

ANTHROPOLOGY of the CONTEMPORARY RESEARCH COLLABORATORY

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DISOWNING KNOWLEDGE MICHEL FOUCAULT'S ETHICS OF INQUIRY

2007 concept note

no.4

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Suggested Citation: Caduff, Carlo. "Disowning Knowledge. Michel Foucault's Ethics of Inquiry," *ARC Concept Note,* No. 4, 2007.

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Disowning Knowledge Michel Foucault's Ethics of Inquiry

«Thought is freedom in relation to what one does, the motion by which one detaches oneself from it, establishes it as an object, and reflects on it as a problem.»

Michel Foucault

There is, it seems, a puzzle in the way we think about ideas today. While increasingly acknowledging that ideas have the ability to appear at all sorts of times and tend to travel to all sorts of places, we are still eager to attribute them to authors, that is, to refer them back to what is imagined as the time and place of their origin. By and large, this contrast animates today's obsession with intellectual property rights: The more Euro-Americans are drawn to reveal the flow of information, the more efforts they seem to invest in the fabrication of moments of invention and sites of conception. Accordingly, to isolate the source of a piece of information has become tantamount to confer a title of ownership.

Clearly, the function of the author, as Michel Foucault called it in his classic essay *Qu'est-ce qu'un auteur?*, has not disappeared, but rather taken on unexpected valence as a compelling way of regulating the fluidity of information brought about by new technologies of communication. Not quite sure yet about the mechanisms of restriction and incitement imposed on the circulation of ideas by new regimes of intellectual property rights, scholars in the human sciences seem completely comfortable in continuously returning to particular authors. However, as Foucault remarked in his timely essay, to return to the ideas of an author frequently amounts to a transformation of the discursive practice itself. Paradoxically, then, the very practice of attaching ideas to creators can function as a correlate to their transcendence. I will call it a way of disowning knowledge.²

In this essay, I shall briefly analyze how scholars in the human sciences return to Foucault and invent him as an author. I will then examine a different figure, not

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¹ For the English translation, see Michel Foucault, "What Is an Author?," in Aesthetics, Method, and Epistemology. Essential Works of Foucault, 1954-1984, Vol. II, ed. James D. Faubion (New York: The New Press, 1998), 205-222.

² I take the notion of 'disowning knowledge' from Stanley Cavell's work on Shakespeare.

Foucault the author, but Foucault the reader of his work, and will conclude by discussing the implications of Foucault the reader for scholars invested in Foucault the author.

Inconsistencies and Even Contradictions

Time and again, commentators have pointed out that Foucault's work, spanning three decades from 1954 to 1984 and concerned with the historical singularity of the experience of madness, delinquency, and sexuality, is marked by certain inconsistencies and even contradictions. In his famous essay *Nietzsche, la généalogie, l'histoire*, for instance, Foucault offers, as is well-known, a trenchant critique of the search for origins, elaborates a new way of writing history he terms, inspired by Nietzsche, 'genealogy', and underscores the importance to focus on relations of power.³ Departing from his archeological analyses, Foucault now highlights the role of 'the luck of the battle' in the way history is turns out. It is in the same essay that the body is presented as a kind of surface ready to endure the inscription of events, as Judith Butler pointed out in her philosophical examination of the psychic life of power.⁴ However, only a few years later, in his historical study of the birth of the prison, entitled *Surveiller et punir*, Foucault seems to abandon altogether this view of the body as an independent materiality.⁵

Elected to the Collège de France in early 1970, Foucault decided to name his chair 'The History of Systems of Thought'. Significantly, a substantial part of Foucault's historical studies of systems of thought (Folie et déraison — or Histoire de la folie à l'âge classique, as it was entitled at the occasion of the publication of the second edition in 1972 —, as well as Les mots et les choses, and Surveiller et punir) is offered as investigations into the limitation of discourse. 6 Indeed, most of Foucault's research projects are formulated essentially in terms of scarcity. His aim was, after all, to analyze systems of exclusion, marked by a principle of rarefaction of possible speech acts and of possible speaking subjects. Eventually, however, Foucault seems to abandon even this key principle on which a large part of both his archeological and genealogical work was based. In La volonté de savoir, published in 1976, Foucault soberly and almost casually remarks: "A first survey [...] seems to indicate that since the end of the sixteenth century, the 'putting into discourse of sex', far from undergoing a process of restriction, on the contrary has been subjected to a mechanism of increasing incitement."8 One might be tempted to construe this shift simply as an ordinary, if crucial revision that was

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³ For the English translation, see Michel Foucault, "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History," in Aesthetics, Method, and Epistemology. Essential Works of Foucault, 1954-1984, Vol. II, ed. James D. Faubion (New York: The New Press, 1998), 369-391.

