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The Power of Discourse: Michel Foucault and Critical Theory

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Abstract: *The debate that contrasts Marxism and the work of Michel Foucault often overlooks that both projects share a political and ethical commitment. Both have moreover engaged that commitment by challenging what Marx called 'traditional ideas', viewing them as historically complicit with the exercise of power. This 'radical rupture' with traditional ideas has been the hallmark of the critical theory project since* The Communist Manifesto. *By challenging traditional notions of power and language, however, Michel Foucault went further than the Marxist tradition in carrying out the critical theory project. Foucault's alternative ideas of discourse/practice and of power as 'positive' are moreover intricately linked in a way that has not been sufficiently appreciated. This is evident in a genealogy of Foucault's early work, where neither notion is able to take hold in the absence of the other. It only after* The Archaeology of Knowledge, *where Foucault rethought the relationship of language to reality, that he was able to formulate the notion of power as positive in works to come. This link should cause us to rethink our relationship to Foucault's work, of it to Marxism, and of the critical theory project to the power.*

In the still-stunning overture to *The Birth of the Clinic*, Michel Foucault recalls a strange description of an eighteenth-century hysteric. After ten months of daily twelve-hour baths, this unlucky patient began to expectorate and defecate her own insides — tongue, windpipe, gullet, entrails — layer by layer in damp, parchment-like pieces. What is stunning and strange about these opening pages is neither the treatment, its outcome, nor the doctor's triumphant claim to have effected a cure. It is Foucault's interpretation of them. He asks us not to recoil from the outlandish images, but forces us rather to be horrified at our own perception of them as outlandish. 'How can we be sure that an eighteenth-

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century doctor did not see what he saw, but that it needed several decades before the fantastic figures were dissipated to reveal, in the space they vacated, the shapes of things as they really are?' (BC, 1973).

This persistently meddlesome 'how can we be sure' characterizes a resolve to question what appears the most self-evident categories of thought, including Man, Truth, Justice, Reason, and Freedom, a resolve that runs through the entire corpus of Foucault's work. Almost twenty years later, he aptly labeled it 'eventalization,' a 'making visible of a *singularity* in places where there is a temptation to invoke a historical constant, an immediate anthropological trait, or an obviousness which imposes itself uniformly on all.' Its goal is nothing less than 'a breach of self-evidence, of those self-evidences on which our knowledges, acquiescences and practices rest' (Foucault, 1980a, p. 6). To Foucault, the ultimate ethical and political function of eventalization was of course to challenge the institutions of power that depend upon these traditional ideas for their legitimacy and acceptance.

The vantage point of this essay is that this process of eventalization and its challenge of power shares a fundamental kinship with the project of critical theory.[1] The putting into question of the most self-evident categories has been the hallmark of the critical theory tradition since *The Communist Manifesto* responded to the charge of abolishing 'eternal truths, such as Freedom, Justice, etc.' with the blunt description of itself as 'the most radical rupture with traditional ideas' (Marx and Engels, 1991, p. 29). In what he would come to term a 'history of the present' which seeks to achieve the appearance of one's own present, not the past, as a strange, historical moment (2000),[2] Foucault therefore recreated the necessary ethical and political condition of critical theory that had been its *modus operandi* since the ideology critique of the *Manifesto*.

To be sure, in spite of this striking similarity in purpose and approach, the relation of Foucault's work to Marxism and the critical theory tradition is famously troubled from both directions. I will not rehearse that debate here (Barrett, 1980). The bone of contention is of course whether the source of those self-evidences is socio-economic, material and class-based, or rather discursive and linguistic (Foucault, 1980b). The bifurcation of these terms fails however to appreciate Foucault's rethinking of the two categories that the Marxist tradition has never adequately questioned: that of language and that of power itself. Foucault's greatest contribution to the critical theory project is his conception of power as positive: that power produces, makes, and shapes rather than masks, represses, and blocks (what he would come to call 'the repressive hypothesis' with which he implicated Marxism). I will argue that what historians have come to call 'the linguistic turn' – the move away from the dichotomy of language and the real – is a precondition for this positive notion of power. I show that in his early texts, without the formulation of an alternative notion of power Foucault's only recourse

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was to repeat the traditional ideas he sought to challenge, and, conversely, without recourse to a more open understanding of discourse, he was unable to formulate an alternative notion of power. As such, Foucault's project is more faithful to the critical theory project than the Marxism with which it shares the resolve to question the self-evident.

