Michel Foucault and the Rhythms of Time – Part 1

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In the previous chapter, we saw that Michel Foucault never explicitly thematized the concept of rhythm nor envisaged its possible use in his own approach to society, power and knowledge. Moreover, by ignoring Benveniste and his *rhuthmic* theory of language activity, he deprived himself of theoretical means which could have been used to solve some of the complex rhythmanalytical problems with which he was confronted in his theory of knowledge. Our description would not be complete, however, if we bypassed the significant contribution he made on another issue which also highly matters to rhythmology. As a matter of fact, while avoiding language as speech activity, he never stopped reflecting on the question of time which was one of the few themes that accompanied him throughout his career.

A careful examination of his contribution will show that, at least on this subject, he resolutely confronted questions which were to become central in the rhythmological turn which began to form in the mid-1970s. Against abstract conceptions equating time with a regular, linear and progressive development, as much as against those who saw time as an erratic, interrupted and dispersive course, he suggested to conceive of time, and of the passing of time, according to the specific rhythms of the observed phenomena.

As we will see, he thus identified six different figures, six specific ways of flowing of time itself. In turn, he considered time as composed of multiple strata flowing according to differing chronologies; as successive, discontinuous and rather immobile blocks; as a succession of discrete, irruptive and contingent events; as entangled spiral processes; as slow drifts interrupted by sudden breaks; and as a series of vertical surges. In short, Foucault saw time itself as having multiple rhythms, or better yet, multiple ways of flowing. [[1](#)]

The Problem of the Radical Historicity of Human Beings

One perhaps remembers the controversies provoked in the middle of the 1960s by the publication of *The Order of Things*. Sartre and, following him, almost the entire left under Marxist influence saw in the book a "refusal of history" [[2](#)]. At that time, nobody was afraid of oversimplifications: time was "left wing" and space "right wing" [[3](#)]. Structuralism received a bad press. Now, many years have passed, but the question of Foucault's relation to time remains a source of misunderstanding. If he

wrote enough history to silence his most superficial critics, the concepts he coined and the images he used in his works, have often led to conclude that the concern for space and visible prevailed in his work, in spite of everything, over the concern for time and sensible. It is true that Foucault himself, because of his style and his theoretical choices, might have reinforced that impression. "Table of representations" in *The Order of Things*, "dispersion plane of statements" in *Archaeology of Knowledge*, "planning" of town, "mapping" of society, "panopticism" in *Discipline and Punish*, there is in the Foucaldian texts an abundance of visual and spatial metaphors on which the commentators have insisted a lot, reinforcing, though unwillingly, the image of Foucault subjecting time to space [4].

Yet the question of time has probably been one of the matrices of his work, one of the problems from which it arose. As he himself explained in *The Order of Things*, our experience of temporality developed, at the turn of the 18th and the 19th centuries, when people began, with both amazement and a lot of confusion, to contemplate their *original* or *radical historicity.*

> At the very moment when it became possible for it to denounce as fantasies the ideal geneses described in the 18th century, modern thought was establishing a problematics of the origin at once extremely complex and extremely tangled; this problematics has served as the foundation for our experience of time, and, since the 19th century, as the starting-point of all our attempts to re-apprehend what beginning and re-beginning, the recession and the presence of the beginning, the return and the end, could be in the human sphere. (*The Order of Things,* 1966, trans. 1970, pp. 362-363)

Since then, the entire modern thought has been taking up the challenge of its historical situation, that is to say, of its dependence on an "original" which constantly overtakes the thought and endangers its constituting unity.

> The original, as modern thought has never ceased to describe it since *The phenomenology of mind*, [...] the original in man is that which articulates him from the very outset upon something other than man himself; it is that which introduces into his experience contents and forms older than him, which he cannot master; it is that which, by binding him to multiple, intersecting, often mutually irreducible chronologies, scatters him through time and pinions him at the centre of the duration of things. (*The Order of Things,* 1966, trans. 1970, p. 361) [5]

Certainly, we have to read Foucault's work in light of this preliminary description. Like all modern thinkers, he confronted the difficulties that arise from the fundamental temporality of the human being, and had to face the disturbing question of the "original." Yet, something differentiates his position from those of a lot of his predecessors—something which is of the greatest interest to rhythmology.

Most of them aimed at building dams against the flow, which submerge the thought, and at restoring, by every possible means, its lost unity. The radical historicity of humankind has been accepted reluctantly as a dangerous situation, against which we have to protect the thought, because it risks losing any links with truth and good. From Hegel to Merleau-Ponty, from historicism

to phenomenology, most of the philosophers tried to reassure the thought over its cognitive and moral capacities, to reestablish a lost confidence, to exorcise its fall into finitude and the ruin of its almighty power.

