

PRISON TALK: an interview with Michel Foucault

Introduction

This interview dates from June 1975 when Michel Foucault published Surveiller et Punir (Surveillance and punishment), subtitled: Naissance de la Prison (Birth of the Prison). This book can be seen as forming a trilogy with Foucault's Madness and Civilisation (1961) and Birth of the Clinic (1963); each work traces the genealogy of an institution (asylum, teaching hospital, prison) and of the human science symbiotically linked with it (psychiatry, clinical medicine, criminology/penology).

Foucault has since published a further book, La volonté de savoir (The will to knowledge), an introduction to a projected six-volume history of sexuality in the West. His other books available in English are Psychiatry and Mental Illness, The Order of Things and The Archaeology of Knowledge. This interview first appeared in Le magazine littéraire; the interviewer was J. -J. Brochier.

Q One of the concerns of your book is to criticise certain blank areas in historical studies. For instance, you remark that no one has ever written a history of the practice of examining: no one has thought of doing it, which is incredible.

MF Historians, like philosophers and historians of literature, are accustomed to a history which consists of great events. But today, unlike others, they are more ready to handle 'ignoble' materials. The emergence of this plebeian matter in history dates back fifty years or more. So I have fewer difficulties in talking with historians. You will never hear a historian say what someone (whose name doesn't matter) said in an incredible review called 'Raison présente', about Buffon and Ricardo: "Foucault only concerns himself with mediocrities" !

Q When you study prisons you seem to regret the absence of sources, monographs on particular prisons, for instance.

MF At the moment we are returning increasingly to the monograph form, but in terms not so much of studying a particular object as of bringing out the points at which a certain type of discourse has been produced and formed. What would it mean, today, to study a particular prison or psychiatric hospital? People wrote hundreds of such histories in the 19th century, mainly of hospitals, studying the history of institutions, chronologies of directors, and so forth. Today, a monograph history of a hospital would consist in making the whole archive of written material generated by the hospital emerge in the movement of its formation, as a discourse in the process of constituting itself, which is at the same time in interaction with the development of the hospital and its institutions, inflecting and modifying them. What one would try to reconstitute would be the enmeshing of the discourse in the process, the history. A bit like what Faye has done for totalitarian discourse.

The constitution of a corpus of source data does indeed pose a problem for my research. But this problem is clearly different from that of linguistic research for instance. To carry out studies in linguistics, or of myths, it is necessary to take a

certain corpus, to define it and establish criteria for its constitution. In the much more fluid area where I am working, the corpus is in a sense undefined: one will never be able to constitute as a unity the ensemble of discourses on madness, even by restricting it to a given country or period. With prisons, it would be senseless to restrict oneself to discourses about prisons; just as important are the discourses which arise in the prison, the decisions and regulations which are constitutive elements of the prison, part of its means of functioning; these have their strategies, unformulated discourses and ruses, ruses which in the last analysis are not played by anyone but are none the less lived, and serve to ensure the functioning and permanence of the institution. All of this has to be retrieved and made visible by the historian. And the task, in my view, entails making these discourses visible in their strategic connexions, rather than constituting them to the exclusion of other forms of discourse.

Capillary power

Q You determine one moment as central in the history of repression - the transition from punishing to placing under surveillance.

MF That's right - the moment in the economy of power when it became understood that it was more efficient and profitable to place under surveillance than to punish. This moment corresponds to the formation, both rapid and gradual, of a new mode of exercising power, in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Everyone knows the great upheavals, the readjustments of institutions which constitute a change of political regime, the way the delegation of power, right to the top of the state system, is modified. But when I think of the mechanics of power, I have in mind rather its capillary form of existence, at the point where power returns into the very grain of individuals, touches their bodies, and comes to insert itself into their gestures and attitudes, their discourses, apprenticeships and daily lives. The eighteenth century discovered, so to speak, a synaptic regime of power, of its exercise in the social body. Not from above the social body. The change of official political power was linked to this process, but only via intervening shifts and displacements. It was, rather, a fundamental structural change which made possible the realisation, in a fairly coherent fashion, of this modification of everyday forms of the exercise of power. It was the institution of this new local, capillary form of power which impelled society to eliminate certain elements such as the court and the king. The mythology of the sovereign was no longer possible once a certain kind of power was being exercised within society. The sovereign then turned into a fantastic personage, at once monstrous and archaic.

