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Michel Foucault and the Disciplinary Rhythms - Part 2

- Recherches

- Le rythme dans les sciences et les arts contemporains

- Philosophie - Nouvel article

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Rhythmic Techniques and State Power

Foucault's work shed a bright light on the transformation of the rhythmic life forms that took place between the 17th and 19th centuries. His contribution made it possible to greatly improve Lefebvre's elementary reflection and critical approach of the rhythms of our democratic societies.

First, his work on the forms of judgment and penal punishment allowed to understand the rhythmic consequences but also surely the conditions of the transformations of State power. This power, as it was exercised in the *Ancien Régime*, possessed a number of peculiar characteristics: as a power of feudal origin, it considered the rules and obligations mainly as personal ties, the breaking of which constituted an offense and called for revenge; as a representative of God, it did not have to justify its laws, but only to show who its enemies were, and what an outburst of force could threaten them anytime; as a modern monarchical power, it asserted itself as absolute and therefore could not tolerate any opposition. However, it was also the head of very weak networks of administrators, controllers and supervisors. Compared to our modern states, its apparatus was still very light and it was sometimes quite powerless. These conditions led it to seek the periodic renewal of its effects in the splendor of its demonstrations and rituals of punishment.

Yet, one of the paradoxical consequences of this kind of exercise of power was to give a decisive rhythmic importance to the people: it was him that should be impressed, but it was also him who, by his very presence and reaction during the peaks of sociality that constituted the public executions and tortures, exercised an action of protest against the current order which could sometimes turn into riot. Under the influence of the crowd, the public execution, Foucault remarked, could take the aspect of "momentary saturnalia, when nothing remained to prohibit or to punish" (p. 60). Often, these executions, "which ought to show only the terrorizing power of the prince," took "a whole aspect of the carnival, in which rules were inverted, authority mocked and criminals transformed into heroes" (p. 61). Some convicts, but also the crowd watching their execution, took the opportunity to reproach the judges for their barbarism, to curse the priests who accompanied them, and to blaspheme against God. Solidarity was expressed between the convict and the common people. Like the other peaks of traditional sociality identified by Thompson, the great ritual of retribution, which should have imposed the power from above, allowed unwillingly, at least for a brief moment, the expression of a certain popular rhythmic power.

The new forms taken, from the Revolution, by the law, the penal and police repression, had significant rhythmic consequences: the first was probably to break this solidarity and avoid giving the subjected classes opportunities to derail the rhythms of the State power. Another was the possibility to correct the bad distribution of the State pressure, which expressed itself massively and ostentatiously on very small points of the social space and was almost absent in the rest. It was now possible to improve its rhythmic influence and make it penetrate all the pores of the society, while the invention of killing machines, such as the guillotine, the electric chair, or the lethal injections cleaned the

moral stain of its ritual complicity with the executioner.

This analysis of the transformation of the State power sheds light retrospectively upon Foucault's research on the emergence of new forms of power inscribed in the much less spectacular practices of prison, school, hospital, army, and workshop. In any society, the body is subject to a set of prohibitions, constraints and obligations, but Foucault's study of these institutions showed that something changed in the West from the 17th century: control was now implemented by a set of often tenuous forms of coercion; the constraint was related to forces rather than signs; the pressure, which was hitherto relatively erratic, became uninterrupted and constant thanks to a meticulous distribution and control of time, space and movement; in short, domination was then exercised through a new definition and control of the rhythms of life.

The heart of *Discipline and Punish* lies in the conjunction of these two perspectives: that of the softening-intensification of the sovereign power to judge and punish; with that of the emergence of economic-political disciplinary techniques in different institutions that were not necessarily under State power. By both the control and increase of the forces it allowed, the mode of individuation produced by these new rhythmic techniques was better adapted both to the new capitalist productive system and to a society now based on equality before the law and freedom of enterprise, where the power of the State, no longer able to express itself in a spectacular and ritualistic way, had to diffract itself into a multitude of tiny enterprises of rhythmic subjugation.

The Rhythmic Limits of "Modern Autonomy"

One of the first effects of these analyses was obviously to question the grand liberal narrative of the modernization of Western societies. This narrative explained and still explains today the emergence of the modern economic, social and legal systems by the recognition of individuals as subjects of law, the nature of which would have been, until then, prevented from expressing itself by despotic practices. However, the facts described above made it possible to contest this narrative and even to reverse its conclusion: it was not the emergence in the open air of a natural legal subject that had been suppressed for long, which explained the emergence of modern capitalists and democratic societies, but, on the contrary, the very rhythmic disciplinary and punitive techniques practiced by these societies, which allowed the appearance of this type of subject. In other words, there was in this concept a significant part of historical arbitrariness which did not mean, however, that it was conventional or illusory.