As for Foucault, he held an entirely different position. Not because, as has often been said, he would have simply reversed the attitude of thought to master time and embraced the relativistic view of its dispersion in the flow of history, but because he simply decided to break definitively, without regretting it, with the period during which thought was considered immediately appropriate to the world and therefore totally assured of its cognitive and moral powers. This full acceptance of the historicity of thought was far from making it entirely incapable of developing knowledge and moral or political choice. But it required a fairly particular treatment of the very issue of history and time which were simultaneously considered as fundamental or radical, in the etymological sense of the word, and impossible to collapse into clear and distinct concepts. As a matter of fact, in a genuine Nietzschean way which was also genuinely scientific, Foucault always refused to develop a definitive theory of time and preferred to produce local and non-explicit theories, adapted to each of the objects he studied. As much as being, time could not be but interpreted and subjected to a multiplicity of perspectives. It had to be used and specified each time accordingly.

This peculiar position probably explains why Foucault is one of the most original thinkers of the 20th century regarding the question of time, and why some critics have compared him to Heidegger. The struggle engaged by Foucault against the transcendental subject and the deepening of the theme of finitude, the full acceptation of the historicity of thought and of all of its consequences would have drawn him close to the Heideggerian ontology (Dreyfus and Rabinow, 1982; Ijsseling, 1986; Dreyfus, 1989). I think, however, that this interpretation is questionable and doesn't give a full understanding of Foucault's work. Certainly, Foucault built a post-phenomenology philosophy, which opened new ways for the thought, but that did not lead him to adopt an attitude of retreat and to regard time as sacred, as Heidegger did at the end of his life.

In this chapter, I would like to show the full originality of the Foucaldian, so to speak, flowing conception of time: what differentiates it both from historicism and from its subsequent critique by phenomenology, but also from the Heideggerian attempt to supersede the latter as well as the former. To this end, I will therefore try to reconstruct this conception following Foucault from book to book and situating his work among some of the great modern philosophical movements, but also according to the internal logic of his research.

The Stratified Time of History According to *Les Annales*

The project of *Histoire de la folie à l'âge classique – Madness and Civilization* (1961), *Naissance de la clinique – The Birth of the Clinic* (1963) and *Les mots et les choses – The Order of Things* (1966), as one may know, was part of the history of science, as it was practiced at that time by Gaston Bachelard (1884-1962) and Georges Canguilhem (1904-1995) (Canguilhem, 1967; Machado, 1989; Eribon, 1991), and reflected philosophical choices against historicism and phenomenology inspired by the new developments of psychoanalysis, anthropology and linguistics. But there was another source of Foucault's work which is often forgotten nowadays and which has been at the base of his first conception of time: the historical research developed in France since the 1930s [6]. We must then recall, to begin with, the intellectual impact of his relations with the historians, at first with those of the French school of *Les Annales*, but also later with Paul Veyne, Arlette Farge and Peter Brown, to cite only some of them.

Concerning his early books, the repeated tributes to Claude Lévi-Strauss (1908-2009), Georges Dumézil (1898-1986) and Jacques Lacan (1901-1981) that they contain are always pointed out. Nevertheless, Foucault swiftly rejected the structuralist tag, too deeply linked according to him to the semiotic model of the Classical Age, while he never repudiated his debt to Fernand Braudel (1902-1985). His first studies on madness and clinic were actually much more influenced by the historical model of stratified temporalities and by the slow and unconscious evolutions typical of *"la longue durée,"* than by the differentialism inspired by the phonology, the common basis of structuralist studies.

The Braudelian model emphasized "the plurality of the social time." It distinguished between the "short and fast time" of the event, which "suits the individuals," the "slower time" of social transformations, and the "long and not much mobile time" of economic and mental structures. With Braudel and Ernest Labrousse (1895-1988), and later Georges Duby (1919-1996), Pierre Goubert (1915-2012), Jacques Le Goff (1924-2014), Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie (1929-), and independently Philippe Ariès (1914-1984), a new kind of history prevailed, which got rid of the fascination, typical of the former history writing, for the transient time of events, usually of a strictly political or military nature, and which concentrated more and more on the lower and the slower levels of the temporality. Even if Foucault rejected the concept of "mentality," his first studies on the birth of the psychiatric and medical institutions, as well as those on history of science, fitted very well in the new frame proposed by *Les Annales* [7].

In fact, the splitting of the past into unchanging time blocks, which he advocated at the end of the 1960s in his studies in history of science, was not very different from the concept of "immobile history," which already surfaced in Braudel and which would be fully elaborated few years later by Le Roy Ladurie.

The concept of "immobile history" radicalized the Braudelian concept of "*temps long* – long time." Just as in Foucault the notion of *episteme* did not imply any absence of changes, but did establish their regulated mode of appearance, in Le Roy Ladurie (1974/1978 and 1995) the idea surfaced that the societies of the *Ancien Régime* had experienced, because of the immobility of the agriculture techniques, only superficial transformations without any growth. During this "long agrarian cycle," lasting between the 11th and the 18th centuries, the phases of expansion, contraction, and resumption succeeded one another without ever destabilizing the system.