Hence there is a certain correlation between the two processes (global and local), but not an absolute one. In England there occurred the same capillary modification of power as in France. But there, the person of the king, for instance, was displaced within the political system of representation, rather than being eliminated. It cannot therefore be said that the change, at the capillary level of power, is

tied absolutely to institutional changes at the level of the centralised forms of the State.

Q You show that as soon as the prison was constituted in its form as surveillance, it began to secrete its own raw material, namely delinquency.

MF My hypothesis is that the prison was linked from the beginning to a project of the transformation of individuals. People tend to suppose that the prison was a kind of refuse dump for criminals, a dump whose disadvantages revealed themselves in use, giving rise to the conviction that the prisons must be reformed and made into a means of transforming individuals. But this is not true: the texts, programmes and declarations of intent were there from the beginning. The prison was destined as an instrument, no less perfect than school or barracks or hospital, to act with precision on its individual subjects.

The failure of the prison was immediate, and was registered practically from the start of the prison enterprise. From 1820 it was realised that prisons, far from transforming criminals into honest people, serve only to manufacture new criminals and to drive existing criminals still deeper into criminality. It was then that there took place, as always in the mechanics of power, a strategic utilisation of what had been experienced as a drawback. The prison manufactured delinquents, but delinquents turned out to be useful, in the economic domain as well as the political. Delinquents are worth having. For instance, because of the profit that can be derived from the exploitation of sexual pleasure, we have the setting up, in the nineteenth century, of the great prostitution business, possible only thanks to the delinquents, who supplied the link between everyday, paid for sexual pleasure and capitalisation.

Another example: we all know that Napoleon III was able to take power thanks to a group made up, at least on its lower levels, of common law criminals. And it is only necessary to see the fear and hatred felt by nineteenth-century workers towards criminals to understand that the criminals were being used against them, in social and political struggles, as agents of surveillance and infiltration, for preventing and breaking strikes, etc etc.

Q So the Americans, in the twentieth century, weren't the first to use the Mafia for this sort of job?

MF Absolutely not.

Q But there was also the problem of penal labour: workers feared the prisons' competition of a reservoir of cheap labour?

MF Perhaps. But I wonder whether penal labour was not organised precisely so as to constitute this hostility between delinquents and workers which was so important for the general workings of the system. What the bourgeoisie was afraid of was the kind of amiable, acceptable illegality known to the eighteenth century. One must not exaggerate: criminal punishments in the eighteenth century were of great ferocity. But it is none the less true that criminals, or at least certain of them, were perfectly tolerated by the population. There was no autonomous class of delinquents. A man like Mandrin¹ was received wherever he went by the bourgeoisie and aristocracy as well as the peasantry, and protected by all. But once capitalisation had (physically) put invested wealth in popular hands, in the form of raw materials and the means of production, it be-

came absolutely essential to protect this wealth. Because industrial society requires that wealth should be directly in the hands not of those who own it, but those whose labour, by putting it to work, enable a profit to be drawn from it. How was this wealth to be protected? By a rigorous morality, of course: hence the formidable layer of moralisation deposited on the nineteenth-century population. Look at the immense campaigns to christianise the workers in this period. It was absolutely necessary to constitute the populace as a moral subject and break its commerce with delinquency, hence to segregate the delinquents and to show them as being dangerous not only for the rich but also for the poor, as vice-ridden instigators of the gravest social perils. Hence also the birth of detective literature and the importance in the newspapers of the faits divers, the horrible recitals of crimes.

Q You show that the principal victims of crime were the poorer classes.

MF Yes, the more they were the victims, the more they feared it.

Q But criminals were recruited among these classes?

MF Yes, and the great instrument of recruitment was the prisons. From the moment someone entered prison a mechanism came into operation by which he was stripped of civil status, and when he left he could do nothing except become a criminal again. He fell inevitably into the hands of the system which turned him into either a pimp, a policeman or an informer. Prison professionalised people. Instead of having, as in the eighteenth century, nomadic bands of robbers (often of great ferocity) roaming the countryside, one had this closed milieu of delinquency, thoroughly structured by the police, an essentially urban milieu, with a far from negligible political and economic value.

The ideal labourer

Q You remark, rightly, that penal labour has the peculiarity that it is useless. One wonders then what its role is in the general economy?