⁴ Judith Butler, The Psychic Life of Power (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997).

⁵ Michel Foucault, Discipline and Punish. The Birth of the Prison (New York: Vintage Books, 1979). See as well Butler, The Psychic Life of Power.

⁶ Michel Foucault, Madness and Civilization (New York: Random House, 1965). Michel Foucault, The Order of Things. An Archeology of the Human Sciences (New York: Random House, 1970).

⁷ Didier Eribon, "Michel Foucault's Histories of Sexuality," GLQ 7, no. 1 (2001): 31-86. p. 58.

⁸ Michel Foucault, The History of Sexuality. An Introduction, New York, Vintage Books, 1990, p. 12.

based on an unexpected empirical finding. Not surprisingly, different arenas of discourse reveal different regulatory principles. There are, however, indications that Foucault himself was eager to cast his new book in marked contrast to earlier projects of his own. As he explains in the introduction to *La volonté de savoir*. "In short, I would like to disengage my analysis from the privileges generally accorded the economy of scarcity and the principles of rarefaction". The first volume of the *Histoire de la sexualité* should indeed be read as a reversal of a fundamental principle on which Foucault's prior work was based. Certainly, it was not solely the logical consequence of an unexpected empirical finding, but equally the conscious result of a strategic decision. Henceforth, Foucault directed his efforts to show that it was not the rarefaction but the proliferation of discourse that was closely related to the inner mechanics of power.

A Penchant for Theory

Puzzles come into view, when apparently contradictory ideas are forced to meet in a common space — in this case, the space of commentary, as I shall argue. Accordingly, a standard way of resolving such puzzles is to separate and divide ideas again and to attribute them to the equally imaginary order of time and place of origin. As Didier Eribon remarks, one of the main reasons for Foucault's fundamental shift in the early 1970s is related to the political situation in France at the time as well as to "the new way in which his work was being received." Given Foucault's penchant for continuous self-transformation and taking into account his insistence on incessant self-detachment, Foucault's move, then, might not be as surprising as it might seem at first sight.

In the United States, where the concepts of 'discipline' and 'sexuality' attracted most interest among scholars in the human and social sciences, other relocations occurred.¹¹ From this point of view, Foucault developed the concepts of discipline and sexuality in the context of theoretical reflections on power, the subject, and the body. Commenting on Foucault's work, scholars have frequently been captured and puzzled by seemingly contradictory formulations discovered in his main books and some of his essays. Largely unfamiliar with the specifics of the French context, they have been drawn to resolve the puzzles by other means. That is to say, they have begun to construct another arena where words and things are amendable to a different type of rearrangement. This arena, I shall argue, is distinctive of a certain kind of reception of Foucault in the human sciences. In particular, it allows scholars to fashion puzzles encountered in the work of Foucault as purely theoretical problems. Now it is important to note that it is the form of the arena itself that constitutes the conditions of the possibility of the appearance of certain kinds of problems — as well as the range of possible solutions. Engaging Foucault's books and essays as if they revealed some kind of

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⁹ Michel Foucault, The History of Sexuality. An Introduction (New York: Vintage Books, 1990). p. 12. ¹⁰ Eribon, "Michel Foucault's Histories of Sexuality."p. 59.

¹¹ Paul Rabinow, "Une ombre sur les recherches américaines," Le Monde, September 19/20 2004, VI.

underlying theoretical unity and coherence – rather than a virtue of critical inquiry – scholars working in the arena of theory seem to produce the very object they are anticipating.

A series of ethnographic conclusions suggest themselves. Once we assume that it is indeed Foucault's aim to provide a unified and coherent theory of power, the subject, and the body, we are almost inevitably forced to consider the problem of the contradictory ways he approaches them. The contradictory formulations that can be discovered in his work now appear as a serious problem that requires a resolution — a resolution that, in the space of theory, is likely to be developed in dialog with Hegel, Nietzsche, Marx, or Freud, reinforcing the substantialist assumption that ideas have the unlimited ability to appear at all sorts of times and can, just like any other commodity, be shipped to all sorts of places once the bounds of Babylon are overcome. The arena of theory creates not only the possibility for certain kinds of readings, it also introduces a historically distinctive domain of truth and falseness with its own epistemic objects, enunciative modalities, and discursive strategies. As Foucault underscores in L'Archéologie du savoir, propositions must always fulfill "some onerous and complex conditions before they can be admitted within a discipline". Before they can be pronounced true or false, propositions "must be, as Monsieur Canquilhem might say, 'within the truth'."12 It might well be worth analyzing in detail the conditions of the construction of legitimate propositions in the arena of theory.