Making this argument will take me back to the now almost forgotten early work of Foucault. I trace the genealogy of the two component ideas of power and discourse from the poetic and dazzling *Madness and Civilization* (1961) through the numbingly rigorous *Archaeology of Knowledge* of 1969. In the course of this genealogy I also correct a couple of misunderstandings about this early work and about these ideas within it. To gain an appreciation of Foucault's positive conception of power, most commentators have understandably turned to the work of the 1970s where Foucault explicitly formulated it. But in the course of this legitimate turn, two principal and illegitimate ideas have emerged. First is the strangely common idea that in the work that predates this conception, Foucault did not see any links between power and knowledge or even that he was uninterested in power there. In this view, that early work appears as strange as the parchment-like pieces in the opening pages of *The Birth of the Clinic*. Mark Poster set the stage by suggesting that 'in Foucault's case, the themes of domination and power came to the fore ... starting with his inaugural address at the *Collège de France* in 1970' (Poster, 1984, p. 8). Gary Gutting followed Poster's lead in talking about 'the earlier, explicitly archeological period of Foucault's writings,' 'the interconnection of power and knowledge that was Foucault's own primary emphasis during the 1970s,' and 'the ethical direction his work took in the 1980s,' (Gutting, 1989, p. x), as if the interconnection of power and knowledge was absent in the 1960s and 1980s and Foucault was unconcerned with ethics in the 1960s and 1970s. Mark Philip even makes the bizarre statement that in Foucault's earlier work 'discourses often seemed to be highly abstract structures of thought which were unaffected by non-discursive elements such as social and political events and institutions, or economic processes and practices. In his more recent work, however, he has increasingly emphasized the constitutive role which power plays in knowledge' (Philip, 1985, p. 70). The list goes on (Poster, 1982; O'Farrell, 1989; Racevskis, 1983). This conception is simply false. In the pages ahead I point in the early work of Foucault to a veritable obsession not only with power but with establishing its connection to truth and knowledge. In fact, the relationship between truth and power is its central preoccupation. Extremely appealing in its raw insight, this early work brims with ethical and political concerns and with surprising — at the time, shocking — linkages between power and knowledge.

Second, there is the idea that *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, situated at the tail end of this so-called early, 'abstract' period, is a theoretical and methodological meandering of little value. Charles Lemert and Garth

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Gillan, who describe Foucault as being 'bald as well as brilliant' (1982, p. vii), therefore seek 'to disabuse readers of the idea that his *Archaeology of Knowledge* is of special importance' (Lemert and Gillan, 1982). Philip more magnanimously accedes that 'Foucault's earlier works, although not always easy reading, remain stimulating and provoking contributions to their respective fields ... while *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (1972) [*sic*], Foucault's major methodological treatise, although pre-dating the integration of power into his work [*sic*], remains an inspiring monument to his philosophical inventiveness' (Philip, 1985, p. 81). In pointing to a link between the concepts of positive power and of discourse, I instead present *The Archaeology of Knowledge* as the most important text in Foucault's entire oeuvre: a revolutionary work which in its formulation of the concept of discourse/practice created the necessary condition of possibility for the positive conception of power to come. In my miniature genealogy of power and discourse ahead, I therefore read the *Archaeology* and the texts that precede it with care and with relish.[3]

For those politically and ethically committed to the critical theory project, the writings of Michel Foucault have furnished radical reconceptualizations of the characteristics of power that appear more commensurable with a post-industrial society and that offer strategies of resistance more apt than those available previously. At the same time, the task of the critical theorist appears to have become increasingly complicated and precarious. This is because one of the extraordinary qualities of Foucault's work is the demonstration that the intellectual efforts that have often proclaimed themselves allies to critical theory in the pursuit of emancipation – psychiatry, psychoanalysis, criminology; indeed the human sciences *tout court* – have been complicitous with the structures of domination and mechanisms of power they critiqued. The very effort of emancipation, in other words, has on the one hand supported and legitimized, on the other hand produced and generated, power.

