Michel Foucault and the Rhythms of Time – Part 2

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Sommaire

The Time in Blocks of Archaeology

From *The Order of Things* one usually remembers the splitting of time in successive "*epistemaï.*" For Foucault, as we know, the history of human sciences was neither linear nor cumulative. It did not show any progress. It did not link, as traditional historians of science did, the diversity of its contents to a transcendental pole—be it the Subject or the Man—whose expression would be always more precisely grasped. But it followed a succession of periods consisting of as many regulating systems of discourse production rules and as many "limited spaces of communication" (*The Archaeology of Knowledge*, 1969a, p. 126). Scientific topics such as labor, language or life, did not have any actual continuity and it was necessary, in order to understand the meaning of these terms, not to reduce them to the so-called identity of their anthropological conditions of possibility, but to replace them in the general epistemic system, present in the various disciplines, which constituted the "historical a priori" of the period in which they were used (1969a, p. 127). Each epoch disappeared abruptly, leaving space for a new form of knowledge and the epistemic time was then split into almost immobile blocks separated by sudden ruptures.

This stress put on the concept of *episteme* inconveniently underplayed what was at stake in the making of an archaeology, without which one wouldn't be able to understand its full originality. In *The Order of Things*, Foucault tried to escape not only from the 19th century historicism (under its positivist as well Hegelian form), but also—which is more interesting for us—from the phenomenological critique of this historicism which had been elaborated during the 20th century on the grounds of another conception of time. His strategy remained genuinely Kantian: he tried to disclose the conditions of possibility, the common matrix of both traditions, which he called "the analytic of finitude." According to him the principal aporia of modern thought, since Kant, consisted of seeking to determine the foundation of all possible knowledge from the very limits of man, which were due to his temporality.

All post-Kantian philosophies—and all human sciences that developed simultaneously—should thus be read as a succession of attempts, necessarily unstable and incomplete, to clear the difficulty generated by a contradictory demand: to put temporality at the very basis of the transcendental, to start from the empirical dispersion of history, but in order to extract from it the synthetic unity of man. Edmund Husserl (1859-1938) and Martin Heidegger (1889-1976) (at that period Foucault only

cited *Sein und Zeit*) or Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1908-1961), were comparable to Hegel, Marx and Comte. They all grew out of the same archaeological ground and were burdened by the same ambiguities.

The historicist strategies showed all their *naïveté*. Postulating an objective or an eschatological nature of time, they had dogmatically got rid of the difficulty that arose from the folding of the transcendental upon the empirical, or they had attempted to overcome it dialectically but without actually being able to reduce it: positivism found the warrant of the truth of thought in the truth of history or of nature, postulated independent; Hegelianisms, on the contrary, favored the continuity of thought and its participation in nature or history. Thus neither the former nor the latter could escape from the aporia caused by Kantian dualism.

However, the subtle critics who, since the end of the 19th century, had attempted to oppose historicism and its reduction of temporality to an objective flow or to a progress, didn't allow us either to escape from the anthropological paradox.

The Husserlian phenomenology sought, through an analysis of the "actually experienced" temporality, "to articulate the possible objectivity of a knowledge of nature upon the original experience of which the body provides an outline; and to articulate the possible history of a culture upon the semantic density which is both hidden and revealed in actual experience *(vécu)*" (1966, p. 321). Immersing itself in "the intimate consciousness of time," the phenomenology had tried to find a ground that would allow maintenance of the separation between empirical and transcendental, but which could, nevertheless, allow to aim at them both together. It had then believed to be able to analyze man both as subject, i.e. as a substratum of empirical knowledge, and as a form immediately present in these contents through the mediation of body and culture revealed by the actual experience. But instead, it had only been able to swing indefinitely between these two poles.

> The analysis of actual experience is a discourse of mixed nature: it is directed to a specific yet ambiguous stratum, concrete enough for it to be possible to apply to it a meticulous and descriptive language, yet sufficiently removed from the positivity of things for it to be possible, from that starting-point, to escape from that *naïveté*, to contest it and seek foundations for it. (*The Order of Things,* 1966, trans. 1970, p. 349)

Husserl and later Merleau-Ponty had oscillated between the assertion that the background practices (the implicit, the inactual, the sedimented, the non-effected) on which the thought rested, since it was intricated in temporality, were not representable and the other assertion that these practices could be controlled and made explicit by the exercise of reflection—between an ontology of the *Lebenswelt* and a transcendental analysis of time.

