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Myths and legends of domination

- Features - Daniel Bensaïd archive -

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Twenty-five years later, Michel Foucault put the question in a different way, by borrowing a phrase from Horkheimer: ‘is it really so desirable, this revolution?’ [1] The question of historical possibility thus gave way to that of the desiring subjectivity.

Two periods, two moments, two approaches.

From spectacle to simulacrum

Marcuse's approach was representative of the doubts brought forth by the post-war period of economic growth, of capitalism's retrieved dynamism and its capacity to integrate the workers' movement into the contractual procedures of the welfare state. It was part of a theoretical work that examined the consequences of this relative prosperity, of the intervention by a state acting strategically, of alienation in a consumer society that promised abundance. From *Critique of Everyday Life* by Henri Lefebvre (1961) to *The Consumer Society* by Jean Baudrillard (1970), passing through *Things* by Georges Pérec (1965), *The Society of the Spectacle* by Debord (1967) and *Reproduction in Education, Society and Culture* by Bourdieu and Passeron (1971), we find echoes, in various forms, of the questions raised by Marcuse.

The characters in the novel by Pérec, published the same year as the French edition of *One-Dimensional Man*, incarnate a consumerist neurosis. The book opens with a lengthy description of an apartment. Reminiscent of the first pages of *Capital*, where Marx describes capitalism as ‘an immense collection of commodities’, the inventory of the apartment reveals an immense collection of objects. As the pages turn, in the grip of a ‘passion for possessing’ that ends up being ‘all their existence’, [4] a couple of young sociologists trained in the new techniques of marketing ‘fall into abundance’, but this is an abundance that creates a void: ‘they wanted superabundance [5] ; ‘the enemy was within them, it had rotted them, infected them, eaten them away. [...] Tame pets, faithfully reflecting a world which taunted them’. [6] A society lulled to sleep by the lullabies of unlimited progress knows no enemy other than that which eats away at it from within, alienation in front of the tyrannical fetishes of the world of commerce. There are no longer any epics nor tragedies of revolution, only, as Pérec notes dryly, ‘a quiet tragedy’: [7] ‘Jérôme and Sylvie did not quite believe you could go into battle for a chesterfield settee. But that was all the same the banner under which they could have enlisted most readily.’ [8]

Whether as theory or novel, the literature of the 1960s posed questions of the possibility of revolution and of what the new sources and actors of subversion might be in the face of instrumental rationality and bureaucratic management. Art itself, which was ‘the determined negation of dominant values’, [9] seemed to be neutralized by the ‘phenomenon of cultural assimilation’ which eliminated all transgression. For Marcuse, the popular classes themselves had become conservative. So we had to look for a new subject in ‘the outcasts and outsiders, the exploited and persecuted of other races and other colors, the unemployed and the unemployable’, whose ‘life is the most immediate and the most real need for ending intolerable conditions and institutions’. [10] For, Marcuse concluded, it was from those without hope that hope was given to us. This desperate hope found, in the eruption of May ‘68 and its aftermath, confirmation and comfort.

If, for Marcuse, the questions whether ‘advanced industrial society is capable of containing qualitative change’ and whether ‘forces and tendencies exist which may break this containment and explode the society’ still seemed open, [11] as the 1970s waned, the horizons of expectation began to narrow: ‘in the medium of technology, culture, politics, and the economy merge into an omnipresent system which swallows up or repulses all alternatives’. [12]

Over time, the writings of Debord took on an increasingly dark tone as reality and fiction became merged in 'the integrated spectacle'. And, already in 1970, Baudrillard introduced the postmodern theme of the collapse of history and the loss of a sense of the future, introducing in *The Consumer Society* the notion of simulation. In the same way that magical thought seeks to conjure away historical change, 'the generalized consumption of images' seeks to 'conjure away history with the signs of change'. [13] This society, stuck in an eternal present, becomes conducive to a violence that is no longer properly historical, sacred, ritualistic or ideological, but explodes sporadically 'within our closed universe of consumed quietude' and 'very briefly takes over for everyone a part of the lost symbolic function, before resolving back into a consumer object.' [14] Devoid of any strategic purpose, this urban violence (foreshadowed by youth riots in Amsterdam in 1966 and Montreal in 1969), captured in television images, made a spectacle of itself. After the spectacle, the supreme stage of commodity fetishism according to Debord, comes the hour of the simulacrum as the supreme stage of the spectacle according to Baudrillard.