This belief is evident throughout Foucault's writings. In his first major work, *Madness and Civilization* (1961), he asserts that the opening of the Hôpital Général in 1656, which in the context of this text marked the beginning of the Classical Age, had little or nothing to do with medicine or science:

> From the very start, one thing is clear: the *Hôpital Général* is not a medical establishment. It is rather a sort of semi-judicial structure, an administrative entity.... In its functioning, or in its purpose, the *Hôpital Général* had nothing to do with any medical concept. It was an instance of order, of the monarchical and bourgeois order being organized in France during this period. It was directly linked with the royal power which placed it under the authority of the civil government alone (MC, 1965, pp. 40–41).

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Therefore, to regard the Hôpital Général, which to Foucault incarnated the entire 'Great Confinement' of the Classical Age, as an expression of compassion is an imposition of the present:

> Before having the medical meaning we give it, or that at least we like to suppose it has, confinement was required by something different from any concern with curing the sick. What made it necessary was an imperative of labor. Our philanthropy prefers to recognize the signs of a benevolence toward sickness where there is only a condemnation of idleness (MC, 1965, p. 46).

What is more, implicating philosophy, Foucault argues that this confinement was not limited to the detention of the mad and slothful, but it was also expressed in the analogous epistemic attempt to banish unreason from the discourse of Classical Reason:

> It assumed its precise meaning in this fact: that madness in the classical period ceased to be the sign of another world, and that it became the paradoxical manifestation of non-being. Ultimately, confinement did seek to suppress madness, to eliminate from the social order a figure which did not find its place within it; the essence of confinement was not the exorcism of a danger. Confinement merely manifested what madness, in its essence was: a manifestation of non-being; and by providing this manifestation, confinement thereby suppressed it, since it restored it to its truth as nothingness. Confinement is the practice which corresponds most exactly to madness experienced as unreason, that is the empty negativity of reason; by *confinement, madness is acknowledged to be nothing* (MC, 1965, pp. 115-16).

However Foucault not only contends that the construction of the Hôpital Général had nothing to do with any humane apprehension for the sick and poor, but was rather propelled by economic and disciplinary concerns, and that the pursuit of pure Reason during the Classical Age mimicked and served as a support for this Great Confinement. He further asserts that the release of these confined insane at the end of the eighteenth century by Pinel and Tuke was far from the innocent liberation it is made out to be. This is a far more serious charge, because historians of science and modern psychiatry alike remain wedded to the view that Pinel's and Tuke's release of the confined was a grand magnanimous and philanthropic gesture, firmly grounded in new scientific discoveries and a bringing to light of the dynamics of the human psyche. Foucault reminds us:

> We know the images. They are familiar in all histories of psychiatry, where their function is to illustrate the happy age when madness was finally recognized and treated according to a truth to which we had too long remained blind (MC, 1965, p. 241).

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But what purported to be a result of the discovery of the true nature of mental illness was in fact something very different. Its first tactic was to instill fear in the madman, rather than him evoking consternation: 'Now madness would never – could never – cause fear again; it would *be afraid*, without recourse or return, thus entirely in the hands of good sense, of truth, and of morality' (MC, 1965, p. 245). In this the birth of the asylum knowledge was in the service of power.

The second tactic was to instill guilt into the deranged. The 'Thou shalt not' is now being replaced by the far more effective '*I* shouldn't.' The monstrous beast of the Classical Age, confined in its brute animality, is now subdued into a feeble, contrite creature. Therefore,

> liberations of the insane, abolition of constraint, constitution of a human milieu – these are only justifications. The real operations were different. In fact Tuke created an asylum where he substituted for the free terror of madness the stifling anguish of responsibility; fear no longer reigned on the other side of the prison gates, it now raged under the seals of conscience (MC, 1965, p. 247).

