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Foucault and the Event

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What is the sense of an event? In this piece I would like to explore this question by juxtaposing Foucault's presentations of two types of event: the discursive event and the revolutionary event. In both cases, the event fundamentally involves difference and the way differences are brought together or synthesized. The issue of difference, in turn, underpins the event's relations with truth, subjectivity, power, politics, and history.

Foucault (1989) maintains that a discursive formation's unity is a function of its regularity in dispersion. "Tradition," "author," "science," and other abstract principles of unity, he holds, are imposed externally onto discourse and "require, in order to be defined exactly, a theoretical elaboration" (71). In everyday language, "dispersion" suggests scattering or diffusion. However, it has another, more appropriate technical meaning: in chemistry, a dispersion is a mixture of heterogeneous substances, such as an aerosol (a liquid dispersed in a gas) or an emulsion (one liquid dispersed in another). Considered in this way, a discursive formation's unity arises from its regularity in synthesizing divergent discourses.

Psychopathology, for example, is a discourse formed in the intersections of a clinical discourse's health/sickness binary and a legal discourse's citizen/criminal binary. The "surfaces of emergence" of its various objects and the legitimacy of its subjective "authorities of delimitation" depend on this dispersion of one discourse in another (Foucault 1989:50–54). As no necessary or automatic connection exists between "healthy" and "citizen," nor between "sick" and "criminal," these intersections also contain strife and resistance. A discourse's consistency thus rests on the badly tied knots it establishes between other discourses.

A statement (*énoncé*) is a discursive event. Neither a sentence, proposition, nor speech act, it is what allows these discursive operations to "make sense" (Foucault 1989:86). In his later, genealogical works, Foucault demonstrates how various disciplinary practices get their sense from a discursive link made between desire and truth, just as psychopathology's propositions and sentences depend on the convergence of clinical and legal discourses. Statements establish these connections across heterogeneities, operating as "a function that cuts across a domain of structures and possible unities, and which reveals them, with concrete contents, in time and space" (87). Though expressed in all sentences, propositions, and speech acts, statements are "always in deficit" (119)—however many exist, restrictions remain on who may speak and what may be said. This makes statements part of discourse, but never representable by discourse. Accordingly, the field of statements "does not obey the temporality of the consciousness as its necessary model" and its analysis "operates... without reference to a cogito" (122). Statements may "be situated in accordance with spatio-temporal coordinates" (86), but their sense and efficacy exceed any linear temporal order. The statement appears as an anonymous and timeless voice as a consequence of its

placing discourse in contact with an “outside,” whereby it is “caught up in the play of an exteriority” (122).

Reflecting on the Iranian Revolution, Foucault employs Furet’s distinction between historical processes, which can be plotted in relation to the revolution’s time and place, and “the specificity of the Revolutionary event” (Foucault 1988:214). Because of this specificity, “[r]evolts belong to history. But, in a certain way, they escape from it... the man who rebels is finally inexplicable” (Foucault 2000:449). Revolutions are enigmatic not only in their eruption into history, which escapes causal logics, but also in their expression of a concrete and collective—as opposed to abstract and general—will. No vanguard party or clean class schism creates this will’s unity (Foucault 1988:212–213) and it consists in neither an alliance of political forces nor a compromise among social classes (219). Only later, when an external perspective reincorporates the event into history, does this collective will appear as “a rallying of the upper classes to a popular, left-wing movement, etc.” (221). Viewed immanently, its unity, like a discourse formations, is one of dispersion. In Iran, this dispersion takes the form of “A phenomenon has traversed the entire people” in such a way that the revolutionary movement and the political or rational calculations and interests of its individuals “do not come into contact” (219).

Religion provides “the vocabulary, the ceremonial, the timeless drama” (Foucault 1988:214) that gives the event its sense: “Because they are thus ‘outside history’ and in history... one understands why uprisings have so easily found their expression and their drama in religious forms” (Foucault 2000:450). Secular and religious Iranians and those in between all shout “Long Live Khomeini” in unison (Foucault 1988:213–214). Their differences remain, but they nevertheless function like “a single beam of light, even though we know that it is made up of several beams” (220) or like a man whose diverse activities (breathing, etc.) engender a single rhythm of walking (221–222). The way the Iranian struggle pits the whole population against the state, rather than some of its elements against others, attests to its unity (216). However, internal tensions persist and this unity, being composed from available materials that also express anti-Semitism, xenophobia, and chauvinism, raises the danger of the collective will falling back onto the exclusive logics of identity that it has, briefly, been able to transmute and overcome (224).

Whether discursive or revolutionary, events are configurations of power, but specifically micropower. They erupt from a constitutive level of strife-filled relations that connect heterogeneities. Events are not operations of hegemony, if hegemony refers to a unity of differences established through constitutive exclusion; Foucauldian events do not work on such constitutive friend/enemy binarisms. Through events, “subjectivity... is brought into history, breathing life into it” so that “the time of human beings does not have the form of evolution but that of ‘history,’ precisely” (Foucault 2000:452). Such events are guarantors of difference, making the thought of the event the thought of difference.

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