The modern history of the sovereign legal power and the range of punitive institutions that accompanied it, as well as that of the fine-meshed network of extra-judicial disciplinary practices, which constituted its condition of possibility, showed that these systems did not constitute negative mechanisms, which would protect "natural subjects" by prohibiting, preventing, repressing, excluding, or removing those who did not respect "their natural rights," but technical devices responsible for a whole series of positive effects determining in large part our modes of individuation.

Certainly, in our societies, body and discourse were no longer the target of a criminal, violent and ostentatious repression. Punishment presented itself, most of the time, as a mere deprivation of liberty. But both body and discourse were, in a diffuse manner in society and in a maximized way in prison, subjected to techniques of dressage, reform, or "healing," which penetrated deeply into them and participated in the creation of a "soul," whose degree of freedom could not therefore be measured by the yardstick of an abstract transcendental criterion, but by the actual practices of power and knowledge applied to it and on which it simultaneously relied to build its autonomy.

Foucault's critique did not aim as it has often been wrongly claimed to invalidate the democratic project itself, but to show that its historical development had not much to do with the idealized cliché diffused by liberal mythology.

The Rhythmic Nature of "Modern Alienation"

The other notable effect of the rhythmic analyses developed in *Discipline and Punish* was to seriously shake up the traditional Marxist critique of this very liberal conception by severing the former from the grand alternative narrative it was based on.

First of all, the Marxist narrative did not match a certain number of historical facts. Foucault's research demonstrated the very early importance of rhythmic disciplinary coercion in secondary and elementary schools, and emphasized the decisive role, from the 17th century, of the hospital and military organizations in the development of disciplinary practices. Similarly, although the prison as it is known today was developed only in the first half of the 19th century, the first modern prison experiences dated back to the end of the 16th century in the Netherlands. The fabric, on the other hand, emerged only late in the 18th century and really took off in the following century. In short, the models of rhythmic discipline that had been applied to the workforce during the Industrial Revolution were invented, tested and improved in previous institutions that owed nothing, at least directly, to industrial and capitalist development. Historically, the disciplines appeared less determined by vast economic movements than by a multitude of micro-political experiences, initially very localized and without unity.

There was, in general, a complex interplay between the history of the modes and relations of production, on the one hand, and, that of political techniques of the body-discourse-sociality, on the other, an interaction that could not be reduced to a unilateral determination by economic infrastructure alone. Like Thompson, Foucault expanded to the dominated classes Weber's intuitions about the crucial role of "ethics" and emphasized the correlation between the development of capitalism and the disciplinarization of the workforce (on Thompson, see Michon, 2007/ 2015c, pp. 151-162).

> The body is also directly involved in a political field; power relations have an immediate hold upon it; they invest it, mark it, train it, torture it, force it to carry out tasks, to perform ceremonies, to emit signs. This political investment of the body is bound up, in accordance with complex reciprocal relations, with its economic use; it is largely as a force of production that the body is invested with relations of power and domination but, on the other hand, its constitution as labor power is possible only if it is caught up in a system of subjection (in which need is also a political instrument meticulously prepared, calculated and used); the body becomes a useful force only if it is both a productive body and a subjected body. (*Discipline and Punish*, 1975, trans. Alan Sheridan, 1977, p. 25-26)

Moreover, the Marxist narrative was based on an anthropological principle which was more than questionable. From the radically historical viewpoint adopted by Foucault, it was not possible to maintain that individuals were merely *alienated*, that is, *separated from their authentic nature* by the unequal relations of production established by capitalism. Not because these relations did not exist, but because the notion of alienation, through which they were described, maintained in Marxism a metaphysical presupposition which should be abandoned: the basis of a *human nature* that could be simply *recuperated* by a revolutionary transformation of class relations and then *exalted* by a society re-founded on the principles of communism. On the contrary, individuals were produced by body, discourse and sociality rhythmic techniques determined by power relations, and their "souls" varied according to "the way the body itself [was] invested by [these] power relations."

