VUE DES ETATS-UNIS

THE POLITICAL IMPLICATIONS OF FOUCAULT'S PHILOSOPHY

Michel Foucault once compared our present political situation to that of the early Christians, pointing out that since the end of the eighteenth century political thought has been haunted by the prospect of a second revolution--a second coming that would fulfill the promise of the first one.[1] Nevertheless, it was quite clear to him that, while the French Revolution inaugurated the politics of the modern age, the phenomenon of Stalinism had made the very desirability of revolution our main political problem of the day. Therefore, to engage in politics amounted, for Foucault, to an attempt "to try to know with the greatest possible honesty whether or not the revolution is desirable."

Not surprisingly, such an attitude has made Foucault's political resolve seem highly suspect and has often been subject to accusation of political quietism and conservatism. On the other hand, there is a growing number of critics who consider his attitude to be the best safeguard against the kind of inspired theorical activism that might initiate renewed slouchings toward Bethlehem. This alleged postmodernism of Foucault's has, quite understandably, become a favorite subject of debate among students and critics of his oeuvre.

If the latest publications on and around Foucault (a dozen books in the last two years alone) are to be taken as symptoms of a general trend, then it is fair to say that the critical pendulum is clearly swinging in his favor at the moment. More and more critics (but more, probably, in the United States than in Great Britain) find him helpful in defining and justifying a new course for political and intellectual activism. The principal reason for this reappraisal is the growing realization that Foucault's analyses may indeed correspond to a socio-political reality not fully appreciated until now and that his thought cannot be evaluated

---

[1] Several passages in this article have been taken from a book review published in *Radical Philosophy* 57 (Spring 1991): 50-52, and one due to appear in *Poetics Today*.

fully appreciated until now and that his thought cannot be evaluated according to principles deriving from a modernist ethos; questions that implicitly posit the intellectual as heroic promoter of humankind's noble aspirations are therefore considered moot and an attempt is made to understand Foucault's politics in terms of his own archaeological and genealogical strategies and of their relevance to today's world.

The question of the political significance of Foucault's thought needs to be addressed, first of all, in the context of the critical approach which characterizes contemporary criticism in general and poststructuralism in particular. It is a critical awareness that can be attributed to the realization that the official system of values is no longer operative in the West: it has become evident that "Western civilization has been the site of a massive contradiction between its values and its politics, its philosophy and its action, its creed of equality before the law and its actuality of inequality before the fact."

Post-structuralist criticism attributes the failure of the program of enlightened reason to the very process that has made Enlightenment thought the axiological basis for Western civilization. The theoretical work of the post-structuralists has therefore sought to underscore and explain the discrepancy between the ideals governing our society and the mechanism that ensure their day-to-day functioning. According to the interpretation proposed by Michel Foucault, for example, the 19th century gave rise to a humanism that effectively masked and validated a socio-economic arrangement whereby forces of social discrimination, domination, and oppression could readily coexist with the official ideology handed down by the French Revolution: "The bourgeois revolution of the modern period defined man's humanity by a theoretical liberty and an abstract equality, while at the same time it created a social system that effectively suppresses this equality and liberty" (Bernauer, 33). The post-structuralists have therefore striven to discredit all the metaphysical notions of value and essence that have served to deflect effective critiques of society. As a consequence, they have frequently been accused of promoting a universal skepticism and relativism that is equated to a kind of moral abdication in the face of the ever-present threat of evil in this world; some critics, for example, have diagnosed post-structuralist theorization as a cynical, self-serving strategy that "would facilitate even more the task of the cleverest, strongest, and least scrupulous" (Jacques Bouveresse, *Rationalité et cynisme*, p.17).

When we consider the work of Foucault, however, it becomes clear that a so-called post-structuralist approach to the question of the Enlightenment is anything but an abdication of the kind of rational and moral inquiry that gave eighteenth-century thought its exemplary status. Although the fame achieved by Foucault's work owes much to the somewhat scandalous reputation of the author's anti-humanistic and anti-enlightenment pronouncements, there is nothing cynical about his critical approach to notions of truth and objectivity. In the first place, rather than denying the possibility of norms and the value of rationality, Foucault's archaeology of knowledge seeks to outline the conditions of possibility for our convictions and truths. Secondly, Foucault recognized the undeniable impact the phenomenon of the Enlightenment had had and continued to have on Western thought: "It seems to me that the Enlightenment, taken both as a singular event inaugurating European modernity and as a permanent process that manifests itself in the history of reason, in the development and establishment of forms of rationality and of technique, the autonomy and authority of knowledge is not simply an episode in the history of ideas for us. It is a philosophical question, inscribed since the eighteenth century in our thought" (*Magazine littéraire*, No 207, mai 1984, p. 39). At the same time, Foucault considered it an aspect of our modernity that needed to be problematized because, as he explained, "the question of the Enlightenment, or if you will of reason, as an historical problem, has, in a more or less hidden fashion, affected all of philosophical thinking from Kant until now." The important task for our age is therefore to establish the importance this event had both for the eighteenth century and still has for our age--a task to be undertaken with the understanding that the two ages represent two entirely different contexts for an ideology that remains the same: "It is not a question of preserving the remains of the Enlightenment; it is the very question of this event and of its meaning, (the question of the historicity of the notion of universals) that must be kept before us and in our minds as that which must be thought."

