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Introduction: Foucault's Method Today

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Why, when one has 'done badly', must one bring out the truth, not only of what one has done, but of what one is? (Foucault, *Les confessions de la chair*, 2018, p. 98)

The 1971 debate between Foucault and Chomsky is one we still talk about, think about, and refer to today. Arguably this debate, mediated by Fon Elders, *is* the debate of the 20th century (for instance, compared to what the 21st century has so far offered, namely the underwhelming Žižek-Peterson debate largely due to Peterson appearing out of his depth). The Foucault-Chomsky debate was an incredible televised interchange which included moments of sheer unapologetic verbal cuts from Foucault followed by Chomsky's intelligent, if stunned at times, recourse. They debated the viability of human nature and whether creativity as a subjective expression exists: Foucault says no, Chomsky says yes. It is a debate in which two minds respectfully, honestly, and fiercely engage each other. Moreover, this debate offers us an incredible insight into Foucault's thinking and method. Foucault was first and foremost a historian and insists that the past enables the present to exist, to think about and to occur. It is at this juncture that Foucault presents a demand on all who follow in his wake: we have to know history, engage in and with history, critique, wrestle with and rethink history in order to make sense of the present. One cannot follow or properly draw upon Foucault if history is bypassed or dismissed – which is perhaps why Foucault is often so mis-used today? At the same time, the politics of historicisation also helps enables an understanding of the rise of the present anti-

Foucauldian position which is perhaps an inadvertent acknowledgement of one's lack of knowledge.

Today's strange disposition to bolster one's preferred theoretical or philosophical position by dismissing or degrading Foucault is revealing to how the academy operates under such pressures of scarcity and peculiarity. Keeping oneself relevant (or, we should say, 'citable' as the shallow genealogy of the current day) in the eyes of the academy through following theoretical fashions and trends is highly problematic at the best of times but especially in a supposed intellectual environment. There should always be room for the theoretically unfashionable, for those who thought against the grain of their time. Foucault fits the bill here, declaring that "[i]t wasn't May of '68 that changed me, it was March of '68, in a Third World country' (1991 [1981], p. 136). What he was referring to here was his commitment to supporting those anticolonial and antiwar student protests against the Tunisian government, accused of corruption and violence. Foucault went as far as to allow his personal apartment to be used as one of the headquarters for activist organisation at this time and he gave protection and funds for legal fees to those protesters who were targeted and arrested (Hendrickson, 2013, p. 89–90). While this is admirable and for some, beyond the call of intellectual duty, how does this speak to Foucault's method? To be clear, for Foucault politics is a praxis: where the rubber hits the theoretical road. But Foucault does not stop here: he employs the intersection between theory and politics as a way as a critical ongoing epistemological problem of the nexus between language, self and history.¹

For sure, Foucault fits this typecast today: he certainly created important divisions in thinking. He was an unapologetic relativist who opposed the position of taking up universal 'truth' (truth for Foucault was an ongoing question of critique); he expressed enjoying pleasure as an expression of subjectivity (but rejected psychoanalysis); he had little time for the swathes of claims and pleas others might have had about one's talent or creative proclivities (and yet was savvy to how to mobilise people and express discontent). He was also a leading activist, prolific writer and thinker, someone who suffered with his mental health and who questioned the institutions which prop up so call taken for granted subjectivities. He was by no means entirely a pragmatist, although he developed a method for studying the present. He put the concept and circulation of power to work – it was to be found, Foucault maintains, in all the nooks and crannies of everyday life: our relationships, sex, work, law, care, health and so on... If we take power into account, Foucault says, we can treat it with the contempt it deserves. Such truth is for Foucault an historical construction and inevitably therefore, one organised by discourse about how identity, sex and pleasure can be discussed and practiced. This

gives the truth of sex and pleasure an empirical bodily presence which for Foucault is problematically interpellated within essentialism:

'Sexuality': the correlative of that slowly developed discursive practice which constitutes the *scientia sexualis*. The essential features of this sexuality are not the expression of a representation that is more or less distorted by ideology, of a misunderstanding of taboos; they correspond to the functional requirements of a discourse that must produce its truth. Situated at the point of intersection of a technique of confession and a scientific diversity [...] sexuality was being defined 'by nature' (Foucault, 1976, 68).

Foucault is confrontational as a thinker – especially for those of us whose interests and theoretical uptakes lie in fields where questions of power might be obfuscated, dismissed, ignored, conditionally accepted or sidelined. For example, there is no power (or linear time) in the unconscious but these are symbolic and within the very nature of psychoanalytic praxis is to give power to the unconscious over the ego. Power (as well as linear time) is very much at work. It needs to be.

Foucault's ontology of discourse emanates from the cultural and social conditions which, he contends, are imposed upon us. He understands discourse as an ordering of everything (people, attitudes, values and so on) as they emerge and reproduce within different discursive fields such as sex, science or history. For him, the subject emerges, not in any singular 'fixed' way, from a composition of many discourses, all of which carry political investment. Thus for Foucault the body is a text which can be read discursively, having already itself produced a politics of discourse. Such discourse can be thought of as language in action, one which vehemently rejects all notions of self-knowledge, sovereignty, narrative, agency and so on because, claims Foucault, these are already generated for us and we either take them up or not. This is why history is important, for via an engagement with history we become aware of what is generated, how and why – and also, how and why we might take up or reject what is generated. It is notable that for Foucault it is the very interpellation of discourse which allows for collective social and political transformation. Interestingly, this conviction can be said to be foregrounded by none other than Ferenczi who also claimed that nothing serves to resist inevitable change because it is the phantasy of difference that provides the foundation of the drive.