Unlike during the age of confinement, the doctor played an essential role in the nineteenth-century asylum. But again, to Foucault this is a mere alibi which helped endow the institution with an aura of scientificity: 'If the medical profession is required, it is as a juridical and moral guarantee, not in the name of science' (MC, 1965, p. 270). Tuke's and Pinel's philanthropic gesture of liberating the insane and the scientific revelations that accompanied them is therefore an illusion whose true nature is one of power and domination:

> They did not introduce science, but a personality, whose powers borrowed from science only a disguise, or at most their justification. These powers, by their nature, were of a moral and social order; they took root in the madman's minority status, in the insanity of his person, not of his mind. If the medical personage could isolate madness, it was not because he knew it, but because he mastered it; and what for positivism would be an image of objectivity was only the other side of this domination (MC, 1965, p. 271).

The doctors took the fullest possible advantage of their newly gained position of power, which, again had nothing to do with medicine:

> The physician could exercise his absolute authority in the world of the asylum only insofar as, from the beginning, he was Father and Judge, Family and Law – his medical practice being for a long time no more than a complement to the old rites of Order, Authority, and Punishment (MC, 1965, p. 272).

Therefore, the purported 'liberation' was, in fact, the absolute opposite: 'That gigantic moral imprisonment, which we are in the habit of calling,

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doubtless by antiphrasis, the liberation of the insane by Pinel and Tuke' (MC, 1965, p. 278). This means that the situation of the mad was not all that different after all, confined or not, because, as Foucault put it a stunning turn of phrase, 'what was formerly a visible fortress of order has now become the castle of our conscience' (MC, 1965, p. 11).

In sum, where psychiatrists, psychoanalysts, doctors, and human scientists have claimed with Olympian, cocksure certitude to have uncovered the noble and eternal categories that govern the grubby mess of ordinary life, Foucault's enterprise purports to show the very ordinary and grubby mechanisms by which these lofty claims came about. The pursuit of truth is not exempt from the discursive, social, and economic context in which it is undertaken.

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These passages ought to disengage thoroughly the notions that Foucault was not really interested in the interstices between power and knowledge in his so-called 'early writings,' that it was only after 1970 that the themes of domination and power came to the fore in Foucault's writings, and that he only realized the connection between power and knowledge, power and truth, after that year. These passages show an almost compulsive resolve to demonstrate points of convergence between the two. In the face of psychiatry, clinical medicine, and positivism Foucault's assertions are outrageous. He renders what had been depicted as philanthropy, humanism, emancipation and a disinterested pursuit of truth as 'domination,' 'discipline,' 'power,' 'gigantic moral imprisonment,' 'Order, Authority, and Punishment,' 'Surveillance and Judgment' (MC, 1965, p. 250), etc. Contrasted with the former version of events, Foucault's implies a radically different relation between truth and power. Where psychiatry has claimed truth as a weapon against power, as the opposite of power — that is, the more truth, the less power — Foucault sought to demonstrate that *truth is the accomplice of power — the more truth, the more power.* Already in *Madness and Civilization,* truth is an alibi for the exercise of power.

These charges call for a thorough theoretical elaboration and redefinition of the traditional notion of power. This is the missing link in these 'early writings.' In retrospect, the call for a redefinition of the relation between truth and power seems an obvious one. Why did Foucault not carry it out? Let us look at how he delineated the mechanisms of power and knowledge in his 'later writings.' The most succinct contrast between the traditional understanding of power and Foucault's appeared in his 1975 *Discipline and Punish*:

> We must cease once and for all to describe the effects of power in negative terms: it 'excludes,' it 'represses,' it 'censors,' it 'abstracts,' it 'masks,' it 'conceals.' In fact, power produces; it produces reality; it produces domains of objects and rituals of truth. The individual and the knowledge that may be gained of him belong to this production (DP, 1979, p. 194).

