).

Yet Foucault spotted, on this almost immobile ground, variations that dragged the lifestyles into a slow mutation, in a kind of continental drift of ethics [6]. The transformations, during the Roman Empire, of the problematizations and technologies of the self developed by the Greeks must be read as an inner mutation of a relatively stable order and a new appreciation of the elements of this order, as "a shift, a change of orientation, a difference in emphasis" (1984b, trans. 1986, p. 67). Regarding dietetics and the problematization of health, "the change [was] marked by an increased apprehension, a broader and more detailed definition of the correlations between the sexual act and

the body, a closer attention to the ambivalence of its effects and its disturbing consequences" (Foucault, 1984b, trans. 1986, p. 238). Foucault noted that there was "a greater preoccupation with the body" (Foucault, 1984b, trans. 1986, p. 238), but also "a different way of thinking about sexual activity, and of fearing it" (Foucault, 1984b, trans. 1986, p. 238). Regarding wives and marriage, the transformation concerned "the valorization of the conjugal bond and the dual relation that constitutes it" (Foucault, 1984b, trans. 1986, p. 238). Finally, regarding boys, there was, on the contrary, a deproblematization and a weakening of the value of friendship bonds. Generally, the art of taking care of the self was modified by a series of little strokes which finally changed its colors.

> This art of the self no longer focuses so much on the excesses that one can indulge in [...] it gives increasing emphasis to the frailty of the individual faced with the manifold ills that sexual activity can give rise to. It also underscores the need to subject that activity to a universal form by which one is bound. (*The Care of the Self*, 1984b, trans. Robert Hurley trans. 1986, p. 238,)

Thus the technologies of the self and the problematizations which were linked to them underwent transformations whose logic was no longer linked to the play of interacting forces. These transformations rather occurred in accordance with a model which can be, strictly speaking, labeled as *stylistic* or *rhetorical*, a model opposing relatively constant norms to deviations from these norms provoked by changes of accentuation. The time which Foucault discovered, while studying the technologies of the self during Antiquity, seemed to be characterized by the slow drift of the lifestyles, which the spreading of Christianity brutally ended, around the 4th century AD.

If we combine these descriptions, we can see that the temporality of the moral subject history was once again described by Foucault as organized around a rupture and as a swift transformation of a relatively stable pattern. Yet there were at least two differences with the epistemic model. First, despite the incompleteness of his work, we see that Foucault sought to bridge his archaeological and his genealogical conceptions. Certainly, the genealogical model of spiraling movements, which linked knowledge, powers and bodies, and which sometimes accumulated catastrophically their whirls, this model remained valid even if it was not used much in the last texts. But it gave the impression that these effects could not by themselves explain the shift from an ethical world to the next one. Actually, a slow mutation of the ethical model occurred previously, a mutation which already greatly transformed it from within. Thus Foucault now saw the notion of discontinuity as a change of configuration prepared by a slow displacement of accents among the various elements composing the ethical order of an epoch, provoked by the activity of problematization.

Second, this rupture did not occur, as was the case in the theory of *epistemaï*, in a temporality that was homogeneous and which remained as immobile before as after the rupture. The break did not only entail the change of the prevailing form of subjectification, but also of the form of temporality itself, which acquired a new rhythm and followed a new mode of transformation. Time gained a kind of plasticity or elasticity giving to it changing aspects. Before the Christianization of the Empire, there was an almost invisible mutation of the lifestyles. The regime of historicity was determined by the repetition of the same gestures and the same maxims, which left very little room for variations. Times were changing very slowly. Since the victory of Christianity, given that life was no longer an object of stylization, but the target of a hermeneutics, a new type of historicity—or at least its ethical condition of possibility—dominated. Because the individual no longer had the task to elaborate himself, to model his behavior, his feelings and his existence, but to discover himself, his interior secrets and his hidden truth, and because he had to relate to his body, more like a discourse which

he listened to than an object that he looked at and fashioned from outside, time could not consist of a series of efforts to intensify the present and of its slow drift. Instead it became a journey that had to be covered, and a present always attracted by the future. With the institution of the subject of desire and want appeared the oriented and always unbalanced historicity in which we are still living nowadays.

Footnotes

[1] This rejection is clearly inspired by Nietzsche, but is also very close to the concept of *Wechselwirkung* – interaction developed by Humboldt.

[2] Foucault often spoke on this topic: "In the first place, I do indeed believe that there is no sovereign, founding subject, a universal form of subject to be found everywhere. I am very skeptical of this view of the subject and very hostile to it. I believe, on the contrary, that the subject is constituted through practices of subjection, or, in a more autonomous way, through practices of liberation, of liberty, as in Antiquity, on the basis of course, of a number of rules, styles, inventions to be found in the cultural environment." (1984g/1994, trans. 1988, pp. 50-51) For a more precise assessment of this idea, see also (1984f/1994, p. 718).

[3] The idea of the multiplicity of types of subjectivation available to the individuals appears very early in Foucault's work. See, for example, (Foucault, 1969b/1994, trans. 1984, p. 118).

[4] "That is what the Greeks did: they folded force, even though it still remained force. They made it relate back to itself. Far from ignoring interiority, individuality or subjectivity they invented the subject, but only as a derivative or the product of a 'subjectivation'." (Deleuze, 1986, trans. Seán Hand, 1988, p. 101)

[5] See his analysis of Plato's *Alcibiades*, where Foucault shows the relation between the problematization of power upon oneself and that of power upon others (1981-82/2001). See also, his studies on the *Parrhesia* and on the Cynics for whom the "free speech" is always in a certain way a risky critique of the power (1985b). See also the careful descriptions of the Christian penitence practices, which link search for truth and direction of conscience (1981 and 1979-80).

[6] It would be interesting to compare this Foucaldian idea with the slow drift of the demographic and economic system of the European agrarian world between 1320 and 1720, described by Le Roy Ladurie (1995), as well with the recent critiques attacking, on the contrary, the explanatory potential of the homoeostatic principle for the history of population (Lee, 1992). One would see how Foucault remained close to *Les Annales* even in his last period.