Likewise, the idea of "discontinuity," of swift destruction of structural orders, which were very slowly altering, inherited certainly the tradition of the Bachelardian history of science (the famous "epistemological rupture"), but it has already appeared in Labrousse and Braudel.

According to Labrousse, the crisis represented a period of time when the tension between structures and circumstances reached its climax, and when the dialectic of disorder could deliver a new order. On this topic, see (Labrousse, 1933 and 1944). As early as the 1950s, Braudel himself wrote:

> Then, what is a social discontinuity, if not in historical language one of those structural ruptures, one of these deep, silent, painless breaks, as they say. One was born within one particular state of society (that is to say, simultaneously, a mentality, some frames, a civilization and especially an

> economic civilization), which several generations have known before us, but everything can collapse before our life ends. (Braudel, "For a Historical Economics," 1950/1969, p. 132, my trans.)

> Still more significant than the deep structures of life are their breaking points, their swift or slow deterioration under the pressure of contradictory forces. (Braudel, "History and Social Science. La longue durée," 1958/1969, p. 71, my trans.)

Thus, it is of great significance that the two first pages of *Archaeology of Knowledge* are dedicated to a tribute to *Les Annales* and to an analysis of their methodological contribution.

> For many years now historians have preferred to turn their attention to long periods, as if beneath the shifts and changes of political events, they were trying to reveal the stable, almost indestructible system of checks and balances, the irreversible processes, the constant readjustments, the underlying tendencies that gather force, and are then suddenly reversed after centuries of continuity, the movements of accumulation and slow saturation, the great silent, motionless bases that traditional history has covered with a thick layer of events […]. These tools have enabled workers in the historical field to distinguish various sedimentary strata; linear successions, which for so long have been the object of research, have given way to discoveries in depth. (*The Archaeology of Knowledge*, 1969, trans. A. M. Sheridan Smith, 1972, p. 3)

Later on, when the influence of *Les Annales* became less determining, the dialogue with the historians continued *sotto voce*. During the 1970s, Foucault embarked on a history of "the event" mostly inspired by Nietzsche, and yet this reorientation wasn't without relations with the historians' new objects. After having been dominated by the Structuralist vision, by the slow, indeed almost immobile evolution, the historians would progressively reintroduce the explosive time of the event, without yet coming back to the *histoire événementielle* typical of the 19th century. The scope would be to reconstruct the events of the past as if they were present, i.e. instead of replacing them in an explicative historical continuity and looking for their origin, the historians would seek to show all their ambiguities, their contradictory aspects and especially their potential openness, their singularity and their power of breakthrough.

The theme or "the return of the event" was launched by a historian of the contemporary period (Pierre Nora, 1931-), but was rapidly adopted by the Marxist historians of the modern period (Michel Vovelle, 1933-2018), who wanted to keep alive the idea of revolutionary rupture attacked by the supporters of a more right-wing conception of the "*longue durée*" (François Furet, 1927-1997). It was developed as well by the historians inspired by the 1968 events, more attached to restore the speech of the "unknowns" or of the "not remembered" by the history than the one of the "masses" (Arlette Farge, 1941-). This trend was parallel to the Italian development of the "micro-history" with Carlo Ginzburg (1939-) and Giovanni Levi (1939-). [8]

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Footnotes

[1] A first version of this chapter was published in *Time & Society* © 2002 SAGE (London, Thousand Oaks, CA and New Delhi) Vol. 11 No. 2/3 (2002), pp. 163-192.

[2] "Certainly Foucault's perspective remains historical, declared Sartre. He distinguishes different periods, a before and an after. But he replaces cinema by magic lantern, movement by a succession of immobile states" (Sartre, 1966, cited in Eribon, 1991, p. 191).

[3] According to Foucault himself (1982b/1994, p. 282)

[4] See, for example, "Géométrie de l'incommunicable : la folie" (Serres, 1962/1969) or "Un nouveau cartographe" (Deleuze, 1986).

[5] In 1984, Foucault adds *The Critique of Judgement* to the clues of the substitution of the classical world by the modern world. See (1985a/1994, p. 775).

[6] This obliteration of the role played by *Les Annales* is one of the flaws of the interesting study by Dreyfus and Rabinow (1982), as in many of the same type.

[7] As a matter of fact, *Madness and Civilization* was well received in the journal *Annales E.S.C.* by Robert Mandrou and Fernand Braudel himself. On the "longue durée" and the stratified temporality see the pioneering article of Braudel (1958/1969) and Vovelle (1978).

[8] On "history of event," see (Nora, 1974) and for a good presentation of the spirit of this period (Farge, 1997). Foucault participated to these changes with works, which are less read than others, but which are not less interesting (Foucault, 1973) and (Farge and Foucault, 1982).