When Heidegger tried, in turn, to break the objectivist and eschatological conceptions of time, he wanted to radicalize the Husserlian project founding his conception of temporality no longer on the "actually experienced" but on the *Dasein* as "ek-sistent." Henceforth, it was no longer the depths of the consciousness but the being-in-the-world of the *Dasein* itself which allowed definition of time and thus its relation to being. This strategy allowed demolition of the historicist conception of historicity, which, in order to oppose the disintegration of man by the "original," had promised him plenitude

and achievement, and to contrast it with a conception which, restoring to the *Dasein* "the void" or at least the "extreme recession of the origin" made out of the historicity "a ceaseless rending open which frees the origin in exactly that degree to which it recedes" (1966, p. 334).

However, this analytic, even though it aimed at describing time in its ontological purity, remained imprisoned in the anthropological paradigm from which it tried to escape. In *Sein und Zeit*, as Heidegger himself acknowledged later, the man, thanks to the retreat he maintained respectively to the retreat of things back to their origin, was still the one who allowed them to develop into their being. Man was always the clearing [*Lichtung*] that allowed access to all things of the world: "[Man] is the opening from which time in general can be reconstituted, duration can flow, and things, at the appropriate moment, can make their appearance" (Foucault, 1966, p. 332). Thus, the work of Heidegger remained an attempt to connect the two separate yet solidary aspects of anthropology: the positive (the temporal beginning) and the fundamental (the temporalizing clearing) (Dreyfus and Rabinow, 1982). And the reproach made by Foucault to this strategy was of the same type as the one made against Husserl. This solution was unstable: as soon as the origin was understood as the historicity of practices, it retreated again and disappeared, because these practices, which were constitutive, were actually out of reach for the practicians.

Thus the phenomenology like the historicism, which the former criticizes, were not anything but symmetrical products of the epistemic conditions of their epoch. Both had looked at the question of time from the anthropocentric, contradictory and always unbalanced form of knowledge of the modern *episteme*. And that was why they appeared as an insatiable and invading will to truth, whose conditions of possibilities were shown by the archaeology.

_The Time in Pieces of Genealogy

The conception of time which Foucault wanted to oppose both to historicism and phenomenology was undergoing a great transformation at the beginning of the 1970s. In *Archaeology of Knowledge* (1969a), Foucault systematized his epistemic conception and extended it to his former studies on madness and clinic, that had been designed in fact in quite a different spirit.

> The unity of the discourses on madness would not be based upon the existence of the object 'madness', or the constitution of a single horizon of objectivity; it would be the interplay of the rules that made possible that appearance of objects during a given period of time. (*The Archaeology of Knowledge*, 1969, trans. A. M. Sheridan Smith, 1972, p. 35,)

But beside the temporal categories inspired by *Les Annales* and by Lévi-Strauss appeared new notions. To the Braudelian principles of *discontinuity* (rupture and branching of processes described traditionally as linear), of *multiplicity* (temporality contains differing chronologies which cannot be unified), Foucault added the Nietzschean principles of *discreteness* (irruption and temporal spreading of the events) and of *contingency* (no necessity of the events) [1].

In his inaugural address at the Collège de France, *L'Ordre du discours – The Order of Discourse* (1971a), and in the essay entitled "Nietzsche, la généalogie, l'histoire" – "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History" (1971b/1994), Foucault explained that he wanted to genealogically rework the question of the conditions of possibility regarding the insatiable deployment of modern knowledge, structurally

studied in *The Order of Things*. He wanted to try to describe the entanglement of desires and powers that had been at its origin.

> True discourse, liberated by the nature of its form from desire and power, is incapable of recognizing the will to truth which pervades it; and the will to truth, having imposed itself upon us for so long, is such that the truth it seeks to reveal cannot fail to mask it. (*L'Ordre du discours – The Discourse on Language*, 1971, trans. Rupert Swyer, 1971/1972, p. 219)

Nietzsche offered, henceforth, the model for a use of history and a conception of time which were no longer organized by metaphysical concepts. Unlike a great part of the history written during the 19th century, which was organized around notions such as unity of meaning, continuity, development, progress, the Nietzschean genealogy proposed to restore the dispersion, the proliferation, the heterogeneity, the difference of the event.