With the spectacular foreclosure of historicity, the possibility of politics as strategic thought is destroyed. For, as Debord well understood, a movement suffering from a grave deficit of knowledge and historical perspectives 'can no longer act strategically'. All that remains is the management of a present with no tomorrow and the petty pleasures of entertainment. In 1970, Baudrillard sensed this eclipse of strategic reason. Ten years later, in *Simulacra and Simulation*, long before Fukuyama, he went so far as to decree the pure and simple loss of all historical meaning: 'history has retreated', because its stakes were 'chased from our lives by this sort of immense neutralization, which is dubbed peaceful coexistence on a global level, and pacified monotony on the quotidian level'. [15] The 'maximal norm and the mastery of probability' [16] by simulation, the increasing locking-in and growing control entailed that 'one can no longer imagine what project, what power, what strategy, what subject could exist behind this enclosure, this vast saturation of a system by its own forces, now neutralized, unusable, unintelligible, nonexplosive'. [17]

The endpoint of history? Politics at a standstill?

A revolution named desire

With the 1973-1974 crisis, the end to the Portuguese revolution in November 1975, the Moncloa pact in Spain and the historic 1976 compromise in Italy, the narrow door of hope opened in 1968 seemed to be closing. The liberal counteroffensive of the Thatcher–Reagan years was approaching. The relationship between the change in political context and the evolution of theoretical statements seems clear. We need only to recall the dates of the publications that marked this sequence: *Rhizome and A Thousand Plateaus*, by Deleuze and Guattari, in 1976 and 1980; the lectures by Foucault at the Collège de France on 'the birth of biopolitics' in 1977-1978 ; *The Postmodern Condition*, by Lyotard in 1979 ; *Farewell to the Working Class*, by Gorz in 1980; *Simulacra and Simulation*, by Baudrillard in 1981; *Memories of Class*, by Zygmunt Bauman in 1982; *All That is Solid Melts into Air: The Experience of Modernity*, by Marshall Berman in 1982; *Weak Thought*, by Gianni Vattimo in 1983.

If one follows the periodization made by Boltanski and Chiapello in *The New Spirit of Capitalism*, the question posed by Marcuse is linked to the 'second spirit', that of the organized capitalism of the post-war period, and the question posed by Foucault is linked to the new spirit of the free-market counter-reform.

By one of the tricks of reason that only history has the secret of, Deleuze and Foucault's conceptual invention, radically subversive in relation to the statist capitalism (or 'molar capitalism', in Deleuzian terminology) of the 'thirty glorious years' of the post-war boom would be out of time. In spite of itself, it would resonate with the discourse of liberal deregulation, of the 'liquid society', of history in shambles. The isomorphism between a national, centralized and organized capitalism and a workers' movement that was itself national, centralized and organized would then be succeeded by a new isomorphism between a globalized and deterritorialized capitalism and a reticular or rhizomatic social movement. Once again, the system would demonstrate its capacity to feed on and digest its critics.

When the question of the desirability of revolution displaces that of its necessity (in the sense of an irrepressible need born of systemic contradictions), the Walrasian marginalist theory of 'value-desire' takes its revenge on Marx's theory of labour-value. In reality, an entire political paradigm is questioned, the one in which a conception of the state, a representation of classes and their struggles, and a strategic thought of revolution were articulated. For Foucault, state power tends to become dissolved in power relations, class in the disordered plebeians, and revolution in the whims of a desiring subjectivity. He draws his own conclusion: 'my ethics are 'antistrategic''. One must be respectful when a singularity arises and intransigent as soon as the state violates universals. It is a simple choice, but hard work. One needs to watch, a bit underneath history, for what breaks and agitates it, and keep watch, a bit behind politics, over what must unconditionally limit it.' [18]

Almost at the same time, Claude Lefort also dismissed the idea of revolution as an 'absolute event' in which the actors comport themselves as 'envoys of universal History'. As opposed to Furet, however, Lefort refused to bury the fact alongside the idea. Although Revolution with a capital R is dispersed to 'a thousand revolutionary theaters', the revolutionary fact remains. Without it, 'the revolutionary idea would not be formed' and one needs to continue to study it. And the vulgar assertion, extrapolated from Foucault, that 'power is everywhere' is mystifying. It confounds under the same broad concept all positions of domination and influence. 'As it is used', this concept of omnipresent power, becomes 'a blanket concept' that dismisses 'thinking the political'. [19]