> This study obeys four general rules: [...] 4. Try to discover whether this entry of the soul on to the scene of penal justice, and with it the insertion in legal practice of a whole corpus of "scientific" knowledge, is not the effect of a transformation of the way in which the body itself is invested by power relations. In short, try to study the metamorphosis of punitive methods on the basis of a political technology of the body in which might be read a common history of power relations and object relations. (*Discipline and Punish*, 1975, trans. Alan Sheridan, 1977, p. 24)

Relations of production and class relations did not disappear from sight, but they were penetrated and doubled by much finer power relations that innervated bodies, discourses, and social interactions including those of the working class representatives.

Finally, on the epistemological level, the Marxism continued to think of knowledge as antithetical to power even through the notion of "dialectic" which was deemed capable to articulate them to each other. In the official Marxist narrative, historical materialism could constitute a true "science of history" because it had succeeded in overcoming the limitations imposed upon itself by the economic and political conditions of its elaboration, by relying on the very class destined to put an end to the class struggle itself. Certainly, Marxism no longer believed, as Liberal empiricism did and still does, to be able to establish the validity of its diagnoses from the individual epistemological subject, but it retained, for its part, the illusion of being able to overcome its own insertion in the relations of power by anchoring itself on the so-called "universal subject": the Proletariat. The warnings expressed at the beginning of *Discipline and Punish* were thus clearly directed against Marxist so-called "historical materialism" as much as against Liberal empiricism.

> Perhaps, too, we should abandon a whole tradition that allows us to imagine that knowledge can exist only where the power relations are suspended and that knowledge can develop only outside its injunctions, its demands and its interests. (*Discipline and Punish*, 1975, trans. Alan Sheridan, 1977, p. 27)

The Flows of Power-Knowledge

Foucault thus proposed to substitute both Liberal and Marxist metaphysical views with a radically historical approach based on the constant interaction of power and knowledge.

> We should admit rather that power produces knowledge (and not simply by encouraging it because it serves power or by applying it because it is useful); that power and knowledge directly imply one another; that there is no power relation without the correlative constitution of a field of knowledge, nor any knowledge that does not presuppose and constitute at the same time power relations. (*Discipline and Punish*, 1975, trans. Alan Sheridan, 1977, p. 27)

Since we were always caught up in or carried over by power relationships and since our knowledge was always weakened or intensified by these relationships, it was necessary to change our ways of running scientific activity, sketching our ethical values, and finally of doing politics.

Concerning science, at least social science, an overhanging or external position, which could allow knowledge to control power, whether in a universal way or only in a way limited to "Marxist science," was nowhere to be found. To build a critical knowledge of the existing powers and their anthropological and social consequences, social scientists could no longer rely on a metaphysical subject be it the individual or the proletarian class. They had to capitalize on a constant critical activity which could trigger great effects as Foucault's reflection actually did but which was always in danger to dwindle. In other words, social science could not count on any definitively stabilized principle in order to bring some order into the flow of history; on the contrary, it had to accept that its viewpoints were part of the flow itself; it had to accept that it could only oppose, deviate, or intensify the flow of knowledge.

This move towards what eventually has been termed a "postmodern" theory of truth and knowledge was meant to address a problem that had been recognized, nine years before, in *Les Mots et les Choses. Une archéologie des sciences humaines - The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (1970). What became of knowledge when the human sciences replaced the classical episteme? According to Foucault, a much more complex some would say floating relation between scientific discourse and reality took place at the expense of the old correspondence theory of truth.

Concerning ethics, the situation was similar. It was not possible to judge the value of a certain organization of life by the yardstick of a metaphysical principle that was naturally free or, on the contrary, always socially alienated; as Nietzsche had already noticed a long time ago, one was caught up in "evaluations" that were linked to local power relations and the various kinds of knowledge that accompanied them. These values were therefore necessarily determined according to the epistemic, ethical, and political struggles in which the actors were both involved and engaged.

Foucault's political position was naturally consistent with his epistemological and ethical stands. As the reader may already know, he advocated local actions performed outside the great Proletarian organizations. Indeed, if freedom was not naturally given or guaranteed by a new social contract, it could not be established by the mere reversal of class relations. This transformation had to be accompanied or better yet, preceded by a repotentialization of bodies and discourses   that would allow them to defuse the effects of the rhythmic techniques to which they were subjected. Power was never external to individuals, it was a medium in which all processes of subjectivation and de-subjectivation took place.

> This power is not exercised simply as an obligation or a prohibition on those who "do not have it"; it invests them, is transmitted by them and through them; it exerts pressure upon them, just as they themselves, in their struggle against it, resist the grip it has on them. (*Discipline and Punish*, 1975, trans. Alan Sheridan, 1977, p. 27)

Any emancipation of the individuals could not, therefore, be produced by a simple inversion of the relations of power but had to be carried out by a spiral movement of empowerment within the medium of power.