According to Foucault, in order to get at the "sense" of the Enlightenment, it is necessary, first, to separate it from the themes of humanism with which it has been associated since the 19th century: "we must free ourselves from the intellectual blackmail of 'being for or against the Enlightenment;'(*Foucault Reader*, p. 45)" it is necessary to study not only the phenomenon itself but everything surrounding and supporting it: not only the artifact but the terrain around it--to use the archaeological metaphor dear to Foucault. Thus reason implies everything it is not--or

unreason--and Foucault sought to define the positivity and the sense of all that was familiar and valorized in our culture by bringing to light everything that such a valorization had exclued, banished, silenced.

The strategy proposed by Foucault testifies both to the failure and achievements of Enlightenment: it requires that we raise all over again the whole question of the purpose and rationality of human society and that we question once more the relation between politics and literature, ideas and reality. The relation between the old ideals and the human condition has undergone an evident transformation; this realization does not diminish the importance of thought or deny its effect on the world; it only calls for a new--or, perhaps more appropriately--renewed ethos of enlightened commitment. Foucault, again, has put it quite succinctly: "The thread that may connect us with the Enlightenment is not faithfulness to doctrinal elements, but rather the permanent reactivation of an attitude--that is, of a philosophical ehtocs that could be described as a permanent critique of our historical era" (*Foucault Reader*, 42). It is, fundamentally, a strategy of dissent.

The logic of dissent, as Eve Tavor Bennet has demonstrated (in *Structuralism and the Logic of Dissent*) is precisely what characterizes the writings of the so-called structuralists, who were paradoxically "not only anti-structuralist writers" but also "counter-structuralists." In addition to displacing and subverting existing systems they also sought to produce "structures of their own--structures which define new spaces of non-conformity and freedom" (4-5). As the title of Tavor Bannet's book suggests, the kind of dissent and resistance introduced by the structuralists and post-structuralists involves its own kind of logic. It is a strategic attitude elaborated in response to a situation in which writers saw themselves as attempting to "think and write creatively within a culture, for a culture, and ultimately to perpetuate a culture which they view as all-dominant, all-encompassing and utterly inauthentic, once they no longer believe that successful revolutionary change is on the agenda of world history" (2).

Fundamental to this logic is the recognition of the fact that reality is ineffable and that "the symbolic order creates its own realities according to its own laws" (8). Foucault, for example, "took seriously Lacan's insistence that all that we know, all that we do, and all that we are is predetermined by the possibilities inherent in the symbolic order" (95). What he added was an approach designed to focus on the particular mechanisms that become operative in the symbolic order in

order to produce subjects. He thus tried to bring to light what had remained hidden by problematizing the self-evident and effecting reversals in all our familiar ways of thinking and doing. Inded, Foucault teaches us a lesson in modesty and shows us that our philosophy is much less competent and that things are much more complicated that we had suspected. At the same time, Foucault refuses to indulge in nostalgia or anxiety: "In Foucault, the finiteness of man's thought is not a tragic fate, but a comic celebration of the ridiculousness of human pretensions to universal knowledge and universal truth" (163). Paradoxically, the importance of philosophizing is not diminished by this realization. For one thing, Foucault understands quite well that truth has become an "increasingly important commodity" in our postmodern civilization; it is fabricated, manipulated, disseminated, and inculcated as never before. Foucault once remarked that his point was not "that everything is bad, but that everything is dangerous" (Gutting, 288). Consequently, while intellectuals, as experts in their various fields, may wield more power than ever before, they need to be aware of the inevitable collusion which their work enters into with dominant institutions such as universities, scientific laboratories, political think tanks, organs of the mass media. What Barthes, Foucault, Derrida have taught us to see is that "the subject continues to repeat the institutional languages, the cultural fragments, the *epistemes,* the norms, the rules, the writings, the re-presentations and the myths of a symbolic order which remains essentially independent of human beings and which creates reality as we know it" (Tavor Bennet, 235). The claim that we can dominate and shape this reality through force of intellect is a modernist belief that is made more and more tenuous by the implacable manner in which postmodern reality continues to impose itself on us.