For Foucault discourse frames desire as itself a discourse which entraps the subject, thereby enabling relations of authority to be perpetually reproduced and circulated. In this scenario desire is understood against the backdrop of already existing power relations. Desires are taken up because they appear already structurally *desirable* to the subject. An example of this given by Foucault is how the sexed subject is constructed within the dominant ideology of heteronormativity in

which the body speaks, but only via power relations brokered by an authoritative voice within discourse.

To understand what Foucault means by the emergence of discourse as it pertains to the sexed body, we must include his conception of power as referring to that which are historically, strategically constructed:

Power is not a thing, an institution, an aptitude or an object. Power describes relations of force, and as such is a nominal concept: One needs to be nominalistic, no doubt: power is not an institution, and not a structure; neither it is a certain strength we are endowed with; it is the name one attributes to a complex strategical situation in a particular society (Foucault, 1979, 93).

For Foucault power consists of the wider social body interwoven with institutions and activities which bring about knowledge including sex and sexualities. What frames power as *power* are the resistances which initially motivated its hegemony, yet such is its ultimate inherence it can appear to be neutral – this is a hallmark of Foucault's account of power. For him, although power is not tangible, it has tangible institutional effects and articulations in every facet of human activity: sex, family, education, medicine, punishment and so on. In deciphering power Foucault claims that, being invested in the body as an object to be desired, power negates or cancels the potential to discover the self because as subjects we always perceive ourselves in relation to the power already invested within us by discourses of authority. We only have the ability to recognise ourselves in ways which speak to or resist imprisoning power structures. If we cannot recognize how power is structured and repeated, we will lack the ability to recognize the self as potentially authoritative. Within this circulation of power truth for the subject is determined solely by institutional, cultural, and historical phenomena. Thus, Foucault's radical position portrays the effect of power as historical, historicising and totalising.

Here Foucault's theory of the subject takes an interesting turn regarding its implications for desire. In his debate with Chomsky, moderated by Elders, Foucault does not discount the existence of human nature but insists that it emerges from specific cultural and historical practices (1974). In the same interview Foucault then also argues against creativity, universal values, justice, idealism and so on. What makes this interview so memorable and important today is not so much its confounding of Chomsky and Elders as the strength of Foucault's conviction – that defining the self in terms of a human nature (whatever that might be) merely endorses existing underlying social, historical, cultural, and political universals. The problem, states Foucault, is that these are not universal at all but simply attributes of

social life and nothing more. Furthermore, since these supposed universals may be used to support oppressive hegemonies, they should be argued against. He gives the example of the university tasked with inventing disciplines to prop up some rules whilst negating others. Foucault is not here being cynical – rather, he is pointing out that it is precisely the role of an institution to be tasked to provide the content required by the power it has been set up to serve. Similarly in his *Confessions of the Flesh*, Foucault discusses the power of the ‘confession’ as a conduit by which people are compelled to speak their sexuality, an essentialism, he says, is bound within the power language is afforded.

This issue reads Foucault (who, if alive today would be 96) from the present and asks what do contemporary readings of Foucault offer to thinking via those political, subjective, and social issues relevant today? Reading Foucault from within the 21st century is not only to engage with Foucault from a distance (that is, the aftermath of the rise and fall of Foucault in the academy) but also to remind ourselves of how the 21st century is itself as series of power discourses continuing into the new century. The contributions in this issue all put to work not only Foucault's methods of politics, genealogy and historicity as specific readings of social and subjective phenomenon but also read him across and alongside other authors, some recent such as Dean and Zamora's controversial reading of Foucault and neoliberalism, and other provocative intellectual interlocuters, such as Guartarri, Jameson, Baudrillard, Allouch, Zupancic, Canguilhem, Lacan, Kant, Freud and Illouz. What is also put to work is the interdisciplinary nexus of Foucault's thinking relating to philosophy, biology, history, sex, autoethnography, technology, Christianity, and politics. The authors all take up Foucault's work not as a legacy of the past, but rather as a modality of contemporaneity: How can his praxis be thought today via his reconsideration of parrhesia? What might be Foucault's reception to Greek and Roman philosophies? What are the implications and effects of a contemporary Foucauldian praxis regarding the crises and conundrums we currently encounter? In the face of the current trend towards universalism how can Foucault provide a challenge or riff to such theoretical and rhetorical orientations, especially concerning the ‘political subjectivity’ as one which unapologetically takes up pleasure?

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· Foucault raises this in his 1968 seminar, 'Linguistics and Social Sciences' *Centre d'études et de recherches économiques et sociales* of the University of Tunis. Here he is very clear about his method which he refers to as a "history of reason" where he claims the human science should be tasked with: "1) to purge themselves of the classical conception of causality and associated concepts (e.g. 'predetermined syntheses' such as the subject, author, history and the book), which had been used to rationalise empirical fields in the 19th century; 2) to formalise new procedures and concepts in order to discover to what degree 'one can formalise this ensemble of relations . . . in terms of symbolic logic'; and 3) to design methods for other human sciences that successfully harness this 'formidable instrument of the rationalisation of the real' while accounting for differences between linguistics and other disciplines" (1968).