The formulation that it is 'the desirability of revolution that today is the problem' in effect appears as a refusal to grasp the riddles of the century in their social and historical depth. It reflects the profound political disarray that Foucault explicitly expressed at the time: 'For the first time in a hundred and twenty years, there is not a single point on earth from which the light of hope could shine. There is no longer any orientation.' [20]

Hope? At a standstill. Orientation? The major reference points are blurred

This disenchantment is the logical consequence of an illusory investment of revolutionary hope in its statist avatars. After the bureaucratic counter-revolution in Russia, neither post-Maoist China nor Indochina could embody a politics of emancipation. There is 'not a single country', Foucault bitterly observed, to which we could 'refer to say: one must do like that'. [21] Nostalgia for the lost 'fatherlands' of really non-existent socialism? And yet, it is on this necessary disenchantment and disillusionment that any future revival depends.

Instead of attempting to overcome the crisis by extending the permanent revolution into time and space, Foucault consoles himself for lost illusions by thinking of it as 'not just a political project' but 'also a form of life', a principle defining 'a style, as a mode of existence, with its aesthetics, its asceticism, its particular forms of relationship with oneself and with others'. [22] In other words, a revolution reduced to a style and aesthetic without political ambition. This opens the way to miniature revolts and postmodern pleasures.

This challenge to the fetish of Revolution with capital R seeks to undo "the empty form of a universal revolution" [23] in order to envisage a plurality of profane revolutions. Because "the imaginary content of the revolt did not dissipate in the broad daylight of the revolution." [24] Thus, a return thus to the great plebeian and theological dissidences, to subterranean heresies, stubborn resistance, the authenticity of the muzhiks celebrated by Solzhenitsyn. For Foucault, the Iranian revolution revealed a new semantics of historical times. "On February 11, 1979, the Iranian Revolution took place", [25] he wrote. He pointed out, however, that this long series of festivities and mourning, "was difficult for us to call a ""revolution"" [26]. At the crossroads of the 1970s and 1980s, words were no longer certain.

The Iranian revolution seemed to him to announce the arrival of a new kind of revolution. While a certain Marxism, prisoner of its own clichés, refused to see anything else than the repetition of an old history, in which religion 'raised the curtain' before the 'main act' of the class struggle began, Foucault showed an incontestable lucidity. A sclerotic imagination persisted of thinking of the new in the clothes of the old, with imam Khomeini in the role of father Gapon,

the mystical revolution as the prelude to the social one. [27] 'Is this really so?', Foucault asked himself. Guarding against a normative interpretation of modern revolutions, he reminds us that Islam is not only a religion, but 'but an entire way of life, an adherence to a history and civilisation', and has 'a good chance to become a gigantic powder keg'. [28]

Foucault's interest in the Iranian revolution was by no means only just an interlude in the development of his thought. He traveled to Iran ten days after the 8 September 8, 1978 massacre perpetrated by the Shah's regime. On 5 November 5, he published an article in the *Corriere de la Ssera* entitled 'A revolt with bare hands'. He then analyzed Khomeini's return to power and the installation of the mullahs in a series of articles published in Italy, including 'A powder keg called Islam' in February, and in 'Is it useless to revolt?'. Paradoxically, the man who had set out to pluralize the idea of revolution saw in the Iranian revolution the expression of a 'perfectly unified collective will'. [29] Fascinated by the marriage between the latest technology and forms of life unchanged 'for the last thousand years' [30] he asserted that there was no need to worry, because 'there will not be a Khomeini Party', and 'there will be not be a Khomeini government.' [31]. In short, it would be a pioneering experiment in what some today call anti-power.

This immense 'movement from below' [32] was in effect supposed to break with the binary logics of modernity and transgress the borders of Western rationality. 'On the borders of heaven and earth', [33] it represented a turning point in relation to the revolutionary paradigms that had been dominant since 1789. It was because of this, and not for social, economic or geo-strategic reasons, that Islam could become a formidable 'powder keg'. It was no longer the opium of the people but the meeting point of a desire for radical change and a collective will.