One of the strategic benefits offered by a Foucaldian analysis is a changed understanding of the intellectual's function and responsibilties. Foucault's motivation and convictions originate not in theory but in experience, in his involvement with various ethical and political causes. Gary Gutting points out, for example, that Foucault's "archaeological method originates primarily from concrete struggles for historical understanding, not from prior philosophical commitments." His "philosopher's analytical and synthetic skills" serve not to ground thought or action but to clear the way for these. In this, Foucault's purpose was clearly different from that of Kant: "Like Kant, he accepts reason as the key to freedom and autonomy. But, in characteristically postmodern fashion, he also sees the ways in which reason itself can tyrannize rather

than liberate and sets himself the task of employing reason to overcome its own destructive tendencies." These destructive tendencies are particularly threatening the moment categorical boundaries are taken to be universal attributes, and not the "contingent products of history" that they always are. For Foucault, the necessary grounding is provided by praxis: "the specific evaluations defining the goals of our struggle for human liberation are grounded in our concrete experiences of oppressive institutions and practices, quite independent of any justification by philosophical theorizing." While such a strategy is obviously prone to errors, at least it will not be maintained in its erring ways by a theory that has turned into a paralyzing, sacred dogma. The political struggle waged according to Foucaldian insights will necessarily be local and limited and will open the area of decision making to the participants, denying from the start any leadership role for intellectuals who would claim to have the required wisdom and vision. Injustice and oppression are sufficiently persuasive on their own and can provide ample motivation for action without the benefit of philosophical justification.

Far from dispensing the critic from taking a position then, a Foucaldian approach obligates him or her to a constant commitment--not to theory but to the need for confronting the real without the benefit of metaphysical alibis. Gutting finds Foucault's own statements revealing and agrees with the latter's recommendation that "the project of the historical critique of reason must be 'experimental' in the sense of continually putting itself 'to the test of reality, of contemporary reality'" (283). In this way, as Foucault reminds us, intellectuals will be in a better position to provide the necessary tools for understansding concrete situations, tools with which "they try to facilitate the struggles of different groups by offering analyses, conceptual strategies, and political and theoretical critique" (May, 178). Intellectuals thereby lose their heroic stature but the idea of a hero, as Foucault has shown, "has served as a device to explain change apart from the millions of unknowns who are responsible for that change" (Bernauer, 156). Intellectuals no longer need to provide the reasons, the goals, the motivation for struggles as soon as they understand that "real political change comes from below and from many points, not from above and from a center" (May, 170). It is a change that will be brought about by the involvement of those who struggle with the reality of their own condition and whose actions are based on the experience of their specific situation.

In this regard, a revealing parallel exists between the strategy of

post-structuralists and the thought of such Russian anarchists as Bakunin and Kropotkin, as Todd May has demonstrated. May notes that "anarchism promotes direct consensual decision making rather than delegation of authority." This is because anarchists realize that it is when political authority is delegated or "represented" that dictatorships--of the proletariat or someone else--are made possible. Anarchism therefore "focuses upon the oppresed themselves rather than upon those who claim to speak for them." The goal of political activity then is to create conditions that will allow "oppressed populations to decide their goals and their means of resistance within the registers of their own oppression" (176). Likewise, anarchists were suspicious of any overarching theme such as "the good," "the march of history," "the needs of society" or any abstract general concept recruited as a principle for action because of them, "freedom is not juridical, it is material" (171). Structuralist, Deconstructionist, Poststructuralist, and related theories have contributed to deepen and spread this suspicion; in doing this, they have become politically useful. They still can serve to weaken processes by which theorical freedoms are proclaimed only to cover up the tangible, material mechanisms of oppression.

THE OHIO STATE UNIVERSITY KARLIS RACEVSKIS

WORKS CITED

Bernauer, Jamees W. *Michel Foucault's Force of Flight: Toward an Ethics for Thought.* Atlantic Highlands, N.J.: Humanities Press International, 1990.

Bouveresse, Jacques. *Rationalité et cynisme.* Paris: Minuit, 1984.

"Foucault." *Magazine littéraire*, 207, May 1984.

The Foucault Reader. Ed. by Paul Rabinow. New York: Pantheon, 1984.

Gutting, Mary. *Michel Foucault's Archaeology of Scientific Reason.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989.

May, Todd. "Is Post-Structuralist Political Theory Anarchist?" *Philosophy and Social Criticism* 15 (1989): 167-182.

Tavor Bannet, Eve. *Structuralism and the Logic of Dissent: Barthes, Derrida, Foucault, Lacan.* Urbana: Univ.of Illinois Press, 1989.