MF In its primitive conception, penal labour is not designed as an apprenticeship in this or that trade, but rather in the virtues of labour itself. Work in a void, work for work's sake, was intended to form individuals into the image of the ideal labourer. A chimaera, perhaps, but one which had been perfectly worked out and defined by the American Quakers (the founding of the workhouses) and the Dutch. Then, from 1835 to 1840, it became clear that the aim was in reality not to retrain delinquents, to make them virtuous, but to regroup them within a thoroughly defined, card-indexed milieu, which could act as a tool for economic or political ends. The problem thereafter was not one of teaching prisoners something, but rather to teach them nothing, so as to make sure they could do nothing on coming out of prison. The futile character of penal labour, which was linked initially to a particular didactic plan, now came to serve a different strategy.

Q Don't you think it's a striking phenomenon that today people are returning from the schema of delinquency to that of infraction and illegality, taking, that is, the opposite course to that of the eighteenth century?

MF I consider that in fact the great intolerance of

the population towards the delinquent, which the morality and politics of the nineteenth century had set out to establish, is now being eroded. More and more, certain forms of illegality and irregularity are accepted: not only those which were previously accepted or tolerated, such as fiscal and financial irregularities, which the bourgeoisie had been able to get along with on friendly terms, but also that sort of irregularity, for instance, which consists in stealing an article from a shop.

Q But isn't it because the first sort of irregularities, the fiscal and financial ones, have come to be known about by everyone, that the general attitude to petty crime has changed? Some time ago statistics were published in Le Monde comparing the considerable economic damage due to the former, and the few months or years of prison by which they were punished, and the slight degree of economic damage due to the latter sort of crimes (including violent offences like hold-ups) and the considerable number of years of prison which they had been punished with. The article expressed a sense of scandal at this disparity.

MF This is a difficult issue which is currently a subject of discussion among groups of ex-prisoners. It is true that in popular consciousness, but in the present economic system as well, a certain margin of illegality is not a serious problem, but rather perfectly tolerable. In America people know that hold-ups are a permanent business risk run by big stores. They work out roughly what it's costing them and find that the cost of an effective surveillance and protection system would be too great, and hence uneconomic. They leave things as they are. The insurance company pays, it's all just part of the system.

With regard to this sort of illegalism, which seems at present to be spreading, are we dealing with a questioning of the line of demarcation between tolerable, tolerated breaches of the law and serious crime, or rather with a simple relaxation on the part of the system, which, aware of its own solidity, can afford to accept at its edges something which, after all, poses absolutely no threat to it?

No doubt there has also been a change in people's attitude to wealth. The bourgeoisie no longer has that proprietorial attachment to wealth which it had in the nineteenth century. Wealth is no longer what one possesses, but what one makes a profit out of. The accelerating flow of wealth, its ever-growing power of circulation, the abandonment of hoarding, the practice of *crédit*, the decrease in the importance of landed wealth - these all tend to make theft seem no more scandalous to people than confidence tricks or financial fraud.

Q There is another change as well: in discussions of crime, the straightforward condemnation in the nineteenth century ('he steals because he is evil') today has given way to explanation ('he steals because he is poor') and the idea that it is more serious to steal when you are rich than when you are poor.

MF That is true. If there was only that perhaps one might feel confident and hopeful. But isn't there, along with that, an explanatory discourse which carries with it a number of dangers? He steals because he is poor, certainly, but we know that all the poor don't steal. So, for that individual to steal, there must be something wrong with him. This something is his character, his psyche, his education, his unconscious, his desires. And with that the

delinquent is handed over to a penal technology, that of the prison, and a medical technology, if not that of the asylum, at any rate that of specialised supervision.

Q The connexion you make between penal and medical techniques and repression may upset some people.

MF Well, maybe fifteen years ago it was still scandalous to say things like that. I've noticed that even today the psychiatrists have never forgiven me for Histoire de la Folie. Not a fortnight ago I received yet another abusive letter. But I think that today this sort of analysis is much more easily accepted whatever offence it may still cause, above all to the psychiatrists, who have been dragging their bad consciences around for so long.

Q You show that the medical system has always been auxiliary to the penal system, even today when the psychiatrist collaborates with the judge, the court and the prison. But perhaps this is unjust to some younger doctors who have tried to free themselves from this complicity.