> The *wirkliche historie* transposes the relationship ordinarily established between the eruption of an event and necessary continuity. An entire historical tradition (theological or rationalistic) aims at dissolving the singular event into an ideal continuity—as a teleological movement or a natural process. "Effective" history, however, deals with events in terms of their most unique characteristics, their most acute manifestations. An event, consequently, is not a decision, a treaty, a reign, or a battle, but the reversal of a relationship of forces, the usurpation of power, the appropriation of a vocabulary turned against those who have once used it. ("Nietzsche, Genealogy, History," 1971b/1994, trans. Donald F. Bouchard and Sherry Simon, 1977/1984, p. 88,)

Thus the deconstruction of linear, continuing and progressive conception of time was furthered. Time couldn't be unified by reference to synthetic entities such as Subject or Man. Now the reference to synthetic and a priori units of truth, previously patiently reconstructed in *The Order of Things*, collapsed in turn and the successive blocks, which composed time, were transformed in a "kaleidoscope," [2] destroying any unity. Conscious of the fact that the structuralized time of archaeology still remained molded in the belief of a lasting truth, Foucault adopted the "time in pieces" of the Nietzschean genealogy. The traditional history both deluded and reassured itself trying to find spiritual units and continuities, while it actually faced the multiplicity, the discontinuity, in short the complex rhythm, of a body-time.

> History is the concrete body of a development, with its moments of intensity, its lapses, its extended periods of feverish agitation, its fainting spells; and only a metaphysician would seek its soul in the distant ideality of the origin. ("Nietzsche, Genealogy, History?" 1971b/1994, trans. Donald F. Bouchard and Sherry Simon, 1977/1984, p. 80)

History of knowledge thus appeared to have known a series of intricate conflicts between desires and powers which carried various wills to truth. And thus these desires and powers were the ones essential to identify behind each claim to truthfulness.

As we have seen in the previous chapter, this transformation of Foucault's thought led, in *Discipline and Punish* (1975), to a critique of the traditional representations of political science and philosophy. Far from being at the origin of a development of individual liberties and having guaranteed them, the building of modern State, the constitution of social contract, the development of Law would have masked, and in a certain way reinforced, the actual transformation of domination forms. The entire juridical discourse and especially the discourse of human rights, would have been used to hide the generalization and intensification of the detailed play of subjecting forces, the microphysics of power and the body disciplines which were imposed at the same time in factories, worker accommodation, barracks, schools, hospitals and prisons.

These assertions sparked off a disapproval as spectacular as the one provoked by the structuralist-styled analysis, which he had been developing few years before against humanism, historicist Marxism and existentialist philosophy. Ironically, Foucault who was condemned for his "refusal of history," was now rebuked by critics reproaching him for liking history too much and disintegrating the Transcendental, Man and the Subject in the chaos of Time. The relativist epistemological and ethical position, which would have been adopted by Foucault, as his critique of democracy, would take their roots in a vitalist and metaphysical conception of historicity and time, directly inherited from Nietzsche [3].

If we take a closer look, the question seems less straightforward than its critics claimed. In fact, Nietzsche referred all representations, science, philosophy and morality, but also art, to the interplay of forces and the will to power that expressed itself through them. From this viewpoint, there was no more thing-in-itself; only phenomena instituted by a perspective and without any vis-à-vis in a background-world. There were only events dispersed in time. The thing-in-itself and the transcendental that faced it seemed to be fantasies made up by a will gone astray, which tried to stop the becoming and to give itself the feeling of controlling its proliferation. But at the same time, the world could appear as this surface without depth, only because it was perceived as deployment of the will to power. In his last texts, particularly in those edited by his sister, Nietzsche seemed to find again an explanatory systematicity. Then the will to power regained simultaneously the two roles of the thing-in-itself which had just disappeared: its critical role of limit of human knowledge and its ontological role of substratum of the reality. The will to power meant both the disappearance and the reappearance of the thing in itself in the plane of immanence.

This phenomenon explained why Nietzsche's thought could be interpreted in turn in two absolutely different ways and why we must be cautious not to impute to Foucault a vitalist thought.

Some critics such as Karl August Götz [4], Karl Jaspers (1883-1969) [5] or Heidegger (1961), reading mostly from *The Will to Power* and arguing that the critical role of the thing-in-itself cannot be detached from its ontological role, considered that Nietzsche, repatriating the latter in the plane of immanence, built dogmatically, whatever one may say, a doctrine of being which aimed at establishing the most general feature of all beings, as when he claimed that "the most intimate essence of being is the will to power" (cited in Granier, 1966, p. 372 *et sq*.). Nietzsche seemed to be then as the one thinker who, by merely inverting the Platonism and getting rid of the supra-sensible lining of the world, actually brought forth the exact contrary of what he was looking for and put the metaphysical dualism of the transcendental and the empirical to its climax.

