

Truth, Power, Self: An Interview with Michel Foucault - October 25th, 1982.

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Q. Why did you come to the University of Vermont?

A: I came to try to explain more precisely to some people what kind of work I am doing, to know what kind of work they are doing, and to establish some permanent relationships. I am not a writer, a philosopher, a great figure of intellectual life: I am a teacher. There is a social phenomenon that troubles me a great deal: Since the 1960s, some teachers are becoming public men with the same obligations. I don't want to become a prophet and say, "Please sit down, what I have to say is very important." I have come to discuss our common work.

Q. You are most frequently termed "philosopher" but also "historian", "structuralist", and "Marxist". The title of your chair at the College de France is "Professor of the History of Systems of Thought". What does this mean?

A. I don't feel that it is necessary to know exactly what I am. The main interest in life and work is to become someone else that you were not in the beginning. If you knew when you began a book what you would say at the end, do you think that you would have the courage to write it? What is true for writing and for a love relationship is true also for life. The game is worthwhile insofar as we don't know what will be the end. My field is the history of thought. Man is a thinking being. The way he thinks is related to society, politics, economics, and history and is also related to very general and universal categories and formal structures. But thought is something other than societal relations. The way people really think is not adequately analyzed by the universal categories of logic. Between social history and formal analyses of thought there is a path, a lane - maybe very narrow - which is the path of the historian of thought.

Q. In The History of Sexuality, you refer to the person who "upsets established laws and somehow anticipates the coming freedom." Do you see your own work in this light?

A. No. For rather a long period, people have asked me to tell them what will happen and to give them a program for the future. We know very well that, even with the best intentions, those programs become a tool, an instrument of oppression. Rousseau, a lover of freedom, was used in the French Revolution to build up a model of social oppression. Marx would be horrified by Stalinism and Leninism. My role - and that is too emphatic a word - is to show people that they are much freer than they feel, that people accept as truth, as evidence, some themes which have been built up at a certain moment during history, and that this so-called evidence can be criticized and destroyed. To change something in the minds of people - that's the role of an intellectual.

Q. In your writing you seem fascinated by figures who exist on the margins of society: madmen, lepers, criminals, deviants, hermaphrodites, murderers, obscure thinkers. Why?

A. I am sometimes reproached for selecting marginal thinkers instead of taking examples from the mainstream of history. My answer will be snobbish: It's impossible to see figures like Bopp and Ricardo as obscure.

Q. But what about your interest in social outcasts?

A. I deal with obscure figures and processes for two reasons: The political and social processes by which the Western European societies were put in order are not very apparent, have been forgotten, or have become habitual. They are part of our most familiar landscape, and we don't perceive them anymore. But most of them once scandalized people. It is one of my targets to show people that a lot of things that are part of their landscape - that people are universal - are the result of some very precise historical changes. All my analyses are against the idea of universal necessities in human existence. They show the arbitrariness of institutions and show which space of freedom we can still enjoy and how many changes can still be made.

Q. Your writings carry profound emotional undercurrents unusual in scholarly analyses: anguish in Discipline and Punish, scorn and hope in The Order of Things, outrage and sadness in Madness and Civilization.

A. Each of my works is a part of my own biography. For one or another reason I had the occasion to feel and live those things. To take a simple example, I used to work in a psychiatric hospital in the 1950s. After having studied philosophy, I wanted to see what madness was: I had been mad enough to study reason; I was reasonable enough to study madness. I was free to move from the patients to the attendants, for I had no precise role. It was the time of the blooming of neurosurgery, the beginning of psychopharmacology, the reign of the traditional institution. At first I accepted things as necessary, but then after three months (I am slow-minded!), I asked, "What is the necessity of these things?" After three years I left the job and went to Sweden in great personal discomfort and started to write a history of these practices [Madness and Civilization]. Madness and Civilization was intended to be a first volume. I like to write first volumes, and I hate to write second ones. It was perceived as a psychiatricide, but it was a description from history. You know the difference between a real science and a pseudoscience? A real science recognizes and accepts its own history without feeling attacked. When you tell a psychiatrist his mental institution came from the lazar house, he becomes infuriated.

Q. What about the genesis of Discipline and Punish?

A. I must confess I have had no direct links with prisons or prisoners, though I did work as a psychologist in a French prison. When I was in Tunisia, I saw people jailed for political expediency, and that influenced me.

Q. The classical age is pivotal in all your writings. Do you feel nostalgia for the clarity of that age or for the "visibility" of the Renaissance when everything was unified and displayed?

A. All of this beauty of old times is an effect of and not a reason for nostalgia. I know very well that it is our own invention. But it's quite good to have this kind of nostalgia, just as it's good to have a good relationship with your own childhood if you have children. It's a good thing to have nostalgia toward some periods on the condition that it's a way to have a thoughtful and positive relation to your own present. But if nostalgia is a reason to be aggressive and uncomprehending toward the present, it has to be excluded.