MF Perhaps. In any case, I have only tried, in Surveiller et Punir, to mark out a few paths. At the moment I'm preparing a work on the role of psychiatric experts in penal affairs. I intend to publish some dossiers, some of which go back to the nineteenth century, but others are more contemporary, and which are quite stupefying.

Genres of crime

Q You distinguish two sorts of criminality: one which ends up in the police, and another which founders in aesthetics: Vidocq and Lacenaire.

MF I ended my analysis with these crucial years the 1840s. It was at this time that the long concubinage between the police and criminality began. The first studies had been made of the failure of the prison, they knew that it does not reform, but on the contrary manufactures criminality and criminals, and this was the point at which the benefits were discovered that are accrued from this process of production. Criminals can be put to good use, if only to oversee other criminals. Vidocq is very characteristic of that. He came out of the eighteenth century, the revolutionary and imperial period, in which he was a smuggler, for a while a pimp, and a deserter. He was one of those nomads who frequented and circulated among the towns, the country, and the army. An old-style criminality. Then he was absorbed into the system. Sent to forced labour, he came out as an informer, became a policeman and ended up as head of a detective force. And, symbolically, he is the first great criminal to have been used as a criminal by the apparatus of power.²

As for Lacenaire,³ he is the token of another phenomenon, different from but related to the first - that of the aesthetic and literary interest beginning to be felt in crime: the aesthetic cult of crime. Up to the eighteenth century crimes were only heroised in two modes: a literary mode when, and because, they were the crimes of a king, and a popular mode found in the broadsheets which narrate the exploits of Mandrin, or of a great murderer. Two genres which absolutely do not communicate with each other.

Around 1840 there appears the figure of the criminal hero, a hero because a criminal, and neither aristocratic nor plebeian. The bourgeoisie

produces its own criminal heroes. This is the same moment when the separation is effected between criminals and the popular classes: the criminal cannot be allowed to be a popular hero, he must be an enemy of the poor. The bourgeoisie constitutes for itself an aesthetic in which crime no longer belongs to the people, but is one of those fine arts of which the bourgeoisie alone is capable. Lacenaire is the model for this new kind of criminal. His origins are bourgeois or petit-bourgeois. His parents have done some bad things, but he has been properly brought up, he has been to school, he can read and write. This enabled him to act the leader in his milieu. The way he speaks of other criminals is typical: they are brutal animals, cowards and incompetents. He, Lacenaire, is the cold, lucid brain. Thus the new hero is created, displaying all the signs and tokens of the bourgeoisie. That brings us in turn to Gaboriau and the detective novel, in which the criminal is always of bourgeois origins. You never find a working class criminal in nineteenth-century detective novels. The criminal is always intelligent, he plays a sort of game on equal terms with the police. What is funny is that in reality Lacenaire was pathetic, ridiculous and inept. He always dreamed of killing, but never got as far as doing it. The one thing he could do was blackmail the homosexuals he picked up in the Bois de Boulogne. The only real crime he committed was a few dirty tricks he got up to in prison with a little old man. If Lacenaire came within a hair of being killed by his fellow inmates in forced labour, it was because they thought, no doubt with good reason, that he was an informer.

Q When you say that criminals are useful, couldn't it be said that for many people crime is more part of the nature of things than a politico-economic necessity? Because it might seem that for an industrial society criminals are a less socially useful work force than the working class?

MF In the 1840s, unemployment and short time were fixed economic conditions. There was a surplus of labour power.