> The overthrow of these "micro-powers" does not, then, obey the law of all or nothing; it is not acquired once and for all by a new control of the apparatuses nor by a new functioning or a destruction of the institutions; on the other hand, none of its localized episodes may be inscribed in history except by the effects that it induces on the entire network in which it is caught up. (*Discipline and Punish*, 1975, trans. Alan Sheridan, 1977, p. 27)

As a result, the State appeared as hugely important, but it was not the only place where power was exercised within a particular society. The former, through the rhythms of life, traversed all social relations, from macro-relationships to micro-physical relations face to face. The struggle could therefore be carried out almost from everywhere and those who wanted to be "de-subjected" did not have to wait until they could take over or transform the State power through the next elections or a revolutionary overthrow of the dominant class which did not condemn, however, these more traditional struggles.

In short this power is exercised rather than possessed; it is not the "privilege," acquired or preserved, of the dominant class, but the overall effect of its strategic positions an effect that is manifested and sometimes extended by the position of those who are dominated. (*Discipline and Punish*, 1975, trans. Alan Sheridan, 1977, pp. 26-27)

To put it in nutshell, Foucault proposed an ethical and political conception that was entirely consistent with his epistemological theory. All were deemed in constant interaction with each other within the flows of history.

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 1. It is striking to see how Foucault tried, just as Lefebvre, to bring political analysis on rhythmic ground, although Lefebvre did not acknowledge this effort since he considered Foucault like Claude Lévi-Strauss (1908-2009) as one of the members of the Structuralist school he strongly rejected.

 1.1 In both cases, yet, whether from the issue of the colonization of space and everyday life, or from that of punishment and disciplinary techniques in prison, schools, army and fabrics, the questioning aimed at the rhythms that were imposed upon life in modern societies. Although, contrary to Lefebvre, Foucault did not use a rhythmic vocabulary, he clearly proposed significant large-scale as well as small-scale rhythmanalyses of modernity. Moreover, his historical prism undeniably allowed him to supplement Lefebvre's views on "dressage" and "colonization of everyday life" by "linear rhythms" with descriptions that were much more detailed and that, at the same time, concerned a much larger period of time.

 1.2 It is also fascinating to note that for both, this interest in rhythm was a key element in an opposition to the Liberal thought as much as to the orthodox Marxist theory, although the rejection of the latter was certainly stricter in Foucault than in Lefebvre who remained a committed Marxist until the end of his life. Despite their differences, there was something of the 1968 spirit floating on both their works.

 1.3 Unlike Lefebvre, though, Foucault did not elaborate explicitly on the concept of rhythm itself. Rhythm probably appeared to him as a notion limited to music and aesthetics, that had no bearing on the ethical, political and epistemological issues he was addressing. That allowed him not to indulge, as his predecessor, in simplistic oppositions such as harmonious *vs* discordant rhythms, cyclical-traditional *vs* linear-modern rhythms, or in a metaphysical pan-rhythmism, or in a most objectionable nostalgia for "nature, fatherland, and roots." But Foucault's contribution was not without limitations of its own.

 2. Concerning his ethical and political critique of modern societies, a certain number of points have repeatedly attracted the attention of the commentators.

 2.1 Did Foucault not underestimate the resistance to the diffusion of rhythmic disciplinary techniques? Very rich in descriptions of the institutions and their functioning, his historical essay said little or nothing about the reactions of the individuals subjected to these techniques. At least in *Discipline and Punish* because things were seen differently from *La Volonté de savoir* (1976) - *The Will to Knowledge* (1978) his approach certainly lacked a more detailed examination of the resistances and efforts of the actors, an examination that would have been necessary to counterbalance the emphasis placed on the genealogy of the punitive and disciplinary apparatuses.

 2.2 Did he not consider too quickly that the power relations and the rhythmic disciplinary practices, which spread between the end of the 18th century and the beginning of the next, constituted a kind of system, which would still be essentially the same at the time he wrote? Was this view not induced by a residue of a Structuralist conception that prevented him from seeing the evolutions and divergences that had occurred within the disciplinary world? Foucault himself later indicated, particularly in his lectures on "governmentality" and his reflections on "biopolitics," that the modern world had been traversed by other types of power exercise which were independent of the disciplinary model.