But others, not less numerous, like Gilles Deleuze (1925-1995) (1962), Jean Granier (1933-2019)

(1966) or Foucault himself, who referred only to the greatest of Nietzsche's texts and rejected the very suspicious edition of his last writings made up by his sister [6], saw in his thought, on the contrary, a critical radicalization and argue that it aimed at "the way the essence of being accomplishes itself as Being-interpreted" (Granier, 1966, p. 378), i.e. necessarily split or differentiated. The Nietzschean view was then understood as an anti-metaphysical hyper-kantism emancipating the thought of any transcendence, as a philosophy of temporality freed of any synthetic vis-à-vis.

For not having taken this renewal into account—and for not having understood its critical force, in particular, regarding Heidegger—his censors, in fact inspired by the latter, have attributed a questionable interpretation to him. Thus, in a double irony, they remained blind to the Foucaldian hyper-kantism [7], which should have satisfied them, and they unconsciously adopted a philosophy which they rejected on the other hand. Instead of understanding the critical force of the new Foucaldian approach, the permanent split that it postulated inside of the being and the new conception of time that it implied, they only saw in it, like Heidegger in Nietzsche, a new metaphysics of force, an energetism generalizing dogmatically to the globality of being a particular quality of human experience.

Certainly, it is not difficult to find in Foucault's works numerous statements which have vitalist undertones. One finds, for example, especially in the texts written during the 1970s, a whole set of metaphors linked to *generation*. He often speaks about "perpetual inventiveness" and about a "steady burgeoning of methods and procedures" (1976, trans. 1978, p. 119). He refers to sexuality as "the proliferating meaning that had always to be taken control of again lest it escape" (1976, trans. 1978, p. 148).

But these statements were integrated into a large strategy which renounced very consciously to vitalism and to any forms of the primacy of immediacy which sustained his first books. Foucault said it quite clearly in a famous interview with Bernard-Henri Levy.

> What you call "naturalism" refers, I believe, to two things. A certain theory, the idea that under power, with its acts of violence and its artifice, we should be able to rediscover the things themselves in their primitive vivacity: behind the asylum walls, the spontaneity of madness; through the penal system, the generous fever of delinquency; under the sexual interdict, the freshness of desire. And also a certain aesthetic and moral choice: power is bad, ugly, poor, sterile, monotonous and dead; and what power is exercised upon is right, good and rich. ("*Non au sexe roi* – Power and Sex," 1977/1994, trans. David J. Parent, 1988, p. 120)

Footnotes

[1] Daddabbo (1998) accurately lists these categories.

[2] According to a very appropriate metaphor coined by Veyne (1978, p. 225).

[3] The most explicit expression of this thesis can be found in the text "Foucault and Deleuze: the Vitalism against the Law" (Ferry and Renaut, 1987, p. 77 *sq*.). But it supports many other critiques made about Foucault on different grounds. See, for example, (Gauchet and Swain, 1980; Habermas, 1985; Honneth, 1986).

[4] "Es zeigt sich, daß der Wille zur Macht ein Surrogat dessen wird, was die früheren Metaphysiken 'Gott' nannten. Er ist eine Formel, ein bloßes Wort für etwas, was nicht in einer Formel, was nicht in einem Wort aussprechbar ist." (Götz, 1949, p. 67) cited in (Granier, 1966, p. 374)

[5] Jaspers writes about *Jenseits von Gut und Böse*: "So Nietzsche ends up with a determination in the old metaphysical way. The universe seen from within, the universe defined and described through its intelligible characteristics won't be anything else than 'the will to power' " (Jaspers, 1936/1961, p. 298) cited in Granier (1966, p. 375).

[6] In one of his last interviews, Foucault explained: "My relation to Nietzsche, or what I owe Nietzsche, derives mostly from the texts of around 1880, where the question of the truth, the history of the truth and the will to truth were central to his work" (1983/1994, trans., 1988, p. 32). And later on, he added: "I think there is a perceptible displacement in Nietzsche's texts between those which are broadly preoccupied with the question of will to knowledge and those which are preoccupied with the will to power" (1983/1994, trans., 1988, p. 33).

[7] François Ewald, who at that time was his assistant at Le Collège de France, wrote under his control: "If Foucault certainly belongs to the philosophical tradition, it is to the critical tradition which begins with Kant and one could name its project *Critical History of the Thought*." (Foucault, 1984d/1994, p. 631)