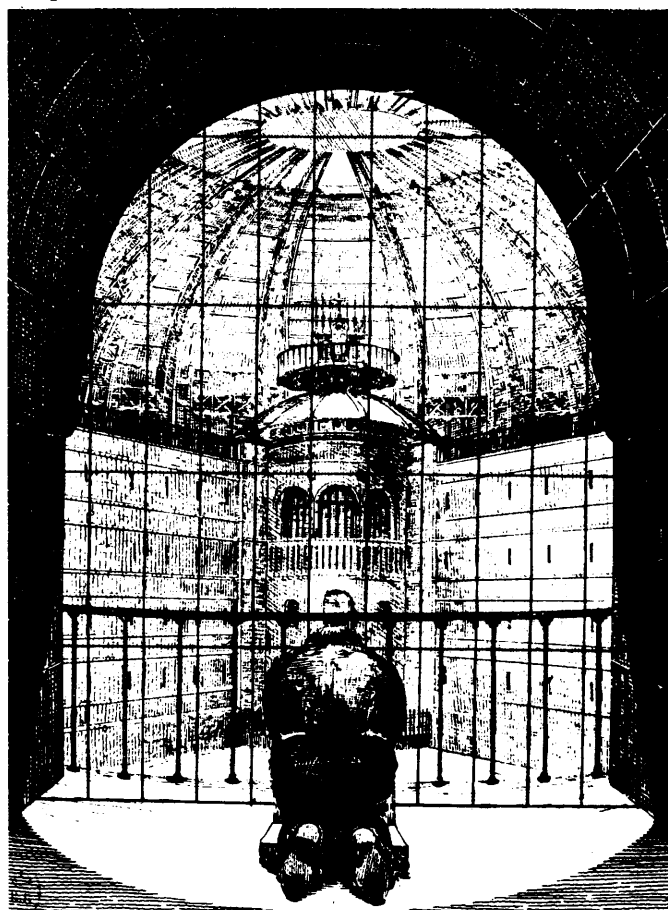
But to think that crime was part of the order of things no doubt was part of the cynical intelligence of nineteenth-century bourgeois thought. You had to be as naive as Baudelaire to think that the bourgeoisie is stupid and prudish. Rather it is intelligent and cynical. You only have to read what it said about itself and, better still, what it said about others.

At the end of the eighteenth century people dreamed of a society without crime. But then the dream evaporated. Crime was too useful to dream of anything as crazy, and ultimately as dangerous, as a society without crime. No crime means no police. What makes the presence of police and police control tolerable for the population, if not fear of the criminal? This institution of the police, so recent and so oppressive, is only justified by this fear. If we accept the presence in our midst of these men in uniforms, armed, while we do not have the right to be armed, who demand our papers, who come and prowl on our doorsteps - how would that be possible if there were no criminals? And if there weren't articles every day in the newspapers telling us how numerous and dangerous our criminals are?

Q You are very harsh towards criminology - its 'garrulous discourse', its 'interminable repetitions'.

A technology of reform

MF Have you ever read any criminology texts? They make you gasp. And I say that with astonishment, not aggressiveness, because I cannot comprehend how the discourse of criminology has been able to continue at this level. One has the impression that the discourse of criminology has such utility, is needed so urgently and made so vital for the working of the system, that it does not even need to look for a theoretical justification for itself, or even simply a coherent framework. It is entirely utilitarian. I think it is necessary to investigate why a 'learned' discourse became so indispensable in the functioning of the penal system in the nineteenth century. It was necessary to the alibi, employed since the eighteenth century, that if you impose a penalty on someone, this is not to punish what he has done, but to transform what he is. From this point a penal judgement, that is, saying to someone: we'll cut your head off, or put you in prison, or just fine you because you have done such and such, is an act which no longer has any meaning. Once you suppress the idea of vengeance, which previously was an act of the sovereign, threatened in his very sovereignty by the crime, punishment can only have a meaning within a technology of reform. And the judges themselves, without wishing to and without even taking cognizance of the fact, have gradually moved away from a verdict which still retained punitive connotations to a verdict which they cannot justify in their own vocabulary, except on the condition of its being transformatory of the individual condemned. But they know perfectly well that the instruments available to them, the death penalty, formerly penal colonies, today imprisonment, do not transform anyone; hence the necessity to call on the people who are to conduct a discourse about crime and criminals which will justify the measures in question.



N. Haroun-Romain. Plan for a penitentiary, 1840.

A prisoner praying in his cell, facing the central surveillance tower.

Q In short, criminological discourse is only useful to give the judges a semblance of a good conscience?

MF Yes. Or rather it is indispensable in enabling them to judge.

Q In your book on Pierre Riviere,⁴ it is a criminal who speaks and writes. But, unlike Lacenaire, he carried his crime through to the end. First of all, how did you find this amazing text?

MF By chance, while working systematically through medico-legal statements by experts and penal-psychiatric documents in professional journals of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

Q Isn't it extremely rare for an illiterate, or barely literate, peasant to take the trouble to write forty pages to explain and tell the story of his crime?