Q. What do you read for pleasure?

A. The books which produce in me the most emotion: Faulkner, Thomas Mann, Malcolm Lowry's *Under the Volcano*.

Q. What were the intellectual influences upon your thought?

A. I was surprised when two of my friends in Berkeley wrote something about me and said that Heidegger was influential [Hubert L. Dreyfus and Paul Rabinow, *Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics* (Chicago; University of Chicago Press, 1982)]. Of course it was quite true, but no one in France has ever perceived it. When I was a student in the 1950s, I read Husserl, Satre, Merleau-Ponty. When you feel an overwhelming influence, you try to open a window. Paradoxically enough, Heidegger is not very difficult for a Frenchman to understand. When every word is an enigma, you are in a not-too-bad position to understand Heidegger. *Being and Time* is difficult, but the more recent works are clearer. Nietzsche was a revelation to me. I felt that there was someone quite different from what I had been taught. I read him with a great passion and broke with my life, left my job in the asylum, left France: I had the feeling I had been trapped. Through Nietzsche, I had become a stranger to all that. I'm still not quite integrated withing French social and intellectual life. If I were younger, I would have immigrated to the United States.

Q. Why?

A. I see possibilities. You don't have a homogenous intellectual and cultural life. As a foreigner, I don't have to be integrated. There is no pressure upon me. There are a lot of great universities, all with very different interests. But of course I might have been fired out of them in the most outrageous way.

Q. Why do you think you might have been fired?

A. I'm very proud that some people think that I'm a danger for the intellectual health of students. When people start thinking of health in intellectual activities, I think there is something wrong. In their opinion I am a dangerous man, since I am a crypto-Marxist, an irrationalist, a nihilist.

*Q. From reading *The Order of Things*, one might conclude that individual efforts to reform are impossible because new discoveries have all sorts of meanings and implications their creators never could have understood. In *Discipline and Punish*, for instance, you show that there was a sudden change from the chain gang to the closed police carriage, from the spectacle of punishment to disciplined institutional punishment. But you also point out that this change, which seemed at the time a "reform", was actually only the normalizing of society's ability to punish. So how*

is conscious change possible?

A. How can you imagine that I think change is impossible since what I have analyzed was always related to political action? All of *Discipline and Punish* is an attempt to answer this question and to show how a new way of thinking took place. All of us are living and thinking subjects. What I react against is the fact that there is a breach between social history and the history of ideas. Social historians are supposed to describe how people act without thinking, and historians of ideas are supposed to describe how people think without acting. Everybody both acts and thinks. The way people acts or react is linked to a way of thinking, and of course thinking is related to tradition. What I have tried to analyze is this very complex phenomenon that made people react in another way to crimes and criminals in a rather short period of time. I have written two kinds of books. One, *The Order of Things*, is concerned only with scientific thought: the other, *Discipline and Punish*, is concerned with social principles and institutions. History of science doesn't develop in the same way as social sensibility. In order to be recognized as scientific discourse, thought must obey certain criteria. In *Discipline and Punish*, texts, practices, and people struggle against each other. In my books I have really tried to analyze changes, not in order to find the material causes but to show all the factors that interacted and the reactions of people. I believe in the freedom of people. To the same situation, people react in very different ways.

Q. You conclude Discipline and Punish by saying that it will "serve as a background for various studies of normalization and the power of knowledge in modern society." What is the relationship of normalization and the concept of man as the center of knowledge?

A. Through these different practices - psychological, medical, penitential, educational - a certain idea or model of humanity was developed, and now this idea of man has become normative, self-evident, and is supposed to be universal. Humanism may not be universal but may be quite relative to a certain situation. What we call humanism has been used by Marxists, liberals, Nazis, Catholics. This does not mean that we have to get rid of what we call human rights or freedom, but that we can't say that freedom or human rights has to be limited at certain frontiers. For instance, if you asked eighty years ago if feminine virtue was part of universal humanism, everyone would have answered yes. What I am afraid of about humanism is that it presents a certain form of our ethics as a universal model for any kind of freedom. I think that there are more secrets, more possible freedoms, and more inventions in our future than we can imagine in humanism as it is dogmatically represented on every side of the political rainbow: the Left, the Center, the Right.

Q. And this is what is suggested by "Technologies of the Self"?

A. Yes. You said before that you have the feeling that I am unpredictable. That's true. But I sometimes appear to myself much too systematic and rigid. What I have studied are the three traditional problems: (1) What are the relations we have to truth through scientific knowledge, to those "truth games" which are so important in civilization and in which we are both subject and objects? (2) What are the relationships we have to others through those strange strategies and power relationships? And (3) what are the relationships between truth, power, and self? I would like to finish with a question: What could be more classic than these questions and more systematic than the evolution through questions one, two, and three and back to the first? I am just at this point.