This supposed emergence of a new form of spirituality in an increasingly prosaic world attracted Foucault to the degree that it seemed to respond to the avatars of dialectical reason and the desiccation of the Enlightenment. The very idea of modernization (and not just the illusions of progress) was becoming archaic in his eyes. His interest in Shiite spirituality and the mythology of the martyr at work in the Iranian revolution seemed to echo his research into care and technologies of the self. He feared that future historians would reduce it to a banal social movement, while the voice of the mullahs thundered in his ears with the same terrible accents as that of Savonarola or the Anabaptists of Münster. Shiism appeared to him as the language of the popular rebellion that 'transforms thousands of forms of discontent, hatred, misery, and despairs into a force'. [34]

To Claude Mauriac, who called out the damages that could be provoked by such a fused alliance of (religious) spirituality and politics, Foucault responded; 'and what about politics without spirituality, my dear Claude?'. The question is legitimate, the implicit answer disquieting. The conjoined politicization of the social and religious structures under hegemony of religious law signifies in effect a fusion of the political and the social, of the public and the private, not through the withering away of classes and of the state but through the absorption of the social and the political in the theocratic state, in other words a new totalitarian form. Fascinated by a revolution without a party, Foucault wanted to see in the Shia clergy nothing but the unmediated incarnation of a fused multitude or plebes.

This infatuation is based on the idea of an irreducible difference between two discourses and two types of society, between the East and the West. Here Foucault's anti-universalism finds here its practical test. The Iranian revolution as the finally discovered (spiritual) form of emancipation? There's despair in this answer. Yet it is consistent with the dramatic idea that humanity, in 1978, had returned to a stand still. In a kind of inverted Orientalism, salvation would then lie in an irreducible Iranian otherness: Iranians 'don't have the same truth regime as we do'. Perhaps not. But cultural relativism does not authorize axiological relativism.

Foucault sharply criticized Sartre's claim that intellectuals should set themselves up as spokespersons for the universal. It's no less perilous to be the spokesman for singularities without a horizon of universality. The rejection of slavery or of the oppression of women is not a matter of climate, taste or customs. Civic, religious and individual freedoms are no less important in Tehran than in London or Paris. Foucault's theoretical misadventures in the face of the Iranian revolution in no way detract from his merit in politicizing many of the issues (madness, homosexuality, prisons) we now call 'societal', and thus broadening the field of political struggle. His articles on Iran, as conjunctural

as they might be, constitute nonetheless not a slippage but the practical test of a theoretical impasse.

Politics as the art of turning things around

Making a virtue of political impotence, the resurgent social movements of the late 1990s drew heavily on Deleuzism and vulgar Foucauldism to trace their 'lines of flight' and lull their dreams of exile and exodus from a system with no apparent way out. Taking the opposite path, in 1998 Pierre Bourdieu expressed surprise that 'there are no more transgressions or subversions, no more offenses or madnesses' [35], so unbreathable had the air of the times become.

These transgressions and subversions do exist, however, in everyday practices – provided we don't remain subjugated by the massive concept of domination as it was handled by Marcuse, or by Bourdieu himself. [36] In fact, it covers a whole range of relationships – - hegemony, exploitation, oppression, discrimination, disqualification, humiliation – - all of which are the object of resistance, albeit subaltern to what they resist. But it is the nature of all struggle to be asymmetrical, and the challenge of all emancipation to turn weakness into strength.

The problem for politics, conceived strategically rather than managerially, is precisely to seize the moments of crisis when this asymmetry can be turned around. This implies accepting to work within real contradictions and relationships of force, rather than deluding oneself into believing that we can deny or evade them. Because the subalterns (or the dominated) are not outside the political domain of struggle, and domination is never complete and absolute. Practice brings its own experience and knowledge, which can provide the weapons of an alternative hegemony. Freedom emerges from within the very fabric of power. And the norms of domination can be shattered by a crisis, and an event that results neither from a necessity of the social order, nor from the predestination of a historical subject, nor from a theological miracle, but from setting in struggle political practices that engage with the movement that aims to abolish the established order.

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[1] Michel Foucault, 'Inutile de se soulever', Le Monde, 11 May 11, 1979, in Dits et écrits II, Paris: Gallimard, 2001, p. 790. English translation taken from: Janet Afary and Kevin B. Anderson, Foucault and the Iranian Revolution: Gender and the Seductions of Islamism, Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2005, p. 264. This work collects Foucault's articles on Iran as an appendix.