MF It is a totally strange story. However, it can be said, and this struck me, that in these circumstances, writing your life story, your recollections, what had happened to you, was a practice which one finds in a fair number of cases, and precisely in prisons. Someone called Appert, one of the first philanthropists to visit a lot of penal colonies and prisons, made prisoners write their memoirs, and later published some pregments of them. In America one also finds judges and doctors doing this. It was the first great burst of curiosity about the individuals whom one wanted to transform, and for the sake of whose transformation it was necessary to gain a certain knowledge, a certain technique. This curiosity about the criminal absolutely did not exist in the eighteenth century, where it was simply a matter of knowing whether the accused had really done what he was accused of; once that was established, the penalty was fixed.

The question, what is this individual who has committed this crime?, is a new question. But it does not suffice towards explaining the story of Pierre Riviere; because Pierre Riviere makes it clear that he had tried to begin writing his memoir even before committing his crime.

In this book we did not want to conduct any kind of psychological, psychoanalytic or linguistic analysis of Riviere, but rather to render visible the medical and juridical mechanisms which surround the story. The rest we leave to the psychoanalysts and criminologists. What is astonishing is that this text, which left them silent at the time, has left them equally dumb today.

Q I came upon a sentence in Histoire de la Folie where you say that we must 'dismantle the chronologies and historical orderings of all progressivist perspectives'.

MF This is something I owe to the historians of science. I adopt the precaution of method and the radical, but unaggressive scepticism which makes it a principle not to regard the point where we stand now as the outcome of a teleological progression which one would have to reconstruct historically: that scepticism towards ourselves, our present and what we are, our here and now, which prevents assuming that what we have is better, or more, than in the past. This doesn't mean not trying to reconstruct generative processes, but that we must do this without imposing on them a positivity or a valorisation.

Q Even though science has long shared the postulate than man progresses?

MF It isn't science which says that, but rather the history of science. And I don't say that humanity does not progress. I say that it is a bad method to pose the problem as: how is it that we have progressed? The problem is: how do things happen? And what happens now is not necessarily better and more advanced, or better understood, than what happened in the past.

Q Your research bears on things which are banal, or rather have been made banal, because they are not seen. For instance, I find it striking that prisons are in towns, and no one sees them. Or else, if one sees them, one wonders vaguely whether it's a prison, a school, a barracks or a hospital. Your book is an event because it puts before our eyes something that previously no one was able to see. This applies also to certain other very detailed studies, such as one of the peasantry and the tax system in the Bas Languedoc in 1880-2, as well as that of a capital phenomenon which no one had considered, like the prison.

MF In a sense that is how history has always been done. To make visible what no one had previously seen may be the effect of using a magnifying glass. Instead of studying monarchical institutions from the 16th to the end of the 18th centuries, you can study exhaustively the institution of the Conseil d'en Haut between the death of Henri IV and the accession of Louis XIII. It's still the same domain of objects, but the object has been magnified.

But making visible what was unseen can also mean a shift of level, addressing oneself to a layer of material which had hitherto possessed no pertinence for history and which had not been accorded any moral, aesthetic, political or historical value. Today it's self-evident that ways of treating mad people form a part of the history of Reason. But it wasn't self-evident fifty years ago, when the history of Reason meant Plato, Descartes, Kant, or Archimedes, Galileo and Newton.

Knowledge & power

Q Even so we still have here (in Histoire de la Folie) a play of mirrors, a simple antinomy between reason and unreason, which is absent when you now write: 'Histories are written of the congenitally blind, of wolf-children and of hypnosis. But who is going to write the history of the practice of examination, a history more general, more indefinite, but more determinate as well...? For in this simple technique there is involved a whole domain of knowledge and a whole species of power.'

MF The mechanisms of power in general have never been much studied by history. History has studied people who held power - anecdotal histories of kings and generals; in contrast to this there has been the history of economic processes and infrastructures. From this again has been distinguished the history of institutions, of what has been seen as a superstructural level relative to the economy. But power, in its strategies, at once general and detailed, and its mechanisms, has never been studied. Something which has been studied even less is the relation between power and knowledge, the articulation of each on the other. It's a tradition for humanism to admit that once one gains power, one ceases to know: power makes men mad, and those who govern are blind; only those who keep their distance from power, who are in no way implicated in tyranny, shut up in their stove, their room, their meditations, only they can attain truth.