 2.3 Are these descriptions still valid nowadays? Is it still possible, as Foucault claimed in the 1970s, to judge

contemporary powers and social groups only in the light of punitive and disciplinary practices? Many of these practices, particularly those aimed at the systematic training of bodies, discourses,   and interactions, seemed actually to have been abandoned in the last decades of the 20th century. As noted by Gilles Deleuze in *Pourparlers* (1990) - Trans. *Negotiations* (1995), in schools, hospitals, asylums, businesses, and even in the military, traditional disciplinary practices have been replaced by more subtle methods of domination and the system of punitive institutions has retracted into a relatively sparse archipelago, which is now mostly composed of prisons.

 3. Concerning his critique of the most commonly accepted theory of knowledge and the radically historical approach inspired by Nietzsche he advocated by contrast, the attacks were more serious even if they came from perspectives that were not without divergence of their own.

 3.1 Should truth be deemed to be ensured, as for Russell and Wittgenstein, by a structural isomorphism between the elements of a discourse and those of the state of affairs it is describing, Foucault was clearly placed on the relativistic side. His critique was therefore entirely at odds with true science or even mere approximative knowledge.

 3.2 Should truth result, as Austin had claimed, only from a global correlation between discourse and state of affairs, the case was less serious for Foucault but he still lacked the concept of an ultimate and definitive truth.

 3.3 Should the establishment of truth necessitate, as Habermas and Apel had emphasized, that the scientist's theories did not contradict his own capability to assert them, Foucault's new doctrine appeared as self-defeating or based on a performative contradiction.

 4. In order not to be dragged into a long discussion that would stray too far away from the subject of this essay, I will limit myself here to one suggestion. Foucault could maybe have answered at least the first two questions by introducing rhythm, or at least a renovated conception of it, into his knowledge theory.

 4.1 As a matter of fact, in a world where the erratic ostentatious and violent forms of power had given way to regular disciplinary techniques, one could indeed expect that something if not similar at least analogous had occurred concerning knowledge as a result of the "epistemological rupture" that, according to *The Order of Things* (1966, trans. 1970), had inaugurated the modern scientific regime. As the reader may know, whereas science of language, life and wealth had been thought of, until late in the 18th century, in terms of representation, ordering, categorization and taxonomy, it now primarily required the insertion of the observed phenomena into temporal dynamics. But if, in the modern world, according this time to *Discipline and Punish*, power mainly implied the rhythmization of individual and social life, if moreover this exercise of power was now in a constant interaction with the production of knowledge, one could legitimately infer from these new conditions that the latter could have in turn something to do with "rhythm." By associating both perspectives, one was finally led to the idea that the modern stress on temporal dynamics, on historicity, could be beneficially approached through the concept of rhythm.

 4.2 However, this rhythmic outcome of the epistemic change could not be fully recognized unless one abandoned the common metric conception of rhythm, and substituted it with a larger one more suitable for this purpose. Starting from metric could only result in a reductionist notion of history, such as that advocated by Hegel through his concept of dialectic (Michon, 2018b). Instead, Benveniste's linguistic study concerning the ancient materialist concept of *rhuthmos* or "manner of flowing" (1951/1966) could possibly have provided Foucault with the concepts he needed to address these complex issues.

 4.3 If the production of true discourse was an integral part of the historical flows at least in social and political matters because the question of natural science was not addressed in *Discipline and Punish* it could be characterized by its *rhuthmos*, its particular manner of flowing, i.e. its specific tension, intensity, and practical power

upon the other flows. At least a large part of its *epistemic quality* thus depended on its *pragmatic capacity* to both de-legitimize the current powers and empower the individuals, that is to help them to change their lives for the better. In other words, truth did not disappear but it was ensured by a kind of "hyper-Austinian" pragmatic correspondence between the flow of analyses and that of the various shifting states of affairs they described and aimed at changing. Although, we were inescapably plunged into intertwined flows of power and knowledge, this did not mean that we had lost any possibility to establish a correspondence with the states of affairs we tried to analyze; it only meant that the latter was not obtained through term-to-term representation but through a triangular pragmatic relationship between the specific power of critical discourses, the specific discourses of dominating powers, and the specific power and discourse of the individuals concerned.

 4.4 Nevertheless, Foucault never thematized this particular consequence probably because, contrary to most of his contemporaries like Barthes, Serres, Deleuze, Guattari, and Meschonnic, he never paid attention to Benveniste. This was Foucault's main paradox: although he did develop one of the most powerful rhythmanalyses of modernity, the concept of rhythm remained entirely out of his line of sight.

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