The 'we' in this quote who used to be in the habit of describing the effects of power in negative terms clearly includes the author of *Madness and Civilization*. There, the professed gradual revelation of truth was in fact power in 'disguise' (MC, 1965, p. 271), a 'repression' (MC, 1965, p. 266) that 'confined' (MC, 1965, *passim*), 'contained' (MC, 1965, p. 207), 'sequestered' (MC, 1965, p. 64), 'bound' (MC, 1965, *passim*), 'mastered' (MC, 1965, pp. 251, 271), 'silence[d]' (MC, 1965, p. 262), and 'suppressed' (MC, 1965, p. 70) madness. As Jacques Derrida has famously argued, the employment of such a language imparts that what is suppressed is truth: the essence of madness (Derrida, 1978, pp. 31–63). The traditional, negative notion opposes power to truth; power masks truth, and truth needs therefore to be unmasked, revealed, in order to be discovered. This is precisely the claim of scientific psychiatry: that it in Foucault's words declares that 'madness was finally recognized and treated according to a truth to which we had too long remained blind' (MC, 1965, p. 241).

In either conception, power is a force. The notion of power as a negative force — one that violates, censors, obstructs — suggests that the absence of that force would allow a natural order of things to flourish in its true, raw being. Negative power is trickery; an evil, spellbinding force that distorts and manipulates, casts dark shadows on a pure, innocent reality. Only the disinterested scientist, equipped with pure reason, possesses the truth serum that contains the formula with which to tear off the mask of power. But as long as this language and this notion of negative power is employed, the critical theorist is in effect helpless. Stuck with ontic oppositions between appearance and reality, subject and object, the only strategy available against objective claims of a revelation of an absolute truth, hidden in the secret depths of consciousness or reality, is to counter it with new claims of having unmasked even deeper truths, truer, so to speak, than the truth posed by the object of critique. The theorist is then caught in a *perpetuum mobile* of power-generating truth claims. Therefore, Foucault's only available response to the truth of Tuke and Pinel is a new truth; 'must appear as what it was' (MC, 1965, p. 197), 'the truth was quite different' (MC, 1965, p. 243), 'an asylum restored to its truth as a cage' (MC, 1965, p. 207), 'the real operations were different. In fact...' (MC, 1965, p. 247).

One could probably read the history of Western thought as such a *perpetuum mobile*. However, if Foucault's observations are correct — that is, if every time an absolute truth is claimed, this claim has certain effects of power — then the task of the *critical* theorist, who is committed to *fighting* power, becomes an extraordinarily complicated and delicate one. Because the flip-side of a notion of a negative power that masks and conceals appears to be a discourse that unmasks and reveals truth, the critical theorists must avoid such discourse at all cost. Foucault formulates this conviction as the refusal of the genealogist in his 1971 essay

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'Nietzsche, Genealogy, History': 'If the genealogist refuses to extend his faith in metaphysics, if he listens to history, he finds that there is 'something altogether different' behind things: not a timeless and essential secret, but the secret that they have no essence' (Foucault, 1984, pp. 76–100).

However, as I have tried to show, such a refusal is not evident in *Madness and Civilization*, nor is it discernible in the two texts that follow, *The Birth of the Clinic* or *The Order of Things*. The extraordinary difficulties Foucault encounters because of this are very effectively manifested in a curious, but in this respect typical, passage in *The Birth of the Clinic* that is worth quoting at length. Here Foucault discusses the history of what he calls the 'proto-clinic' of the Classical Age. First he recounts this proto-clinic's own revised version of the history of medicine and the medical profession, not surprisingly employing familiar metaphors:

> Such is the occultation that has made possible the long history of systems.... A history, therefore, that negates itself, preserving from time only its destructive mark. But beneath that destructive history lies another history, one more faithful to time because closer to its original truth.... It remains beneath all 'speculative theories,' keeping medical practice in contact with the world of perception, and opening it up to the immediate landscape of truth... (BC, 1973, p. 56).

Foucault criticizes this version of events and the language it employs:

> This ideal account, which is to be found so frequently at the end of the eighteenth century, must be understood in relation to the recent establishment of clinical institutions and methods. It presented them as the restitution of an eternal truth in a continuous historical development in which events alone have been of a negative order: oblivion, illusion, concealment (BC, 1973, p. 57).

But Foucault's own alternative which immediately follows employs almost the exact same language:

> In fact, this way of rewriting history itself evaded a much truer but much more complex history. It masked that other history by assimilating to clinical method all study of cases.... In order to understand the meaning and structure of clinical experience, we must first rewrite the history of the institutions in which its organizational efforts has been manifested (BC, 1973).