Now I have been trying to make visible the constant articulation I think there is of power on knowledge, and of knowledge on power. We should not be content to say that power has a need for such and such a discovery, such and such a form of knowledge, but should add that the exercise of power itself creates and causes to emerge new objects of knowledge and accumulates new bodies of information. One can understand nothing about economic science if one does not know how power and economic power are exercised in daily life. The exercise of power is perpetually creating knowledge and, conversely, knowledge constantly induces effects of power. The university hierarchy is only the most visible, the most sclerotic and the least dangerous form of this phenomenon. You really have to be naive to imagine that effects of power linked to knowledge have their culmination in university hierarchies. Diffused, entrenched and dangerous, they operate in other places than the person of the old professor.

Modern humanism is therefore mistaken in drawing a line between knowledge and power. Knowledge and power are each an integral part of the other, and there is no point in dreaming of a time when knowledge will cease to be dependent on power; this is just a way of reviving humanism in a utopian guise. It is not possible for power to be exercised without knowledge, it is impossible for knowledge not to engender power. 'Liberate scientific research from the demands of monopoly capitalism': maybe it's a good slogan, but it will never be more than a slogan.

Q You seem to have kept a certain distance from Marx and Marxism; this was said against you already about The Archaeology of Knowledge.

MF But there is also on my part a sort of game about this. I often quote concepts, texts and phrases from Marx, but without feeling obliged to add the authenticating label consisting of a footnote and a laudatory phrase to accompany the quotation. Provided you do that, you're regarded as someone who knows and reveres Marx and will be suitably honoured in (so-called) Marxist journals. But I quote Marx without saying I am, without quotation marks, and because people are unable to recognise Marx's texts I am considered to be someone who doesn't quote Marx. Does a physicist feel it necessary to quote Newton and Einstein when he writes a work of physics? He uses them, but he doesn't need the quotation marks, the footnote and the

eulogistic comment to prove how completely he is being faithful to the Master's thought. And because other physicists know what Einstein did, what he discovered and proved, they can recognise him in what the physicist writes. It is impossible at the present time to write history without using a whole series of concepts directly or indirectly related to Marx's thought and situating oneself within a horizon of thought which has been defined and described by Marx. One might even wonder what difference there could ultimately be between being a historian and being a Marxist.

Q So you would call 'Marxist historian' a redundant expression, as Astruc said about 'American cinema'?

MF More or less. And the debate has its beginning within this general horizon of thought, defined and coded by Marx, with those who call themselves Marxists because they play by rules which aren't Marxist but communistological, that is, defined by communist parties who decide how you must use Marx so as to be declared by them to be a Marxist.

Q What about Nietzsche? It seems to me that his presence, diffuse but growing in contemporary thought for the last ten years, has come to figure in opposition to the hegemony of Marx.

MF Nowadays I prefer to remain silent about Nietzsche. When I was teaching, I often gave courses on Nietzsche, but I wouldn't do that today. If I wanted to be pretentious, I would give 'the genealogy of morals' as the general title of what I am doing. It was Nietzsche who specified the power relation as the general focus, shall we say, of philosophical discourse - whereas for Marx it was the production relation. Nietzsche is the philosopher who has moreover been able to think power without having to confine himself within a political theory in order to do so.

Nietzsche's contemporary presence is increasingly important. But I am tired of people studying him only in order to produce the kind of commentaries that are written on Mallarmé and Hegel. For myself, I prefer to utilise the writers I like. The only valid tribute to thought such as Nietzsche's is precisely to use it, to deform it, to make it groan and protest. And if then the commentators say that I am being faithful or unfaithful to Nietzsche, that is of absolutely no interest.

(translated by Colin Gordon)

Notes

- 1 Mandrin (1725-55), brigand in southern France: specialised in robbing tax farmers and respected private property. Repelled attacks by several military expeditions.
- 2 Freed from prison in 1809 by a prefect of police and put in charge of a squad of ex-convict detectives. His police career ended in 1832 when he was accused of theft. His exploits were fictionalised by Balzac and appeared also in both bogus and authentic versions of his memoirs.
- 3 Lacenaire's 'tranquil cynicism' made a profound effect on the romantic Parisian public. Before his execution in 1836 he published a highly successful volume of memoirs.
- 4 I. Pierre Rivière ... - see review in RP15

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