

Interview with *Les Nouvelles Littéraires*, 17 March 1975

Translated by Renée Morel

Editor's Note: This interview was first published 17 March 1975, in *Les Nouvelles Littéraires*, conducted by Jean-Louis Ezine. This translation, by Renée Morel, is taken from the February 1985 edition of the UC Berkeley-based newsletter *History of the Present*, pp. 2-3, 14. That edition was edited by Keith Gandal, Stephen Kotkin, and Paul Rabinow.

Ezine: Yesterday madness, illness; today prisons: through this patient labour as an archivist of the social alcoves, do you hope to rescue philosophy from its powerlessness?

Foucault: You know that I am not talking as a philosopher. When I started to get involved with these subjects that were in a way the dregs [*bas-fonds*] of social reality a number of researchers such as Barthes, Blanchot, and the English antipsychiatrists took an interest in them. But it must be said that neither the philosophical community nor even the political community has been even slightly interested in them. None of the journals, institutionally assigned to register the smallest jolt in the philosophical world, has paid any attention to them. The problem of social controls — to which are connected all the issues related to madness, medicine, psychiatry — did not appear in general view until after May '68. All of a sudden it was catapulted to the centre of common concerns.

Ezine: In spite or because of its aptitude to dismember the "dissocial," to take apart the mechanism[s] of power, for what can contemporary philosophy hope, other than helping these powers refine their strategies as soon as it unmasks them?

Foucault: Your question carries with it a postulate: I would be the author of a philosophical discourse that functions like any other, i.e. in the very directions of the mechanisms of power that it supports. We could argue about that. . . . Whatever the process may be, it is absolutely true that it allows the power structure to refine its strategy, but I don't think we should be afraid of this phenomenon. To be sure, some political groups have long felt this fear of being co-opted. Won't everything that is said be inscribed in the very mechanisms that we are trying to denounce? Well, I think it is absolutely necessary that it should happen this way: if the discourse can be co-opted, it is not because it is vitiated by nature, but because it is inscribed in a process of struggle. Indeed, the adversary pushing, so to speak, on the hold you have over him in order to turn it around constitutes the best valorisation of the stakes and typifies the whole strategy of struggles: as in judo, the best answer to an opponent's manoeuvre never is to step back, but to re-use it to your own advantage as a base for the next phase.

For instance, as an answer to the movement organised these past few years against the penitentiary system, M. Giscard d'Estaing has created a new government post [*secrétaire*] on the penitentiary condition. It would be silly for us to see in that fact a victory for the movement, but it would be just as silly to see in it the proof that our movement has been co-opted. The counter-manoeuve of the power structure can only allow us to measure the importance of the attack that caused it. Now it is our turn to find a new reply.

Ezine: You have seen a postulate in my question; I had thought that I had essentially put a sophism in it: indeed, one should consider that the power structure, defined exclusively as the principle of social oppression, has been ineluctably perfecting itself for two centuries despite the advent and the developments of democracy. This is precisely what your book wants to show: I am not far from seeing in it a certain taste for paradox, if not the traditional traces of philosophical skepticism.

Foucault: As soon as a power infinitely less brutal and less extravagant, less visible and less ponderous than the big monarchical administration became necessary, greater latitudes for the participation in power and in the decision-making process were given to a certain social class. But at the same time and in order to compensate for it, a system of training was elaborated, essentially aimed at other social classes, but also at the new ruling class — for the bourgeoisie has in a way worked upon itself, it has developed its own type of individuals. I do not think that the two phenomena are contradictory: one was the price paid for the other; one was made possible only by the other. For a certain bourgeois liberalism to become possible at the level of institutions, it was necessary to have, at the level of what I call "micro-powers," a much stricter investment in bodies and behaviours. Discipline is the underside of democracy.

Ezine: The more we are in a democracy, the more under surveillance we are?

Foucault: In one way or another, yes: this tight control can take different forms, from caricatures — barracks or old religious schools — to the modern forms. We are now witnessing the rise of other types of surveillance,

obtained virtually without people realising it, through the pressure of consumption. At the beginning of the 19th century, the government tried to force workers to save, despite very low wages. What was at stake in the operation was certainly more than the elevation of the political over the economic order; the point was to try to inculcate in the population, through directives, a certain type of behaviour, made of order and wisdom. Nowadays, this bombardment with moral precepts is no longer necessary: the prestige of the car, the politics of equipment, or the incitement to consumption make for normalisations of behaviour that are just as efficient.

Ezine: I am nevertheless holding on to the paradox and other facilities of logical derision: your thought processes provide other signs of this. For example that the relation between the rule and the exception define these two terms — this would be the a-b-c of Structuralism. Another thing is to base, the way you do, the rule on the exception, to the extent of defining, of justifying the existence and the exercise of the rule only by that which precisely escapes from it. The law is made in order to create the offence, the prison to produce delinquency, etc. . . .

Foucault: You are right to cite Structuralism. We could go back to that major example, first in the structuralist method, which consists of the rules of the incest taboo and those of marriage in primitive societies, since it is finally through this example and thanks to the genius of Lévi-Strauss that we are able to apply to the field of social sciences a certain number of formal models borrowed from linguistics and, occasionally, from mathematics. However, this is not what interests me, and I have always wanted to ask anthropologists, what is the actual functioning of the incest rule? I mean the rule not as a formal system, but as a precise, real, workaday, and subsequently individualised instrument of coercion. It is the constraint that interests me; how it weighs on consciences and how it is inscribed in bodies; how it revolts people and how they thwart it. It is precisely at this point of contact, of friction, possibly of conflict, between the system of rules and the interplay of irregularities that I always place my interrogation.

