



FOUCAULT AND
THE HISTORY OF
OUR PRESENT

EDITED BY **SOPHIE FUGGLE,**
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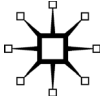
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Introduction

Martina Tazzioli, Sophie Fuggle and Yari Lanci

In 1973, Michel Foucault defined himself as a journalist for his attention to the present and philosophy as a practice of ‘radical journalism’ that tries to transform the present reality (Foucault, 2001c: 1302). In this way, the diagnostic of the present is connected from the outset to a transformative work up against existing power relations that points to reversing the balance between process of subjection and subjectivation. The reference to journalism percolates many of Foucault’s texts, and it is also mobilized to address events as they unfolded, as is the case in his reporting on the Iranian uprisings in 1978–9. Here, Foucault was confronted with a political movement that could not be encoded into the script of the revolution that had ‘overshadowed history, organized our perception of time, and polarized people’s hopes’ (Foucault, 2001d: 450). The Iranian uprisings engendered a deep reconfiguration of the relationships of the Iranian people to modernity as well as the relationships between politics and religion, opening to an experimentation of new forms of subjectivation. In fact, the openness and the unpredictability of the impact of revolutionary events are ultimately restaged in the texts of 1983 and 1984 on the *Aufklärung*: there, the question of ‘our present’ (*what is this present that we belong to?*) is approached through an experimental attitude in which ‘the critique of what we are is at one and the same time the historical analysis of the limits that are imposed on us and an experiment with the possibility of going beyond them’ (Foucault, 2003: 319). This critique suggests that an analysis of the present requires a constant dislocation from the space where we are and from the spatial coordinates that define the present reality we belong to. For this reason, it is not by chance that by introducing the task of an ‘ontology of ourselves’ Foucault ultimately leaves the boundaries and the meaning of the pronoun ‘our’ quite elusive: in fact, the

present we belong to does not fully coincide with the geographic space of a given community or of a nation; on the contrary, it is at the same time what needs to be produced and re-enacted from time to time, not simply as singular subjectivities but along with the others who share 'our present'. However, the 'invention' and the transformation of the present, as well as the redefinition of the 'we' that we seem to belong to, neither happens in a void nor do they irrupt in the form of an event transcending history: rather, it is the provisional outcome of the gap between the existing space of power relations in which we are situated and the production of a possible difference and transformation of these relations which start with the 'impatience for liberty' (319). Nevertheless, this simultaneous move of diagnosis and transformation from within the present that shapes the contours of the 'we' is not a task, Foucault suggests, that can be undertaken individually. The *Aufklärung* as the exit from the state of minority that engages in 'a permanent creation of ourselves in our autonomy', on the one hand (314), and on the other, the permanent virtuality of the revolution as a collective dimension that needs to be constantly reactivated – the revolution as 'an operational value in history' (Foucault, 2010: 20) – represent two moves that cannot be separated: the insurrection of singularities is coupled with the incessant work of reshaping the 'we' to which we belong, forcing its limits and reworking its boundaries. Indeed, firstly, the revolution as a sign addresses a collective dimension to the extent that it reminds the people of the possibility of building their own political constitution; and secondly, the revolution is designated by Foucault as movement, more than as an event, that brings forth the process of exiting from a state of minority (Foucault, 2010: 18).

Hence, the relation to our contemporaneity is conceived as a belonging and, at the same time, as a task to be accomplished (Foucault, 2003). It is up to us to find the revolutionary event from which a transformation of reality, and it remains an open ethical-political task that does not necessarily coincide with the narrative of events set out in historical texts. To put it in a nutshell, the event as well as the 'we' of our present need to be constantly produced and transformed. In this way, the history of the present designates precisely the point where historical reflection and a critical attitude from within and towards the present articulate the production of a difference within history.