A Genealogy of Genealogy

In his analysis of discipline as a distinctive technology of power, published in 1975 in the guise of a historical study of the birth of the prison, Foucault inversed Clausewitz' view of war as the continuation of politics by other means. Turning Clausewitz' formula inside out, Foucault envisioned politics as a continuation of war by other means. In a series of lectures, delivered at the Collège de France from January to March 1976, entitled, rather dramatically, Il faut défendre la société, Foucault refers once again to his inversion of Clausewitz' view. However, an interesting shift occurs. In his 1976 lecture course, Foucault in fact presents, without ever making it explicit, a genealogy of his own view of politics as a continuation of war by other means. Initiating a reexamination of his earlier account, the 1976 lectures offer a genealogy of the norms and forms of his own discourse. They provide, interestingly enough, a historical analysis of the grid of intelligibility of genealogy as a way of writing history, as a way of conceptualizing truth as power, and as a way of envisioning history as battleground for present struggles. In his lecture course, Foucault objectifies his own view, reveals its silent history, and begins to swerve away from himself. It comes as no surprise that

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¹² Michel Foucault, The Archeology of Knowledge (New York: Harper and Row, 1976). p. 223.

Foucault decides to open the first lecture with a confession: «So what was I going to say to you this year? That I've just about had enough...». ¹³

Foucault's primary goal in *Il faut défendre la société* is of analytic kind, as he declares at the outset of the first lecture. He seeks to abandon what he calls the juridical model of sovereignty, characterized by 1) the notion of the individual as the subject of natural right, 2) the idea of law as the fundamental expression of power, and 3) the attempt (of political philosophy) to elaborate a vision of the ideal state. Instead of analyzing power according to the juridical scheme of sovereignty, Foucault considers a different principle for the analysis of relations of power. His initial question is: "Can we find in bellicose relations, in the model of war, in the schema of struggle or struggles, a principle that can help us understand and analyze political power, to interpret political power in terms of war, struggles, and confrontations?"¹⁴ Characteristic for Foucault's style of reasoning, this initial question is eventually approached from a rather different angle: the analytic question itself is subjected to historical scrutiny. The problem now becomes: Where did this particular grid of intelligibility come from? What, Foucault asks, is the silent history of my initial question? Foucault's shift of perspective comes into view in the way he reformulates the initial question at the end of the lecture course. in the revealing pages of the Course Summary: "How, when, and in what way did people begin to imagine that it is war that functions in power relations, that an uninterrupted conflict undermines peace, and that the civil order is basically an order of battle. [...] How did people begin to perceive a war just beneath the surface of peace? Who tried to find the principle that explained order, institutions, and history in the noise and confusion of war and in the mud of battles?"15 Foucault's lecture course, one might say, offers snap shots of an on-going ethical exercise. In these pages, Foucault comes to terms with the silent history of his own thinking; he presents it, then disowns it and transcends it, in order to think differently.16

Documenting previously unacknowledged predecessors, Foucault offers in his lecture course a dense historical account of how the metaphor of war served as a tool in the political analysis put forward in the historical writings of the 17th and the 18th century, as exemplified by the Levelers and Diggers. For Edward Coke, John Lilburne, and Henri de Boulainvilliers, the drive of national history was based on incessant civil war and the dynamics of political life was nothing but the result of a permanent struggle between antagonist groups and their will to power. What these English and French authors provided in their writings were preferably episodes of conquest, chronicles of victory, anecdotes of defeat, and tales of courageous conquerors and coward capitulators. In Foucault's account, Coke, Lilburne, and de

 ¹³ Michel Foucault, "Society Must Be Defended". Lectures at the Collège de France, 1975-1976, ed. François Ewald and Alessandro Fontana, trans. David Macey (New York: Picador, 2003). p. 3.
 ¹⁴ Ibid. p. 23.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ For an excellent account of Foucault's shifting view of the Nietzschean model of power, see Paul Rabinow, "Introduction. The History of Systems of Thought," in Ethics. Subjectivity and Truth. Essential Works of Foucault, 1954-1984, Vol. I, ed. Paul Rabinow (New York: The New Press, 1997), xi-xlii.

Boulainvilliers come into view as genealogists *avant la lettre*, obsessed with, well, the 'luck of the battle'.