In this almost parodic cycle of truth claims, the eighteenth-century medical profession of the proto-clinic rewrites its own history (a gesture which also will be repeated by the nineteenth-century clinic), claiming to have found 'essential truth' that it discovered 'beneath' its previous

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'destructive history,' which it accuses of 'oblivion, illusion, concealment.' Foucault, in turn, charges this rewritten history of having 'evaded' a still 'truer' history that 'masked' 'that other history.' In order to understand this truer history, we must look beneath the rewritten history of the proto-clinic and 'rewrite the history' of this institution. This game of truths hidden beneath yet another truth is reminiscent of Nietzsche's sarcastic remark that Foucault quotes in 'Nietzsche, Genealogy, History': 'We wished to awaken the feeling of man's sovereignty by showing his divine birth: this path is now forbidden, since a monkey stands at the entrance' (Nietzsche, quoted in Foucault, 1984, p. 79). The archaeologist is digging deeper and deeper for truer histories, only to find new histories — the secret that there is no secret. Without the formulation of an alternate notion of power, Foucault's only recourse was to claim new, secret truths, hidden in the depths of Western culture, and, conversely, without recourse to a language that is not dependent on these metaphors, an alternate notion of power is not likely to be formulated.

The same kind of language is even more evident in Foucault's next work, *The Order of Things* (1966). There he professed to 'uncover the deepest strata of Western culture' (OT, 1973, p. xxiv). The chief purpose of this work is to make intelligible various ways of ordering words and things. He defines order in the following way: 'Order is... that which is given in things as their inner law, the hidden network that determines the way they confront one another...' (OT, 1973, p. xx). By 'reveal[ing]' (OT, 1973, p. xi) the 'archaeological level' (OT, 1973), Foucault claims to be able to confront 'order in its primary state' (OT, 1973, p. xxi). This order constitutes a 'middle region' between the eye and knowledge, and 'this middle region...in so far as it makes manifest the modes of being of order, can be posited as the most fundamental level of all: anterior to words, perceptions, and gestures.... Thus in every culture... there is the pure experience of order and its modes of being' (OT, 1973).

Although these and many other examples are rather extreme — 'deepest strata,' 'primary state,' 'being of order,' 'most fundamental level of all,' 'pure experience' — one should keep in mind that these are not metaphysical claims in the most restricted and narrow sense of that term. Clearly, the text operates with a fundamental division between 'surface appearance' and 'the archaeological level [where] we see' (OT, 1973, p. xxii), and a very problematic opposition between 'opinion' and 'knowledge' that has a disquieting Platonic ring to it which shows in turn how incomplete Foucault's critical theory project was in these texts (OT, 1973, pp. 32, 32, 75, 89, 127, 345, 365). Nevertheless, it is crucial to recognize that Foucault does not profess to have discovered essences or absolutes, but that this 'order in its primary state' is subject to change; indeed it is this change that constitutes the ratiocination between the various *epistemes* of the Renaissance, Classical Age, and Modern Age, respectively. However, that is not what is at stake here. I am interested in

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the move from a notion of power as negative – one that masks, conceals, etc. – to an understanding of power as a positive, productive force. I have suggested that the notion of power as negative opposes power to truth; where negative power masks and conceals, truth unmasks and reveals. It is apparent that this is the task that Foucault set forth in *The Order of Things* – to unmask and reveal a hidden order of things, an order of knowledge which he opposed to power.

In Foucault's next work, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, there is a drastic discursive shift. The language of verticality and revelation of *Madness and Civilization*, *The Birth of the Clinic*, and *The Order of Things* is gone. In spite of the title, 'the archaeological level' has now surfaced; it has moved from the hidden depths of the 'positive unconscious' (OT, 1973, p. xi) to the materiality of discourse. The invisible Order of the *episteme* is barely mentioned. The field of forces that shape discourse – rules and systems of discursive formation – now exists in the discourse at hand. Foucault is emphatic on this point: 'These systems of formation must not be taken as blocks of immobile static forms that are imposed on discourse from the outside.... These systems – I repeat – reside in discourse itself; or rather... on its frontier, at that limit at which the specific rules that enable it to exist as such are defined' (OT, 1973, p. 74).