The expression 'history of the present' appears for the first time at the end of the first chapter of *Discipline and Punish*, actually in opposition to a 'history of the past in the terms of the present' (Foucault, 1993: 34). In that context Foucault undertakes a history of the prison, asking whether

such an inquiry constitutes a mere anachronism. Actually, it is not an anachronism, Foucault responds, provided that it is a history of the past in terms of the present. Instead, in the late 1970s and early 1980s, the history of the present is reintroduced by Foucault as his own main intellectual and political task, in light of the philosophical journalism mentioned above. However, it should be observed that in *Discipline and Punish* the point is also not to disqualify a history of the past but rather to stress how the study of the past – in terms of political technologies and mechanisms of power – is conceived by Foucault precisely in relation to the present, finding the continuities and the interruptions at stake there. And conversely, the present will become a readable object of transformative politics only through a genealogical account of its emergence that highlights the contingency of historical trajectories. The critical work of finding lines of fragility in power and the historical limits of the current forms of subjectivity is coupled in the late Foucault with the ‘possibility of not being, doing or thinking anymore what we are, what we do or what we do not do’ (Foucault, 1984: 316). Thus, far from corroborating the current reality, the history of the present points to a disengaging move towards the present, making history work as a source for becoming different in the light of the contingency of the present and the past likewise.

Putting Foucault to work in our present: this formula entails two *entry points* and at the same time two interrogations through which the present is questioned. On the one hand, putting Foucault to work in our present means interrogating how to reread and mobilize Foucault within our contemporaneity, especially in light of the political events, class compositions and mechanisms of power which bring to the fore the awkward tensions at stake in Foucault’s analyses and lead us to rethink and actualize his toolbox. On the other hand, it engages in a diagnostic of the present, exploring how some of Foucault’s concepts and perspectives could work as political and theoretical ‘picklocks’ or as useful analytics to better grasp the transformations at stake today, the new political technologies and the current sites of governmental struggle. Therefore, to ask why and how we can make Foucault work in our present involves engaging with the issue of the ‘uses’ in order to fully understand the various ways Foucault’s notions and analyses might provide us with methodological tools and analytical instruments for unpacking current regimes of power-knowledges. Indeed, over the last two decades there has been an increasing proliferation of studies which make use of Foucault in multifarious ways occurring in different academic domains, well beyond the boundaries of philosophy departments: by addressing Foucault as a

specific and politically engaged intellectual, by using only some of his concepts, by putting him to the test of current power transformations or, finally, by proposing a Foucauldian reading of certain phenomena. However, this eclectic spectrum of experimentation in the use of Foucault's toolbox has contributed to the crystallization and 'normalizing' of the French philosopher into an overwhelming analytical grid for keeping up with the frantic underway transformations of political subjectivities, apparatuses of constraint and governmental technologies at play in our present. The gesture of freezing Foucault's 'anarcheology' (Foucault, 2012) and its unceasing dislocations into a stable grid has in part faded Foucault's troubling force against regimes of power and truth, neutralizing his claim for the unacceptability of powers that in Foucault's work is associated with his genealogical approach.

Once the intricacies of the notion and the meaning of 'use' are set out, it becomes necessary to return to the lynchpin of this collective work, namely, the task of a history of the present. Actually, the idea of a history that addresses the current reality seems a counterintuitive and untenable statement because of the orientation of historical method towards the past. Does this mean that the surface of underway events is immediately put at a distance through an analytical posture which aims at dissecting it as a stable object of inquiry? Does it indicate a substantial analogy between the method of approaching and reading the present context of power relations, on the one hand, and forms of governmentality at play in the past, on the other? It is not difficult to guess that the answer cannot be other than negative, as Foucault would no doubt subscribe. Indeed, when Foucault refers to the task of a history of the present in 1984, he designates a primarily polemical and experimental attitude towards living within the spaces of the present.

Most of all, we should not overlook that Foucault's history of the present cannot be detached from what, since 1967, Foucault has defined as a 'diagnostic': 'what I'm trying to do' Foucault argues, 'is to make a diagnostic of the present, to tell what we are today' (Foucault, 2001a: 634); and in this frame philosophy is conceived as an activity that entails a 'work of excavation under one's own feet' (634). This last sentence illuminates the relationship between the act of writing *in* and *of* the present and a genealogical approach towards this present, in its relationship to the past. In fact, the history of the present neither flattens current struggles and events on the surface of contemporaneity, nor does it analyse them simply as historical objects. Rather, it is situated precisely at the junction between a genealogical account which retraces the conditions of emergence of the present regimes of power/knowledge, and an

attentive scrutiny of the disjunctions at stake in our present in relation to the past. Then, it appears as a history at the very limits of any possible history, since a history of the present necessarily needs to come to grip with the discontinuities that mark the contemporaneity in which we live. Nevertheless, from a Foucauldian perspective both history and the present acquire a peculiar inflection: in opposition to any reading which locates events within a given space and fixes subjects to a position, the diagnostic of the present needs to be done according to 'lines of fragility in the present [...] which open up the space of freedom understood as a space of concrete freedom, that is, of possible transformation' (Foucault, 1998: 449–50). In this sense, the diagnostic work as an experimental attitude is always a history *in* and *of* the present. And in a similar vein, to deal with Foucault in the present day does not simply imply testing the validity and the limits of Foucault's tool-box or using this as a purely explicative lens. On the contrary, it requires taking on Foucault's attitude and concepts as possible tools for keeping open the space of freedom, refusal and transformation at stake in any present.