At the moment when the broad system of scientific and philosophical rationality produces the general vocabulary with which people have communicated since the 17th century, what happens to those whose behaviour excludes them from this language? That is what intrigues me.

Ezine: You go further in the analysis of the functioning of social rules: for example, you are not saying that prisons are imperfect because of their powerlessness to reduce delinquency; you say that they are perfect since they produce delinquency, and that they are made for this purpose.

Foucault: I was coming to that; it's exactly what I wanted to say, but I am doing this analysis, for the time being at least, only in regard to civil and penal laws. I am not applying it to the level of reason. It seemed to me, as I was examining them, that laws were not intended to prevent disorder, irregular behaviours, etc., but that their ultimate function was more complex: as soon as a law is instituted, it suddenly forbids or condemns a certain number of behaviours. Thus, an aura of illegalisms immediately appears around it. And these illegalisms are not treated, not repressed in a consistent way by the penal system and by the law itself. Take, for instance, the category of laws concerning respect for property: they don't function in the same way according to the nature of property; so that one wonders if the law is not, under the guise of a general rule, a way to allow the appearance of certain illegalisms, differing one from the other, which will permit, for example, the enrichment of some and the impoverishment of others, which will now insure tolerance, now authorise intolerance. The penal system would be, to that extent, a way to handle these illegalisms, to deal with their differences, to maintain them, and ultimately to make them work.

Ezine: If I understood well, then, for the power structure, crime pays.

Foucault: Certainly. Some crimes pay. Prison is a curious system of reform, rather akin to witchcraft. In fact, it was soon discovered that, far from reforming the individuals, prison did nothing but constitute them as a milieu: one in which delinquency proves to be the only mode of existence. It was realised that this delinquency, closed in upon itself, controlled, infiltrated, could become an economic and political instrument, most useful to society: the organisation of delinquency through the penal system and the prison is one of the great characteristics of our society. Delinquency has become a social body foreign to the social body; perfectly homogeneous, closely watched and catalogued by the police, penetrated by informers and stool-pigeons, it was immediately used for two ends. An economic one: imposition of profit on sexual pleasure, organisation of prostitution in the 19th century, and finally transformation of delinquency into a fiscal agent for sexuality. And a political one: it is with shock troops recruited from among criminals that Napoleon III — the first to do so — organised the infiltrations of the workers' movements.

Ezine: The prison issue is very topical. In the editorial mass devoted to it, where do you place your book?

Foucault: It is only a short history, an aside, compared to the present struggles. . . . Besides, it is necessary for historical analysis truly to be a part of the political struggle. The point is not to give to the movement a direction or a theoretical apparatus, but to set up possible strategies. It is a fact that Marxism — I mean scholastic Marxism, that traditional corpus of knowledge and texts — does not give us any instrument for this, whereas attacks have multiplied on all fronts: sexuality, psychiatry, medicine, the penal system. . . . Do you know what the marxist psychiatrists did in the '60s? Their problem was to find out how Pavlovism could be applied to psychiatry; they have not perceived for an instant the question of psychiatric power, nor that it supported the renewal of sexual roles and the functioning of the family. There came a time when the in-crowd [*tout-venant*] of the psychoanalyst analysing the in-crowd of his patients started to function as an agent of normalisation and of the reinforcement of the powers of the family, the male, and heterosexuality. If the two big losers of the past fifteen years are Marxism and Psychoanalysis, it is because they were far too connected, not to the ruling class, but to the mechanisms of power. It is precisely against these mechanisms that the popular upheavals have been directed. Having failed to distance themselves from the mechanisms of power, Marxism and Psychoanalysis had no part in the popular upheavals.

Ezine: Aren't you taking pleasure in a certain negativism?

Foucault: Yes, and I am taking pleasure in the deepest sense: the bourgeoisie is not at all what Baudelaire thought, a pack of stupid and sluggish fools. The bourgeoisie is intelligent, lucid, calculating. No other form of domination has ever been so efficient, and subsequently so dangerous, so deeply rooted. It won't suffice to call the bourgeoisie villainous; it won't simply disappear like the flame of a blown-out candle. This justifies a certain sadness; it is thus necessary to bring into the struggle as much gaiety, lucidity, and determination as possible. The only really sad thing is not to fight. . . . Basically, I don't like to write: it is a very difficult activity to master. Writing interests me only in the measure that it incorporates the reality of combat, as an instrument, a tactic, a spotlight. I would like my books to be like surgeons' knives, Molotov cocktails, or galleries in a mine, and, like fireworks, to be carbonised after use.

Ezine: And yet this dark and baroque writing gives neither the appearance of the ephemeral nor of the quick fix [express service].

Foucault: The use of a book is tightly linked to the pleasure it can give, but I don't conceive what I'm doing at all as an *œuvre*, and I am shocked that one can call oneself a writer. I am a dealer in instruments, a recipe maker, an indicator of objectives, a cartographer, a sketcher of plans, a gunsmith