[2] From the introduction to the French edition: Herbert Marcuse, L'Homme unidimensionnel, Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 1968, p. 10.

[3] This article originally appeared in Viento Sur, no. 100, December 2008. French version available at: danielbensaid.org.

[4] Georges Pérec, Things : a story of the sixties with A Man Asleep, London: Harville, 1990, p. 119.

[5] Pérec, Things, p. 77.

[6] Ibid., p. 78.

[7] Ibid., p. 119.

[8] Ibid., p. 77.

[9] Herbert Marcuse, *L'Homme unidimensionnel*, p. 10.

[10] Herbert Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man: Studies in the ideology of advanced industrial society*, New York: Routledge, 2002, p. 260.

[11] Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man*, p. xiv.

[12] Ibid., p. xlvii.

[13] Jean Baudrillard, *The Consumer Society: Myths and Structures*, London: Sage Publications, 1999, p. 33.

[14] Baudrillard, *The Consumer Society*, p. 178.

[15] Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1994, p. 31.

[16] Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, p. 25.

[17] Ibid., p. 28

[18] Foucault, 'Is it useless to revolt?' in: Afary and Anderson, *Foucault and the Iranian Revolution. Gender and the Seductions of Islamism*, p. 267.

[19] Claude Lefort, 'La question de la révolution' (1976), *Le Temps présent*, Paris: Belin, 2007.

[20] Michel Foucault, 'La torture, c'est la raison', in *Dits et écrits 1954-1988*, vol. III: 1976-1979, Paris: Gallimard, 1994, p. 397.

[21] Foucault, 'La torture, c'est la raison', p. 398.

[22] Michel Foucault, 'À propos de la généalogie de l'éthique : un aperçu du travail en cours', interview with H. Dreyfus and P. Rabinow; in Dreyfus, H. and Rabinow, P., *Michel Foucault: un parcours philosophique*, Paris: Gallimard, 1984, pp. 322–346. Foucault introduced a number of changes to this French publication of the interview.

[23] Michel Foucault, 'Pour une morale de l'inconfort', in: *Dits et écrits 1954-1988*, vol. III: 1976-1979. Paris: Gallimard, 1994, p. 786.

[24] Foucault, 'Is it Useless to Revolt?' in: Afary and Anderson, *Foucault and the Iranian Revolution*, p. 265.

[25] Foucault, "A powder keg called Islam", in: Afary and Anderson, *Foucault and the Iranian Revolution*, p. 239.

[26] Foucault, 'The mythical leader of the Iranian revolt', in: Afary and Anderson, *Foucault and the Iranian Revolution*,. *Gender and the Seductions of Islamism*, p. 221.

[27] Translator's note: Part of this article is based on an earlier piece by Bensaïd where he included the following footnote: 'To a large extent, we supported the Marxist schema criticized by Foucault, seeing in the movement against the Shah's dictatorship the religious beginning of a social revolution. But our comrade Michel Rovère's reports (see his articles in *Rouge* at the time), the warnings from exiled Iranian comrades, and above all the trials, from August 1979 on which threatened death sentences against our comrades in Abadan, guilty of supporting striking oil industry workers, soon led us to reconsider our position. In August 1979, we demonstrated in Paris against the repression in Iran and the dictatorship of the mullahs.'" See: '(Im)politiques de Foucault', *Revue vacarmes*, autumn 2004, no. n°28, online at www.europe-solidaire.org/spip.php?article1657.

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[28] A powder keg called Islam', in: Afary and Anderson, Foucault and the Iranian Revolution, p. 241.

[29] Foucault, 'The mythical leader of the Iranian revolt', in: Afary and Anderson, Foucault and the Iranian Revolution,. Gender and the Seductions of Islamism, p. 221.

[30] Ibid., p. 221.

[31] bid., p. 222.

[32] Michel Foucault, 'What are the Iranians dreaming [rêvent] about?', in: Afary and Anderson, Foucault and the Iranian Revolution, p. 204.

[33] Foucault, "Is it useless to revolt?" in: Afary and Anderson, *ibid.*, p. 264.

[34] Foucault, 'Tehran: Faith against the Shah', in: *ibid.*, p. 202.

[35] Pierre Bourdieu, (1990). 'La construction du marché: le champ administratif et la production de la "politique du logement"', *Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales* 81–82, 1990, pp. 65–85.

[36] Daniel Bensaïd (2008): *Myths and legends of domination*