Rewriting the present

Moreover, to begin to write the history of 'our' present, and to position Foucault firmly within this history, demands that we first 'read' Foucault's own history. A threefold process is best understood through the French term *histoire*, which brings together the socio-political context of his work, his highly specific understanding and critique of 'History', as grand narrative, and the personal circumstances of his own 'story'. If it is evident why we cannot simply transpose the statements made by Foucault concerning the emergence and development of various forms of power, discourse and subjectivity onto our own historical moment, it is perhaps less evident why precise attention needs to be paid to his biography.

Speaking in 1969 shortly after Roland Barthes had declared the 'death of the author,' Foucault warned against the production of the author as unified subject, bound by the notion of his oeuvre. In establishing an inextricable link between writer and text, both are rendered subservient to a notion of authorship, which seeks to explain everything from laundry lists to published monographs in terms of personal predilections and pathologies (Foucault 2001b: 882). James Miller's controversial biography, *The Passion of Michel Foucault*, is an impressive exercise in taking this notion of authorship to the extreme (Miller, 1993). Here, Miller brings various, unrelated episodes from Foucault's

life under the umbrella of a 'death wish.' A doubling thus occurs in which the real, physical death of the writer breathes life into an imagined, fictional author who haunts both published and unpublished texts as a spectral figure, demanding an eternal reverence which risks limiting reading, all reading, to the purely exegetical. If, somewhat ironically, Foucault is implicated in the production of this zombie author, the posthumous voice from beyond the grave, whispering eerily that he will not be Kafka to Defert's Max Brod (Bellon, 2007); this is nevertheless a whisper that grows ever fainter with the publication of yet another year of lectures from the Collège de France. At the same time, the murmur of speculation as to the possible publication of *L'Aveu de la chair*, the missing fourth volume of *L'Histoire de la sexualité*, grows ever louder amongst the theory vultures keen to feast on every last scrap of this textual flesh.

There seems to be little critical mileage in this affirmation of Foucault as author. But what of Foucault the reader? An equally fictional product of our collective imaginations, perhaps, but one which, acknowledging Roland Barthes, might provide us with an approach which opens up rather than shuts down the possibilities for engaging with Foucault within the context of now. How did Foucault read his own moment? He read his moment as a reading of political events, public institutions and personal relationships, itself located within a wider reading of literature, philosophy, artworks, treatises, penal codes, architectural drawings, prison timetables and matricidal confessions. How was Foucault critical of existing reading practices as well as his own? What might we learn about reading not only against the grain of existing texts but, at the same time, against that of existing canons? Moreover, how might we explore the tensions between 'living' and 'reading' a moment yielded up in Foucault's work within the context of our own activity as activists, researchers, teachers, writers, subjects and individuals? Where and when do we stop 'reading' and begin 'acting'?

Spaces of power and power of spaces

Foucault's genealogies are characterized by the spatialization of dispositives of power – bodies, discourses, techniques of government and struggles. Indeed, as Foucault explains in the interview with the geographers of the journal *Hérodote*, a spatial perspective allows us to historicize power relations and to grasp them in their transformations (Foucault, 1980). In this way, relations between historical investigation and spatial