Mythical History

In a set of earlier lectures entitled *La Volonté de Savoir*, delivered in 1971, Foucault referred to Nietzsche's view of knowledge as an invention. Paraphrasing Nietzsche's account, he underscores: "la connaissance est une invention derrière il y a tout autre chose qu'elle: un jeu d'instincts, d'impulsions, de désirs, de peur, de volonté d'appropriation." The scene of truth, according to Nietzsche, is a polemic situation, regulated by the cruel play of passions and the cold arithmetics of revenge. In *Die fröhliche Wissenschaft*, Nietzsche unmasked, Foucault affirms, the will to knowledge as a contingent event, concealing the most basic human instincts. Truth is nothing but a powerful weapon in an endless war of domination. As a tool it is derivative not so much of the agon, the competition of forces and the pleasure of excellence experienced by athletics when outdoing their opponent, it is, rather, derivative of the political ontology of the struggle for survival.

In 1976, commenting writings published by a faction of obscure historians of the 17th and 18th century, Foucault discovers the history of Nietzsche's notion of truth. In the perspective of Coke, Lilburne, and de Boulainvilliers, Foucault explains, all institutions of power are based on war. In their view "it was war that presided over the birth of States: not an ideal war — the war imagined by the philosophers of the state of nature — but real wars and actual battles: the laws were born in the midst of expeditions, conquests, and burning towns; but the war continues to rage within the mechanisms of power, or at least to constitute the secret motor of institutions, laws, and order." The norms and forms of this particular historical-political discourse do not offer the speaking subject the possibility to claim a transcendental position. In a cosmos of constant war, the speaking subject is necessarily involved and situated on one particular side. There is no way out of this polemical context in which every knowledge claim is nothing else but another attempt at domination by other means. Truth is a weapon, such is the insight of Coke, Lilburne, and de Boulainvilliers. A statement is valid if it allows the speaker to gain strength; a statement is false if it results in weakness. "The fact that the truth is essentially part of a relationship of force, of dissymmetry, decentering, combat, and war, is inscribed in this type of discourse," Foucault soberly remarks.19

Additionally, Foucault points to a main principle of the historical discourse he analyzes: "An explanation from below, which does not explain things in terms of what is simplest, most elementary, and clearest, but in terms of what is most confused, most obscure, most disorganized, and most haphazard. It uses as an

¹⁷ Michel Foucault, "Le souci de la vérité," in Dits et écrits 1954-1988. Vol. II 1976-1988, ed. Daniel Defert and François Ewald (Paris: Gallimard, 2001), 1487-1497. p. 1111.

¹⁸ Foucault, "Society Must Be Defended". Lectures at the Collège de France, 1975-1976. p. 267-268. ¹⁹ Ibid. p. 53.

interpretive principle the confusion of violence, passions, hatreds, revenge, and the tissue of the minor circumstances that create defeats and victories." And he concludes: "In short [...] the discourse that deciphers war's permanent presence within society is essentially a historico-political discourse, a discourse in which truth functions as a weapon to be used for a partisan victory, a discourse that is darkly critical and at the same time intensely mythical."20 In referring to the forgotten past of noble victories and in celebrating the great age of lost battles, this discourse takes on mythical qualities. Elaborating and propagating collective rituals of remembrance and forging symbols of a past glory, its relation to history is truly mythic. Its goal is not to judge history according to timeless norms, but, rather, to reveal in the movement of history the meaning for present struggles, to incite the passion for revenge, and to honor the courage of past generations. As I have mentioned before, in 1976 Foucault was clearly distancing himself from genealogy as a way of writing history, as a way of conceptualizing truth as power, and as a way of envisioning history as battleground for present struggles. In an interview Foucault gave in 1973 to the newspaper Libération he affirmed: "Il existe dans la tête des ouvriers des expériences fondamentales, issues des grandes luttes: le Front populaire, la Résistance... [...] Il serait intéressant [...] de regrouper tous ces souvenirs, pour les raconter et surtout pour pouvoir s'en servir et définir à partir de là des instruments de lutes possibles."²¹ Only a few years later, in 1976, Foucault would call such an understanding of history truly mythical.

Motion, Freedom

How, then, should one approach an oeuvre that is not always in accord with itself? How should one evaluate Foucault's own concession that he pursued «lines of research that were very closely interrelated but that never added up to a coherent body of work»?²² How should one engage a philosophic legacy that includes the provocative announcement of the "death of man" in the last pages of *Les mots et les choses* and that concomitantly comprises a breathtaking lecture series on the care of the self entitled *L'herméneutic du sujet* delivered in 1982?²³ There is, as one can easily show, a relentless motion in Foucault's work, and it is this very motion that offers us a clue and an argument against any attempt to systematize three decades of patient historical work and vigorous philosophic exploration into timeless theories of power, the subject, and the body. Significantly, Foucault himself repeatedly returned to his own work, testing its limits so as to set himself in motion again. Foucault continuously explored the possibility of transforming the discursive practice he was engaged in by rendering his analytic tools amendable to a particular type of philosophic inquiry and form of historical

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²⁰ Ibid. p. 269-270.