The Archaeology of Knowledge was written in 1968 as a methodological afterthought to previous works. Foucault describes it like this: 'This book was written simply to overcome certain preliminary difficulties' (OT, 1973, p. 210), but he does not further elaborate on what this might entail. However, within the parameters of this essay there is no doubt about what these difficulties were:

> The analysis of discursive formations is opposed to many customary descriptions. One is used, in fact, to consider that discourses and their systematic ordering are not only the ultimate state [but] behind the visible façade of the system, one posits the rich uncertainty of disorder; and beneath the thin surface of discourse, the whole mass of a largely silent development (*devenir*): a 'presystematic' that is not of the order of the system; a 'prediscursive' that belongs to an essential silence (OT, 1973, p. 76).

There is no question that 'one' in this passage that is 'used... to' 'customary descriptions' includes the author of *The Order of Things*. Instead, the 'one' that is the author of *The Archaeology of Knowledge* suggests, albeit with a measure of hesitation, that attention be directed toward 'multiple relations,' and while 'these relations.... can certainly be qualified as 'prediscursive,' *but only if one admits that this prediscursive is still discursive.... One remains within the dimension of discourse*' (OT, 1973, emphasis added).

In a chapter entitled 'Contradictions,' Foucault outlines the difference between his project and the one of 'the history of ideas.' The similarity

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between this 'history of ideas' and especially *The Order of Things* is as striking as the difference to (what is still labeled as) the archaeological analysis to which it is opposed. The history of ideas 'usually.... regards it as its duty to find, at a deeper level, a principle of cohesion that organizes the discourse and restores it to its hidden unity' (OT, 1973, p. 149). He summarizes: 'The history of ideas recognizes, therefore, two levels of contradiction: that of appearances, which is resolved in the profound unity of discourse; and that of foundations, which gives rise to discourse itself' (OT, 1973, p. 151). Archaeological analysis, on the other hand, is radically opposed to such an approach, because here

> contradictions are neither appearances to be overcome, nor secret principles to be uncovered. They are objects to be described for themselves.... Archaeological analysis does not consist in showing that beneath this opposition, at a more essential level, everyone accepted a number of fundamental theses.... one does not discover a point of conciliation. But neither does one transfer to a more fundamental level; one defines the locus in which it takes place.... archaeology describes the different *space of dissension* (OT, 1973, pp. 151–2).

Therefore, 'discourse must not be referred to the distant presence of the origin, but treated as and when it occurs' (OT, 1973, p. 25) and we must 'substitute for the enigmatic treasure of 'things' anterior to discourse, the regular formation of objects that emerge only in discourse. To define these *objects* without reference to the *ground*, the *foundation of things*' (OT, 1973, pp. 47–8, emphasis in the original). Without recourse to a ground, we must turn to 'the most 'superficial' level (at the level of discourse)' (OT, 1973, p. 62).

It might be objected that this drastic shift in language is just that: a question of language. There are certain forces that shape discourse – what is the difference whether these forces are labeled 'rules of formation' or '*episteme*', 'multiple relations' or 'order', whether they reside at a deeper, hidden level of history or in discourse? That is precisely the point: it is a question of language. From *Madness and Civilization* and on, Foucault has demonstrated that truth claims have certain power effects. However, without being equipped with a notion of power other than the traditional one that regards power as a negative force that excludes, masks, conceals, and represses, opposed to a language of truth that includes, unmasks, reveals, and liberates (from) power, the archaeologist has no recourse but to that same language. If there is, as I have argued, a web of relations that connect a notion of negative power that exists outside discourse, and a language of revealed truth, located in the secret depths of history, then the language of *Madness and Civilization*, *The Birth of the Clinic*, and *The Order of Things* that exposes a hidden structure of order that exists outside discourse presupposes such a notion of negative power. However, when this language of truth and revelation is

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completely abandoned, indeed attacked, as in *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, and when the rules that determine discourse reside *in* discourse, only this language that refuses to oppose reality to appearance, knowledge to opinion, object to subject, world to representation, truth to power, is commensurable with a notion of a power that produces discourse and at the same time is produced by discourse.