gaze work simultaneously in two directions: the cartography of powers situates historical analysis within a spatial economy of power/knowledges, also tracing the boundaries of its geographical location; at the same time, the historical and genealogical gesture makes us see space not as a neutral signifier or as the surface of the events but rather as the provisional outcome of a certain configuration of powers/resistances. Space is not an analytical starting grid through which events are located on a map, but rather it is an ongoing changing object of analysis which needs to be historicized. The gesture of putting in motion space within history, considering the space itself as a *subject of* and *subject to* the field of power relations makes the history of the present also a history through and of spaces. *Spaces of power*: relations of power are always inscribed in space and contribute to the shaping of a certain spatial economy. By the same token, in Foucault's view spaces are eminently productive – of borders, of disciplining mechanisms and of differentiations: *power of spaces*. Moreover, it is important to point out that the spaces addressed by Foucault do not necessarily correspond to geopolitical units such as states or nations: the heterogeneity of spaces explored (spaces of confinement, spaces of illegalism and spaces of governmentality) indicates that the boundaries of a given space are traced by the economy of power/knowledge that sustains these. The spatial reference immediately evokes the issue of 'other spaces', namely those spaces that Foucault has deliberately left outside of his genealogies and that are similarly overshadowed in any analysis which is circumscribed to a specific regime of power. In fact, it is at the core of many chapters in this book that the colonial and postcolonial dimension confronts us with the coexistence of uneven spatialities, economies of power and temporalities. Nevertheless, this book aims neither to put Foucault to the test of the colonial legacies nor to interrogate Foucault's failures and lacks regarding the non-Western world. Rather, it approaches the question of 'other spaces' by complicating Foucault's genealogies in light of current mechanisms of power and processes of subjectivation: the history of the present needs to get to grips with the heterogeneity of spaces and with 'other spaces' in terms not only of an 'outside' but of the multiplicities and the complexity of spatialities simultaneously at stake in our present. In this way, the present that the Foucauldian gaze dissects and opens up to spaces of freedom, actually diffracts and multiplies in different geographies of power. Indeed, it cannot go unnoticed that this differentiation of spaces and temporalities was stressed by Foucault in 'The Stage of Philosophy' as one of the main assumptions upon which

his spatial perspective was based: 'the European space is not space in its entirety; [...] we are living in a series of polymorphic spaces, and secondly [...] there is not one history but several, several different times, several durations, several velocities intertwining, crossing, and thus in turn creating events' (Foucault, 2011). At the same time, the pronoun 'our' also implicated in the Foucauldian history of the present becomes problematized through the lens of such a spatial analysis: the question 'what is our present, the moment in which we are living?' requires a parallel inquiry on the consistency and the composition of the implicit space of belonging that is, the correlate of the interrogation. This 'we' needs to be opened up and traversed by the multiple genealogies of subjectivity that form the supposedly well-bounded present reality.

Foucault's spatial approach to the history of the present leads to a fundamental decolonization of politics: he sidesteps and refuses the use of the binary divisions that underpin the spatiality of Western political thought (inside/outside, inclusion/exclusion) as well as the unquestioned political grid and yardsticks, such as democracy. As a matter of fact, Foucault's philosophical gaze neither replicates nor retraces existing political cartographies that codify insurrectional knowledges and practices of struggle into the epistemic and political boundaries of democracy and citizenship, as master signifiers of modern Western thought. Foucault's analytics of power enables us to disengage from a political and conceptual field through which movements and discordant practices of freedom are encapsulated into the language of representation. Indeed, in Foucault there is not something like a 'pure' political space: political concepts are precisely what in Foucault's genealogy are read in their historical emergence and transformations, and they are the outcome of specific sites of struggle. Something always exceeds or escapes the supposed progressive thread of history and of its narratives in which that of modernity is one of the most overwhelming and unquestioned. Foucault's history of the present entails challenging any history written from a 'comfort zone' and, at the same time, maintaining an ongoing openness of the present to transform since, as Foucault remarkably argues in 'Friendship as a Way of Life', 'there ought to be an inventiveness special to a situation like ours; [...] the program must be wide open' (Foucault, 1997: 139).

The contributions of this book hinge on and bring forward the openness of Foucault's work to possible multiple and heterogeneous usages in our present. Therefore, the theoretical stake does not consist in replicating Foucault's analyses in the spaces of the present: on the contrary,

they shed light on emerging spaces and sites of subjectivation and struggle. History of the present, spaces of governmentality, troubling subjectivities and the politics of truth are the four main axes on which these contributions centre. But all the four Foucauldian analytics – history, governmentality, subjectivity and truth – are not simply put to work in the present: rather, they are the object of resignification and are put to the test of postcolonial spaces and the current mechanisms of power, subjectivation and subjection. From this perspective, to work with Foucault today also means to engage in the effort of what Foucault called ‘a sagittal relation’ to our own present (Foucault, 2010: 14) – envisaging possible a mode of action from within our present and transforming it; such an intervention within and beyond the limits of the present starts from the very practice of knowledge production, aware of the fact that ‘knowledge is not made for understanding; it is made for cutting’ (Foucault, 1984: 88).

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