²¹ Michel Foucault, "Pour une chronique de la mémoire ouvrière," in Dits et écrits 1954-1988. Vol. I 1954-1975, ed. Daniel Defert and François Ewald (Paris: Gallimard, 2001), 1267-1268. p. 1267.

²² Foucault, "Society Must Be Defended". Lectures at the Collège de France, 1975-1976. p. 3.

²³ Michel Foucault, L'herméneutique du sujet. Cours au Collège de France, 1981-1982 (Paris: Gallimard / Seuil, 2001).

writing. His books, papers, and interviews, addressing a series of specific practices and discourses embedded in particular historical contexts, always entail, in a certain sense, critical readings of earlier research projects. What, then, was the guiding principle orienting Foucault's thinking and writing?

Our contention is that the guiding principle is not exactly to be found in particular texts written by Foucault in certain periods of his life, but rather in their relationship. Given Foucault's inventive mode of appropriating Foucault, we can conclude that there is not a theory, but a practice, not a morality, but an ethos, not a set of firm positions, but a succession of historically mediated experiences to be discovered in his oeuvre. Clearly, it is important to recognize that Foucault's final work on ancient ethics and the practices of the self, for instance, was marked to some degree by his experiences in Berkeley and the San Francisco Bay Area. But in attaching a creator to his creations, referring to the circumstances of their production, the intention should not be to reduce a piece of work to the time and place of its author's life, but to read texts as means of instruction, as scenes of transcendence, as sites for new experiences, as exercises of transformation, as experiments of going beyond accustomed relations to things, to others, and to oneself. Working in the critical tradition of Immanuel Kant and practicing a version of the history of science as advocated by his mentor Georges Canquilhem. Foucault developed a new type of philosophic inquiry and form of historical writing that enables us to remain close to the events of the past and the present, that allows us to analyze the singular forms that make us what we are, and that encourages us to practice in our inquiries an ethics of attention, alertness, and care. Taken as a whole, Foucault's philosophic inquiries profess a patient effort of giving form to his impatience for freedom. What links Foucault's disparate research projects is a virtue of critical inquiry.²⁴

To clear an original imaginative space for oneself is to swerve from others so as to overcome one's precursors: such is, to use Harold Bloom's felicitous phrase, the "dreadful necessity" of priority that the norm of originality imposes time and again upon Euro-Americans. ²⁵ Clearly, Foucault never insisted on the priority of divination. Just as perilous as becoming an echo of someone else's music is the perennial danger of becoming one's own echo. Stasis and not so much belatedness appears as the main threat thinkers have to face, and so Foucault insisted on the priority of self-transformation. "What", he asked in *L'usage des plaisirs*, "is philosophical activity (...) if it is not the critical work that thought brings to bear on itself? In what does it consist, if not in the endeavor to know how and to what extent it might be possible to think differently"? ²⁶ To clear an imaginative space, Foucault's first choice was to swerve away from himself. Not the misprision of precursors, but the misprision of his own work became his guiding principle. The

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²⁴ See in particular James D. Faubion, "Toward an Anthropology of Ethics. Foucault and the Pedagogies of Autopoiesis," Representations 74 (2001): 83-104. As well as Judith Butler, "What is Critique? An Essay on Foucault's Virtue," in The Political. Readings in Continental Philosophy, ed. David Ingram (London: Basil Blackwell, 2002), 212-226.

²⁵ Harold Bloom, The Anxiety of Influence. A Theory of Poetry, New York/Oxford, Oxford University Press. 1997.

²⁶ Michel Foucault, The Use of Pleasure, New York, Vintage Books, 1990, p. 9.

object of a philosophic exercise, Foucault once remarked, is "to learn to what extent the effort to think one's own history can free thought from what it silently thinks, and so enable it to think differently".²⁷ This philosophic exercise that entails the exploration of the silent history of one's thought amounts in Foucault's oeuvre to an art of disowning knowledge. Confronted with the complex problems that contemporary events pose, scholars in the human sciences might well decide that pride of place belongs to this virtuous mode of practicing critical inquiry.

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²⁷ Ibid. p. 9.

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