This also generates a radically new critical strategy than the one proffered in previous works. Rather than countering homogenizing and normalizing truth claims with new truth claims, the strategy is now not only a refusal to defer to deeper secrets, truer truths, but a resolve to bombard the power of the Same with the difference of the Other. In the following stunning passage, Foucault indeed phrases this resolve as a promise for a future strategy:

> For the moment, and as far ahead as I can see, my discourse...is avoiding the ground on which it can still find support. It is a discourse about discourses: but it is not trying to find in them a hidden law, a concealed origin that it only remains to free.... It is trying to deploy a dispersion that can never be reduced to a single system of differences, a scattering that is not related to absolute axes of reference; it is trying to operate a decentring that leaves no privilege to any center. The role of such a discourse is not to...rediscover, in the depths of things said, at the very place in which they are silent, the moment of their birth.... On the contrary, its task is to *make* differences.... Instead of seeking in what has been said that *other* hidden discourse...it is continually making *differentiations*... (OT, 1973, pp. 205-6, emphasis in the original).

The language of the archaeologist is replaced with the refusal of the genealogist.

Has the time therefore come to read Michel Foucault as a historical figure rather than as a historian? Yes and no. Reading the early Foucault from a historical perspective — as a history of the present — brings out the power of his discourse and paradoxically makes him emerge as more current than ever. *The Archaeology of Knowledge* constitutes a resolute break with previous works and augurs a coherence with future endeavors. When Foucault in these endeavors returned to the interstice power/knowledge, this discourse, drastically different from the language of truth in previous texts, produced a notion of power as positive. *The Archaeology* is therefore not simply the methodological vanishing point of Foucault's early work, but rather a condition of possibility and vantage point for the formulation of a notion of power as positive to come. This prompts a re-reading and re-evaluation of that text. But for the purposes of critical theory and further explorations of the interstice power/knowledge at present, the link of that interstice to the new relation of discourse to reality articulated in the *Archaeology* must be taken seriously. The choice appears either to be to oppose truths with new truths, reality with new realities

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and remain wedded to the repressive hypothesis, or to realize that these oppositions take place in discourse. That is the power of discourse.

Notes

1. I use the term 'critical theory' in the broad, historically unspecific sense by which I mean a political commitment to delineate structures of domination and power in society, to locate points of resistance to these structures, together with outlining theoretical strategies according to which this resistance is to be carried out. This commitment is grounded in a belief that there is a measure of injustice and asymmetrical power relations in society, and that this situation is ethically indefensible. Although this usage does not limit itself to Marxism or the Frankfurt School, it is in keeping with Max Horkheimer's definition of critical theory in contrast to 'traditional theory.' See Horkheimer, 1992, pp. 188–243. For an excellent demarcation of the term in this broader, non-Frankfurt School sense, see Mark Poster, 1989, pp. 1–3.
2. See my paper, 'Michel de Certeau's Place in History,' *Rethinking History* 4:1 (2000), 55–76.
3. As such, I counter a certain aversion to reading Foucault's texts as opposed to his interviews. Philip apparently regards reading as an optional but in the end superfluous and all too strenuous strategy: 'To see the way Foucault's ideas have developed, those with sufficient stamina might consider working through the corpus of texts in chronological order. But this is not really necessary' (p. 80). One can in the ever-growing body of commentaries ascertain a clear hierarchy where the ultimate source to sanction interpretation are interviews with Foucault, not the texts in question. This invocation is invariably performed while praising Foucault for having 'killed the authorial subject' and the usual talk about faces drawn in the sand. The pet quote to this persuasion is M. Foucault's announcement in a 1977 interview that the analysis of 'the mechanics of power.... could only begin after 1968' ('Truth and Power,' p. 116.) In the few cases when the Word of the author is not invoked in a direct quote, the same self-evident fact is echoed by the commentators: 'The question of the mechanics of power could only be posed after 1968,' say Lemert and Gillan (p. 59).

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